

Avian Influenza: H5 and H7 outbreak update report

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agriculture

Department:

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1. Introduction and Background

Avian influenza is a highly contagious viral disease that affects several species of food producing birds, pet birds and wild birds. Occasionally other mammals, including humans, may also contract avian influenza. H5 and H7 avian influenza are classified into two categories according to the severity of disease it causes in poultry namely low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) and highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). LPAI strains cause few or no clinical signs in poultry while HPAI strains may cause severe clinical signs and potentially high mortality rates among poultry. Outbreaks of HPAI in poultry may result in trade bans on the export of poultry and poultry products. Reporting of HPAI outbreaks in non-poultry (e.g., wild birds, pet birds, birds kept as a hobby, backyard poultry as defined by the 2021 OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code), to the WOAAH do not have trade implications.

In South Africa, avian influenza of any subtype is a controlled animal disease in terms of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No 35 of 1984). Any suspect or confirmed case of avian influenza of any subtype must be reported immediately to the responsible state veterinarian in terms of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No 35 of 1984). Both passive and active surveillance for avian influenza is conducted across the country to detect any incursion of avian influenza. Passive and active surveillance in backyard and commercial chickens is continuing across the country.

In 2017 the first case of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) was confirmed in commercial chickens in South Africa. This was confirmed as HPAI H5N8. A HPAI H5N2 was detected in October 2022 in chickens of a small-scale farmer facility in KwaZulu-Natal Province in 2022. This is the first ever HPAI H5N2 in chickens in the country. HPAI H5N2 was detected in ostriches during 2004, 2006 and 2011.

In 2023, South Africa experienced outbreaks of HPAI H5N1 affecting both poultry and wild birds. Sequencing data confirmed that the strain was introduced in late 2022, and new events were reported to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). The poultry event began on 18 April 2023 in the Western Cape and spread to five other provinces, resulting in 29 reported outbreaks, while the wild bird event, which started in March 2023, accounted for 44 outbreaks across six provinces. All cases in poultry and wild birds have since been resolved, and both events have been officially closed with WOAAH.

Recent H5 and H7 avian influenza outbreaks within the country are summarised in this report and are categorised according to pathogenicity (HPAI, LPAI or undefined).

2. Highly pathogenic avian influenza Control in South Africa

All HPAI suspect farms are immediately placed under quarantine and no movement of birds, eggs or products are allowed on, off or through these farms. Samples are collected for verification of the suspicion and back and forward tracing is implemented to detect any possible spread of disease. Most of the affected properties have culled out the chickens and carcasses were disposed of by dumping at an approved hazardous dump site, incineration, rendering or composting on farm; or on farm burial were allowed by the Environmental Affairs Department. Eggs are either taken under veterinary supervision for pasteurisation or moved after double fumigation or fogging.

Passive and active six-monthly surveillance in the country is ongoing. Listed NAI free compartments are continuing with the monthly surveillance. In terms of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No 35 of 1984) any suspect or confirmed outbreak of any avian influenza strain must be immediately reported to the responsible state veterinarian for immediate investigation.

If HPAI is suspected/detected in poultry, there is no scientific justification in placing a radius around the affected farms as a controlled/protection zone due to the mode of transmission, primarily by wild birds. However, all neighbouring farms are immediately visited, and all epidemiologically linked properties to an affected farm are immediately placed under quarantine until preliminary investigations can be conducted.

The recovery of country HPAI freedom may require additional surveillance over and above the current passive and active surveillance.

3. HPAI H5N1 event 2025

A new outbreak of H5N1 was detected in South Africa on samples collected on 23 June 2025. The first H5 PCR positive was detected in a commercial chicken flock in Mpumalanga Province on 25 June 2025.

3.1 H5 poultry event in poultry

A total of nine (n=9) outbreaks were reported. Three (n=3) of these outbreaks were located in Mpumalanga Province; one (n=1) in North West Province, four (n=4) in the Western Cape Province and one (n=1) in the Eastern Cape Province.

3.2 Spatial distribution of the H5 event in poultry

The spatial distribution of the reported HPAI H5 outbreaks in poultry is represented in Figure 1 below.

