

The Farmers' Chronicles

BLOG

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South Africa's Decisive Action to Protect Livestock Production by Vaccinating National Herd Against Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD)

The effects of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) have never been felt so strongly by South African livestock producers than they currently are. With each new reported case of FMD, livestock producers are experiencing increased pressure on their already strained businesses. Especially in KwaZulu-Natal, where the continued spread of FMD has left many livestock producers operating with concern. The national Department of Agriculture has acted decisively in addressing the situation. Minister John Steenhuisen has announced that the national Department of Agriculture will be conducting a nationwide vaccination programme of the national herd to combat foot-and-mouth disease.

This marks a significant turning point in the battle against FMD and a clear indication of South Africa's renewed efforts to combat the disease with urgency and determination. Livestock producers in South Africa have lost income and experience movement restrictions and daily disruptions to their operation due to the ongoing nature of the FMD breakouts across multiple districts. Many livestock producers are operating in a state of uncertainty and South Africa's

livestock export reputation has been jeopardised. Minister Steenhuisen stated clearly that South Africa cannot continue to play catch-up; a national herd vaccination strategy is the strongest possible course of action to regain control of the disease, restore producer confidence and protect the livelihoods of livestock producers and their markets. In addition, this change in policy will allow South Africa to seek recognition of FMD free status with vaccination from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Recognition of this status will provide stability to the national livestock sector and allow for potential recovery of exports.

The vaccination process will begin in the provinces which have been impacted the greatest. KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Free State, Mpumalanga and, North West are already collecting data related to animal populations and quarantine to assist in the organised roll-out of the vaccination programme. Minister Steenhuisen emphasised that this was a coordinated and long-term commitment, rather than a short-term solution. Implementing a programme of this magnitude will require continuous access to



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quality vaccines. Government is strengthening collaborations with Onderstepoort Biological Products (OBP) and the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) it is also finalising agreements with domestic vaccine manufactures and international partners such as China and Argentina. These partners have agreed to provide technical assistance and support to enable South Africa to obtain sufficient vaccines to implement the vaccination programme in a timely manner. Although KwaZulu-Natal is still the centre of the outbreak and accounts for most of the unresolved cases, despite having vaccinated over 931,000 animals in the last few months, the main risk to the national containment effort lies in the illegal and uncontrolled movement of animals. Minister Steenhuisen has acknowledged this directly. Therefore, stronger enforcement will now become a major component of the response as vaccination cannot be successful if animals continue to move through the zones of the affected regions.

Increased vaccination activity occurred around the Kokstad area due to recent outbreaks and resulted in intensified vaccination activities in Estcourt, as well as preventive work in adjacent areas. In order to support livestock producers that adhere to regulations, government has implemented some limited relief programmes in the disease management areas. One example is allowing for single pasteurised milk for local consumption, as a way to alleviate financial burdens on livestock producers while maintaining the highest level of biosecurity.

Government is not acting alone in this endeavour, the Red Meat Industry Services has already provided substantial assistance, and the Milk Producers Organisation has purchased 50,000 vaccine doses to aid dairy producers in KwaZulu-Natal. Thousands of these doses have already been distributed to Bergville, Estcourt, Winterton, Dundee, and the Spioenkop Dam area.

These partnerships demonstrate how government and industry can act together to protect farm operations and accelerate the recovery of livestock operations. The national herd vaccination programme offers several advantages that may contribute to stabilised operations and the protection of rural economies. Once FMD infection rates decrease, livestock producers will be subject to less restrictive movement of animals. Improved herd health will result in a more predictable milk and beef supply. Restoring biosecurity will increase the confidence of livestock producers in their markets. Most importantly, this strategy will improve South Africa's capacity to protect its export channels and rebuild its reputation in global trade. To avoid relying on imported vaccines, a mid-scale FMD vaccine manufacturing facility is being built as part of the national strengthening of biosecurity.

Government expects to receive approximately 2 million vaccine doses through two shipments by February 2026. Through government and industry support, another 1,5 million vaccine doses will also be secured. This long-term commitment to protecting the sector demonstrates a commitment to the sector for years to come. Minister Steenhuisen emphasised that government is completely committed to defeating FMD.

The national herd vaccination strategy represents more than just a change in policy. It is a guarantee to livestock producers that action is being taken at the scale required to address this crisis. It is a guarantee to animals, communities, and rural economies. Most importantly, it represents a direct path toward restoring South Africa's reputation as a reliable livestock exporter. The success of this plan depends on the cooperation of livestock producers, the industry and government.

-Prince Mtsweni-