

August 6 2024

Some unresolved animal health issues that require urgent review

- Biosecurity has been a top-of-mind issue in South Africa's agriculture for more than three years. The specific area of concern has primarily been on animal disease. Rightly so, given the many recent outbreaks across the country. Still, we must never neglect plant health.
- But for this week, we want to reflect on animal health. Cases of foot and mouth (FMD) disease, avian influenza, African swine fever, and Brucellosis continue to emerge, leading to huge costs to farming businesses. The damage to the industry is vast in terms of loss of productive animals, earnings, high-value export markets. The damage to confidence should also not be ignored as the sector will struggle attract investment if there is no clear strategy for addressing animal disease. We have raised this issue many times, and it is good to see that the new Minister of Agriculture, Mr John Steenhuisen, has this issue at the top of the Department of Agriculture's list of priorities.
- This is encouraging, but the real issue is that the process of improving the resolution of animal health issues in South Africa has been dragging on since 2000. Following the animal disease crises in those years, it was concluded that the chain of command in veterinary service in South Africa was inadequate. After various interactions with experts in the industry, we understand that the Department of Agriculture drafted a new Act to deal with the inadequacies in the existing Animal Diseases Act 35 of 1984. The new Act, the Animal Health Act 7 of 2002, was passed by parliament and signed into law by President Thabo Mbeki. Despite the President signing the Act, it was never formally promulgated. Perhaps, with time, this may be worth revisiting as the industry is strengthening its focus on animal disease matters. This would be done to revise it and ensure it is aligned with present-day challenges.
- The experiences over the last three years have again illustrated how important it is to urgently re-evaluate the organisational structures of veterinary services in provinces to address the lack of service delivery and abolish the matrix organisational structure of service delivery.
- These are some of the recommendations contained in the report issued by the Task Team appointed by former Minister Thoko Didiza of the then Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development completed in 2022.
- We have extracted ten recommendations from that report that the leadership in the Department of Agriculture should consider. Some industry role players are puzzled as to why very few of these measures have thus far been implemented. The latest foot and mouth disease outbreak in parts of the Eastern Cape again illustrates the importance of these recommendations. These are:

1. A meeting between the Minister and the MECs of all provinces will be held to discuss interim measures to establish the chain of command, allocation of funding, movement control, and the designation of responsibilities.
 2. Urgently establish an animal health biosecurity plan, which should include alternative options to ensure biosecurity, such as vaccination to control the spread of disease.
 3. Activate Animal Health Biosecurity awareness programmes for livestock owners and handlers across the value chain, including regulatory compliance requirements.
 4. Actively enforce regulatory compliance for disease management throughout the value chain.
 5. Activate public-private partnership agreements and market access during disease emergencies for each commodity impacted by diseases.
 6. Re-activate the process to establish an animal disease emergency fund. This could be done by reserving a specified share of the national annual animal health budget in a contingency reserve. The necessary regulations will have to be developed, and approval from the National Treasury will probably have to be obtained.
 7. Reinstate a rigorous and effective system to control the movement of animals out of disease control areas. In the case of communal areas, a mechanism to work together with traditional leaders should be introduced.
 8. Immediately deal nationally with the state of disrepair of international and protection zone fences.
 9. Review the structural arrangements across several Directorates within the national Department, especially in the Branch of Agricultural Production, Health, Food Safety, Natural Resources, and Disaster Management to eliminate duplication and to strengthen human and financial resources.
 10. Evaluate and assess the management and leadership of key staff in the provincial veterinary offices.
- Some of these recommendations will require collaboration with other departments such as Public Works, Boarder Management Agency, and the South African Police Service. Therefore, the Minister must take the lead to rally support from his cabinet colleagues. We view this as vital, as the livestock and poultry industries account for nearly half of our agricultural fortunes, with significant contributions by black farmers. We also know of the impasse between the EU officials and the South African authorities. The EU is unwilling to consider any discussions on red meat exports to the EU before South African authorities consider some critical questions about veterinary processes and animal disease issues. The EU officials are adamant that they still need these critical questions answered before they consider further negotiations on our access to the high-value markets in their region. Therefore, South Africa must seize the opportunity and interest of the EU in our high-quality red meat products and resolve the outstanding regulatory matters that have been formally communicated to our authorities.