Avian influenza remains a threat to South Africa's poultry industry

By Izaak Breitenbach, CEO of the South African Poultry Association (SAPA)

Make no mistake, avian influenza remains one of the most significant risks facing South African poultry. These outbreaks don't just affect individual farms. The consequences affect food security, jobs, our economy and, most importantly, the nation's access to affordable protein.

The avian influenza outbreaks in 2023 demonstrated how severely the disease can disrupt production and place pressure on the broader supply chain. Since then, we have made meaningful progress in strengthening our response, but to say the threat has passed would be a mistake.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) continues to circulate across the globe, so our focus must now shift from crisis response to long-term resilience.

Progress is encouraging, but the risk remains

Fortunately, South Africa's response to avian influenza has improved significantly since 2023. All six outbreaks recorded this year were contained swiftly, avoiding the widespread disruption experienced three years ago. From an industry standpoint, that progress is important, but it should not be mistaken for victory.

Avian influenza remains unpredictable, especially since international disease pressure has not eased. Containing local outbreaks does not eliminate the risk of new introductions or emerging strains. Preparedness cannot wait for a crisis.

For South Africa, the priority now is turning short-term progress into long-term preparedness. The cost of widespread infection is simply too high for producers, consumers and the country's food-security objectives.

A global threat with local consequences

This is not a challenge South Africa can address in isolation. Ongoing outbreaks across Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand serve as a constant reminder that avian influenza does not respect borders. While the H7 subtype of avian influenza had a devastating impact on local farms in 2023, the widespread international prevalence of the H5 subtype remains a major concern. As the global disease landscape evolves, we must remain prepared.

Migratory wild birds add another layer of complexity. As waterbirds and falcons move along established flyways, they can introduce the virus into local ecosystems, increasing exposure risks for commercial operations.

SAPA continues to monitor these populations as part of its early-warning efforts, but the absence of active detections does not mean there is no risk. Conditions can change rapidly, making continuous surveillance, strong farm-level biosecurity and close cooperation between producers, industry organisations and veterinary authorities essential.

Counting the financial damage

The consequences of a major outbreak extend far beyond individual farms. The 2023 avian influenza outbreaks cost South Africa's poultry industry an estimated R10.9 billion in birds that were culled or died from the disease.

To maintain broiler production and help protect jobs at abattoirs and processing plants, the industry was forced to import 285 million hatching eggs. These numbers highlight the immense pressure outbreaks place on production, supply chains and business continuity.

At its core, this is a food-security issue. Chicken remains South Africa's most affordable and widely consumed source of animal protein. When production is disrupted, the effects are felt throughout the economy, particularly by lower-income households already under financial strain. Protecting poultry production is therefore about more than safeguarding farms. It is about safeguarding access to affordable nutrition.

Vaccination must move from policy to practice

Vaccination is a critical component of South Africa's long-term defence against avian influenza, but the challenge lies in implementation. There is broad industry support for vaccination, but regulatory requirements continue to slow its rollout at scale. Because avian influenza is a controlled disease, vaccination programmes must be supported by robust monitoring systems.

While these safeguards are necessary, the industry urgently needs a practical framework that enables vaccination at scale without creating unmanageable administrative and financial burdens for producers.

In France, the vaccination of 20 million ducks contributed to a significant reduction in disease prevalence. South Africa, however, faces a significant scale challenge. Vaccinating a national flock of approximately 35 million birds could take up to a year, even if regulatory approvals were granted immediately. Addressing implementation challenges is now essential.

At the same time, vaccination needs to be part of a broader disease-management strategy. This also requires strong biosecurity and active surveillance.

Biosecurity remains the first line of defence

Even as vaccination becomes more widespread, biosecurity remains the most effective tool. Producers should continue enforcing strict operational controls. These include preventing wild-bird access to poultry houses, carefully managing open water sources and maintaining rigorous hygiene protocols like footbaths and sanitising showers.

The margin for error is extraordinarily small. A single infected feather carried into a poultry house through a ventilation system can have devastating consequences. That’s why biosecurity must be treated as a daily discipline rather than a response to a crisis.

Consistency is also key. Open communication between producers, industry bodies and veterinary authorities helps to ensure information is shared quickly. That's what makes the difference between a contained incident and a widespread outbreak.

Building resilience before the next outbreak

The goal is clear. We need to protect our poultry and, in doing so, protect our people and help safeguard our economy. The next outbreak should not be the moment we discover whether we are prepared. It should be the moment our preparation proves its value.