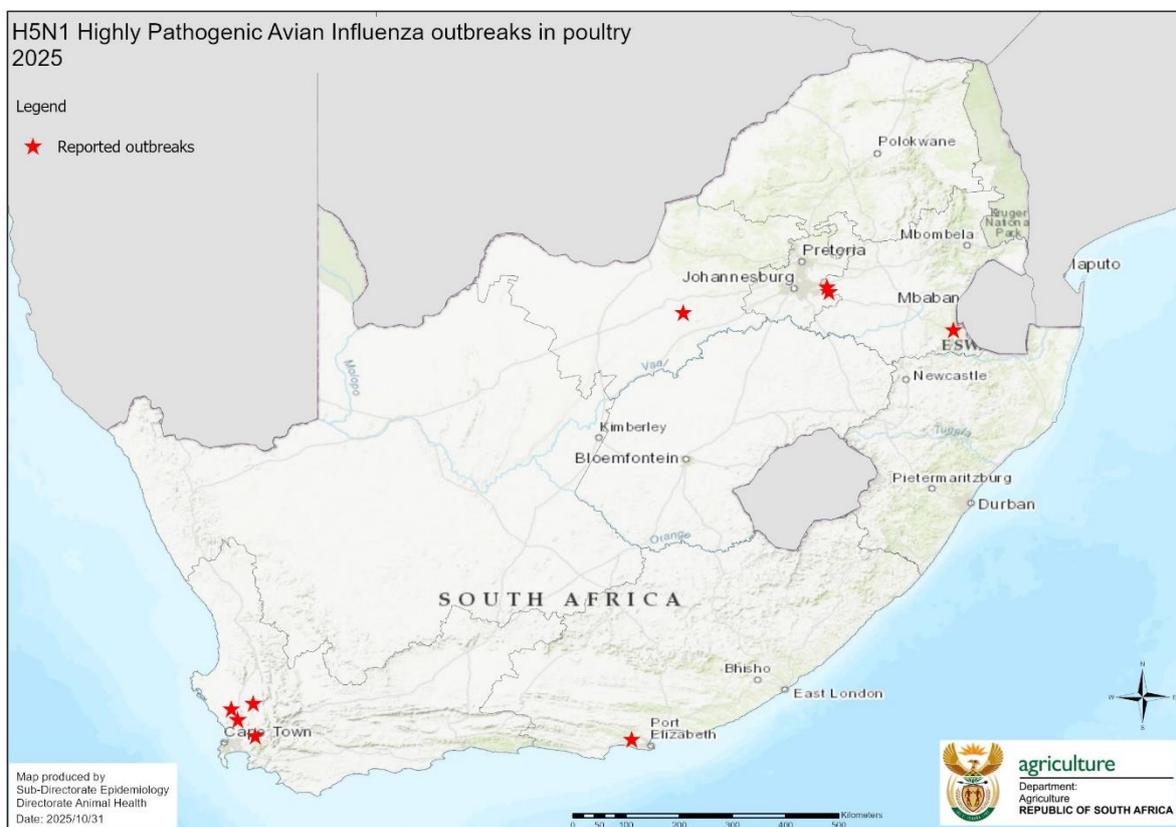


Figure 1: SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF HPAI H5 OUTBREAKS in POULTRY

None (n=0) of the HPAI H5 outbreaks were resolved yet.

The unresolved outbreaks (n=9) per Local Municipality is represented in Table 1 below.

Province & Local Municipality per Province	Number of Unresolved HPAI H5 poultry outbreaks
01 MPUMALANGA	3
111 Mkhondo	1
104 Victor Khanye	2

02 NORTH WEST	1
482 Tswaing	1
03 WESTERN CAPE	4
822 Drakenstein	1
817 Swartland	3
04 EASTERN CAPE	1
711 Nelson Mandela Bay	1
Grand Total	9

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF UNRESOLVED OUTBREAKS PER LOCAL MUNICIPALITY PER PROVINCE FOR HPAI H5 IN POULTRY

3.3 Temporal distribution of the H5 event in poultry

The temporal distribution of the HPAI H5 event in poultry is depicted in Figure 2 below.

