



SOUTH AFRICAN POULTRY ASSOCIATION

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## MEDIA STATEMENT

### **IF YOU CAN'T COMPENSATE, VACCINATE!**

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The poultry industry is in crisis, Avian Influenza (AI or bird flu) is no longer an isolated issue – it has become a global pandemic. South Africa is at high risk of a devastating new outbreak while many producers are still recovering from the 2023 outbreaks.

There are only two ways to deal with bird flu: culling infected flocks or vaccinating birds to build immunity.

Culling is the traditional approach, but it is unsustainable. Every outbreak results in the mass culling of birds, leading to meat shortages, rising costs, and an industry in financial distress.

Unlike other countries, the South African government does not compensate farmers for chickens it orders them to cull. That makes culling incredibly expensive for farmers, who can lose their entire flock. Some of them go out of business as a result.

In any case, culling does not address the root of the problem – outbreaks are contained, but new outbreaks will continue to occur, and farmers will continue to suffer.

Culling works better when it's incentivised, when farmers gain reasonable compensation from government (a global best practice), which is not currently happening in this country. When farmers know they will be compensated, that encourages reporting and helps to contain the spread of the disease. Without compensation, they may be tempted to try to hide the outbreak, which can have disastrous consequences.

Be that as it may, with the mutation of the disease and the spread of the virus, bird flu cannot be managed by culling alone anymore. The only viable, long-term solution is vaccination.

Vaccination has been implemented in countries like France, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Mexico. It helps protect flocks, reduces the severity of outbreaks, and minimises viral shedding, which slows the spread of the disease. While vaccination does not completely prevent infection, it ensures that outbreaks are far less damaging and more manageable, especially from a farmer (and consumer) cost perspective.

The best example is France, where the government subsidised the vaccination of 20 million ducks. The results were so encouraging that France has embarked on a second vaccination programme. In South Africa, the poultry industry desperately wants to start a vaccination programme and use the vaccines that have been approved. However, to date not one dose has been administered.

The problem is that the government permission is needed for each poultry producer that wants to vaccinate, and the government has made the process of accessing vaccines unnecessarily onerous. Monitoring and testing requirements are so restrictive (and expensive!) that farmers cannot comply. Despite approving vaccine registration, authorities are enforcing biosecurity measures that make it nearly impossible to implement vaccination at scale. This leaves South African poultry producers in an impossible situation—culling results in huge losses and does not work long term, and vaccination is inaccessible.

We are running out of time. Bird flu is spreading globally, with each outbreak more devastating than the last. In South Africa, the bird flu season is approaching, and it will take at least a year to fully vaccinate all chicks and ensure they are protected. The government must act now.

The only way to defend the industry from this inevitable crisis is to lower the unnecessarily high barriers preventing vaccination and implement a practical, effective and affordable programme before another devastating outbreak occurs. This is not just an industry issue; it is a national food security issue, as another outbreak will see farmers fold, and the price of chicken and eggs rise considerably due to supply shortages.

The rules preventing vaccination have been set by the Department of Agriculture. The South African poultry industry appeals to Agriculture Minister John Steenhuisen to intervene to ensure that a vaccination programme can start. The choice is clear, and the urgency is real. The government must act—now.

**ENDS**