Government's light hand on Brazilian poultry imports restrictions bodes well

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

In October, Brazil confirmed Newcastle disease on a turkey farm in the southern state of Santa Catarina. Following the outbreak, some countries have suspended all imports from Brazil, while others have only applied regional restrictions.

On 28 October, the Department of Agriculture decided against countrywide restrictions, which was the right move.

The Department of Agriculture has restricted imports from areas affected by the outbreak. Trade from the rest of Brazil can continue, but only under strict veterinary certification requirements.

Newcastle disease (NCD) is a highly contagious viral disease of birds, and it warrants serious controls. The certificates agreed between South Africa and Brazil provide them. Birds intended for fresh poultry meat exports must come from premises with no NCD cases in the past six months, including within a 10-kilometre radius. Poultry that doesn't meet those conditions simply doesn't enter the country. That is a more precise control, and it works because it strictly targets the source of the risk.

Bear in mind, the local flock has further protection. Broiler chickens and long-living birds in South Africa are also vaccinated against NCD. And South African producers don't import day-old chicks or hatching eggs from Brazil. We have enough breeder hens to maintain normal production, so we believe the risk of NCD to our national flock is low.

And we don't expect major disruption on store shelves, either. South Africa imports about 18,000 tonnes of poultry meat from Brazil each month. Because the restriction is regional rather than nationwide, imports from unaffected areas of Brazil can continue, helping to limit shortages and price increases.

This shows why targeted restrictions make sense.

Proportionate restrictions are better than blunt ones. A blanket ban would cost trade and add little protection. And in 2024, the Department of Agriculture restricted the entire Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, after just one reported NCD case. That had real consequences. We welcome a more targeted approach this time. It protects animal health and keeps supply steady, which is what food security is all about.

But we're not out of the woods yet.

The disease of greatest concern to this industry is a different one. Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) is our main biosecurity threat. The 2023 outbreak was the worst on record. It killed 45% of broiler breeder hens and cost the industry R10 billion.

Import restrictions for HPAI are more severe, and rightly so. We continue to call for mass vaccination against bird flu, and for compensation for producers whose birds are culled.

At the end of the day, we aren't afraid of trading. We support safe trade that is fair and based on evidence. Regionalised restrictions for NCD meet that test. We will keep a keen eye on developments in Brazil. But whatever happens, we'll welcome the same proportionate, evidence-led approach when the next threat arrives at our door.

Credit where it's due. Well done to the Department of Agriculture.
Ends.