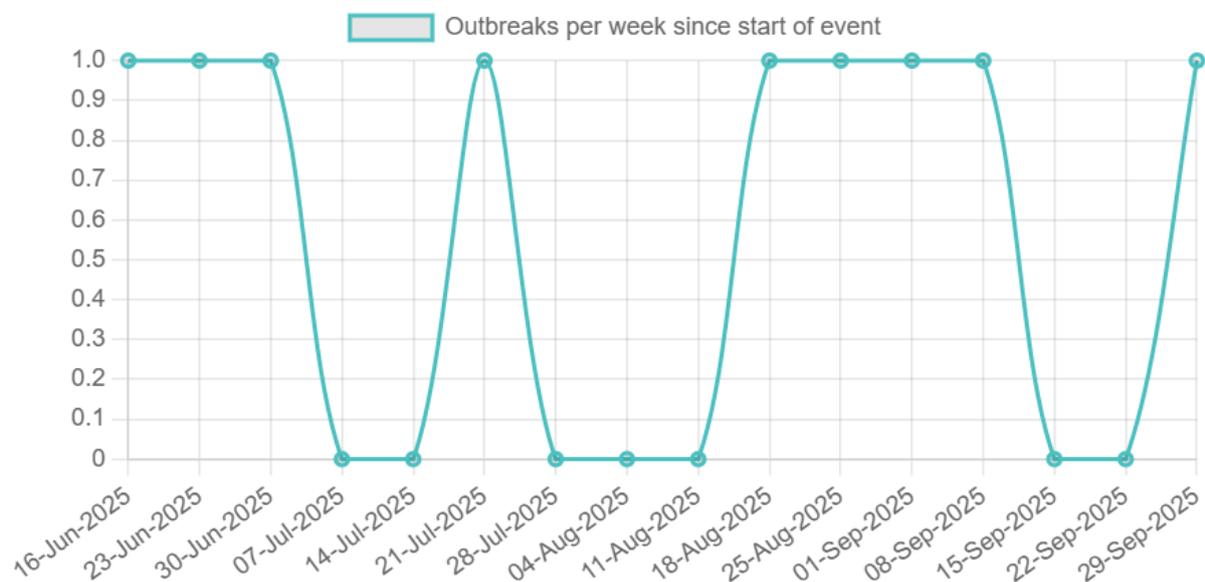


FIGURE 2: TEMPORAL DISTRIBUTION OF HPAI H5 EVENT IN POULTRY

3.4 HPAI H5 in non-poultry (wild birds)

Detections of H5 avian influenza introductions in wild birds started on 01 May 2025. Twenty-six (n=26) were reported to WOA as part of this HPAI H5 event in wild birds and backyard poultry. These outbreaks are distributed as follows:

Twenty (n=20) cases were detected in wild birds, nineteen (n=19) in the Western Cape Province and one (n=1) in Gauteng Province. Two (n=2) cases were detected in backyard poultry (domestic geese) in the Western Cape Province. Four (n=4) cases were detected in backyard chickens, one (n=1) in Mpumalanga Province and three (n=3) in the Western Cape Province.

3.5 Confirmed HPAI H5N1 outbreak in seabirds on Marion Island

Marion Island is one of South Africa's sub-Antarctic Prince Edward Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. Several seabirds died following neurological signs indicative of HPAI. Samples were collected and tested upon return of the ship during the beginning of 2025. Real-time RT-PCR yielded positive results for RNA from HP H5 AIV. Green-based real-time RT-PCR yielded positive results for RNA from N1 AIV.

4. Resolved 2023 HPAI H7N6 event

The first ever HPAI H7 was detected in chickens in South Africa on samples collected in the beginning of June 2023. The first H7 PCR positive was detected in non-poultry in a backyard chicken flock in Gauteng Province in September 2023. A total of a hundred and sixteen (n=116) outbreaks were reported. Seventy three (n=73) of these outbreaks were located in Gauteng Province; eleven (n=11) in Mpumalanga Province, four (n=4) in the Free State Province, six (n=6) in Limpopo Province, sixteen (n=16) in North West Province, one (n=1) in KwaZulu-Natal Province, one (n=1) in the Eastern Cape Province and three (n=4) in the Western Cape Province.

The sample from Gauteng Province yielded an HA0 cleavage-site sequence characteristic of HP H7. The sample yielded an HA sequence with less than 95% nucleotide identity to H7 viruses isolated in Egypt and Georgia. Sequencing of the NA gene yielded an N6 positive and an NA sequence with 97% nucleotide identity to a virus isolate obtained in Egypt and Georgia. Sequencing of the neuraminidase (N) protein gene identified it as a N6 virus. All the H7N6 outbreaks were resolved, and the outbreak event was closed on 01 September 2025.

5. Low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI)

In accordance with Chapter 1.3 of the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code, the “low pathogenic avian influenza (poultry)” disease code has been delisted. As of 1 January 2022, LPAI is only being reported to the WOA as part of a country’s six-monthly surveillance.

All LPAI strains however are still controlled animal diseases in terms of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No 35 of 1984) and control measures and reporting will remain unaltered until reviewed.

A H5 was detected by PCR on ostrich farms mostly located in the Hessequa local municipality and in Oudtshoorn local municipality, sequencing indicated a H5N1 low pathogenic avian influenza virus.


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