



SOUTH AFRICAN POULTRY ASSOCIATION

Founded 1904

24 February 2025

MEDIA STATEMENT

SOUTH AFRICA'S IMMINENT BIRD FLU CRISIS

South Africa is facing a grave risk from the potential spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI or "Bird Flu"). The virus typically migrates with wild birds from Europe to South Africa in winter, heightening the urgency for proactive measures. The disease, which has already spread across Europe, the USA, and Argentina, remains unchecked in many countries, signaling that the time to act is now.

The two primary interventions available to prevent or contain HPAI are culling infected and at-risk flocks, and vaccination. However, culling alone has not been effective in controlling the disease, as evidenced by the experiences of the European Union and the United States. In fact, egg producers in the USA have begun lobbying for vaccination, given the severe consequences of the disease. In South Africa, 90% of long-living poultry in greater Gauteng were either culled or died in 2023 due to the inability of biosecurity and culling measures to contain the outbreak.

Drawing from the lessons learned from France's success in vaccinating 20 million ducks, South Africa is faced with the pressing need for vaccination as a tool to combat bird flu. A major challenge facing South African farmers is that they are unfortunately not compensated for birds culled, and so far, no farms have been granted permission by the Department of Agriculture (DoA) to vaccinate.

Currently, South Africa has three registered H5 vaccines, but the H7 vaccine requires additional testing, which will take at least another year before it can be approved. Industry leaders agree that vaccination is essential, particularly after the devastating losses experienced in 2017, and especially in 2023. With the potential to lose half of all poultry flocks again, the impact on the industry would be catastrophic, not just financially but also in terms of food security, malnutrition, and environmental concerns from the destruction of large numbers of birds. Moreover, this will wreak havoc on the price of South Africa's preferred protein, like it has in the past, as any shortage in supply will inevitably increase pricing.

Despite these pressing needs, obstacles remain in obtaining permission for vaccinations. The DoA has put in place stringent biosecurity measures and monitoring protocols that farmers must meet to be granted vaccination approval. However, these measures have proven impractical, and costly, with no commercial farms in the country currently able to comply. This sets an impossibly high bar, particularly for small-scale farmers. As it stands, no farm has met the criteria for vaccination approval, and the DoA has ceased processing vaccination applications until further guidance is provided by Minister Steenhuisen's office.

The impact of an outbreak on the industry is severe. In 2023, more than 9.6 million birds were culled, representing more than a third of long-living birds in the greater Gauteng area, where 90% of birds were either culled or died. The direct minimum estimated loss to the industry was a staggering R9.5 billion. With food security at risk, government intervention in the form of import rebates was

introduced, but this did nothing to mitigate the damage to the poultry industry (in fact, it only served to do more damage to the domestic industry). Prices for meat and eggs soared, with egg prices increasing by more than 30%. To date, South Africa remains classified as HPAI positive, severely impacting its ability to export.

The urgency of addressing this looming crisis cannot be overstated. The industry has called for immediate intervention to prevent a disaster. Without vaccination, South Africa may once again face catastrophic consequences from bird flu.

ENDS