

The future of biosecurity in South Africa

Facilitator: Theo Boshoff, CEO: Agbiz

Panellists:

- Dr Marinda Visser – University of Pretoria
- Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele – CEO: Citrus Growers Association
- Dewald Olivier – CEO: Red Meat Industry Services

Session sponsor: ABSA

Theo Boshoff, Agbiz CEO, opened the session by asking the panellists: how can we prevent biosecurity constantly being a crisis or becoming a crisis? He noted the comment by the DG Ramasodi that biosecurity is everyone's responsibility.

Dr Visser (who also manages the National Biosecurity Hub on behalf of the National Department of Agriculture) responded that the recent Biosecurity Summit had proved very effective in highlighting the biosecurity challenges and risks facing the country.

Mr Boshoff then asked the panel: how do we make it relevant to consumers?

Dr Visser's response identified the need for heightened consumer education and consumer awareness. People on the street need to understand biosecurity, and how it feeds through to their daily lives and grocery shopping.

The dimensions and learnings from the current crisis were then explored – i.e. what can we take away from the current crisis?

Mr Dewald Olivier framed it via a number of questions – who is funding work on biosecurity? Who's responsibility, is it? He noted that the crisis was moving govt and business towards working together, and away from devising separate plans, as had been the case in the past. Currently, government is in charge of biosecurity by law, Olivier said. But what we've seen over the past six to twelve months is a move towards a situation where we're working together, rather than government being in charge of paying for everything.

Olivier, an admitted attorney, issued a warning against resorting to litigation to resolve biosecurity disputes. Such battles, although perhaps won by the private sector litigants were legally narrow in focus

and could prove ultimately counterproductive. E.g. the recent vaccine ruling only looked at the Animal Diseases Act. It did not take Act 101, Act 36, or the World Organisation for Animal Health's guidelines into consideration, he explained. The concern was that taking government to court doesn't help the overall goal, in that you might win many battles, but the requirement for trust war is then likely lost.

He noted that a new approach to how we view biosecurity was required. Both containment and risk management are key. The current crisis was borne out of years of not prioritising biosecurity sufficiently. And both govt and industry were not working together sufficiently on this in previous years. He agreed with Dr Visser that the Biosecurity Summit had led to frank discussions on approaches and relationships. The Ministerial Task Force composition is a good example of emerging trust.

Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele noted that border awareness and understanding are still a problem. E.g. plant material being brought across a border by individuals without awareness of the possible consequences. The border authorities need therefore to check if persons have visited a farm during their trip, as is the case in some other countries which practice good biosecurity control. There should be "pre-farm, on farm and post-farm containment and risk management". He explained that there is a lot of common understanding between the plant and animal health arenas, yet there was still a significant disparity between plant and animal health biosecurity – with plant health leading and animal health lagging. The citrus industry for example has successfully built functional public-private partnerships based on clear objectives and mutual respect. Defined common practical agendas were followed – with all parties walking out of the room knowing exactly what's expected of them to achieve market access, and in what sequence.

Dr Ntshabele and other panellists in addition highlighted an anomaly - there is almost no public communication or leaflets or notices or TV adverts about the current FMD outbreak. But you don't see the same urgency here even though it is like an animal Covid-19 epidemic. Dr Visser added that biosecurity must become "a norm" rather than "that little special thing we talk about when there's an outbreak."

This required reflection on how industry and government have engaged with stakeholders. All three panellists agreed that public awareness remains dangerously low. Have to be very deliberate about this and highlight what the actual value of the affected industries is to the SA economy.

Mr Olivier pointed out that there is therefore a need to be very strategic about how we do respond now and going forward. But whatever we build now we must build sustainably and it must be something that will last.

The accompanying matter of training and capacity was succinctly highlighted by Dr Visser. South Africa trains or funds bursaries for agronomists, plant pathologists, entomologists, and veterinarians, but who trains regulatory scientists that work on trade requirements and regulations? She challenged industry and agribusiness to invest immediately in training the next generation of risk assessors – the people who open and maintain export markets through pest risk assessments and technical negotiations. Behind every SPS Protocol being signed will be monitoring and other actions that require significant capacity to implement. Dr Visser noted that the Dept of Agriculture and industry stakeholders working on the fruit sector had developed a very good common goal and focus on achieving market access.

Dr Ntshabele reinforced by observing that market access success over coming years could be undermined by under capacity. Many regulators are 20-plus years in their jobs. They're getting older,

they're retiring, and there are less young, energetic people coming in, nor are they being sufficiently mentored or trained.

The Questions and Answers component of the session revealed the level of producer frustration.

One farmer representative, speaking from the floor, described the impossible situation facing primary producers. "Travel through any town in this country – Port Elizabeth included – there are cattle walking through the streets, and grazing 10 to 15 kilometres up the roads," he said. "How on earth does a farmer create biosecurity when the fences are stolen?"

He described a culture of closed doors. "The minute we ask a question; they close the door on us. I don't agree with taking government to court, but it happens out of sheer frustration. None of you sitting at the top could live without a salary for a year. That's the reality farmers face."

Another audience member called for honesty about past failures. "The neglect of our vaccine production capacity did not happen by force of nature. Someone made those decisions, and today we speak of them as though it was out of our control. No one is coming forward to say: "it was wrong."

The Way Forward: Carrots, Not Sticks

Despite the grim assessment, the panel offered a clear path forward.

Olivier argued that financial incentive – the "carrot" – is the only sustainable driver of behavioural change. "If I'm not going to get more by playing by the rules, then I don't play by the rules. The stick approach has been largely unsuccessful."

He pointed to early 2024 as a turning point, with unprecedented collaboration between government and the red meat industry, including a Joint Ministerial Task Team.

Dr Ntshabele called for South Africa to benchmark itself against biosecurity leaders. "In Brazil, government and industry tell the same story. They say, 'Don't worry, we are FMD-free – we'll deal with it.' That's where SA should be. Not talking at cross-purposes; but agreeing. Not contradicting each other."

Dr Visser highlighted practical progress, including an upcoming national plant health response simulation involving Border Management, Inspectorates, and all Ports of Entry. "We're going to run a dry run of what to do if a major crop disease outbreak occurs. We've learned a lot from FMD."

Recommendations

The panel concluded with concrete action items:

1. Industry must fund training for regulatory scientists to replace retiring government risk assessors.
2. Avoid litigation as a first response – rebuild trust through structured, closed-door engagement.
3. Create pre-funded emergency response pools using insurance or bank instruments.
4. Shift from punitive "sticks" to incentive-based "carrots" – export market access as a reward for biosecurity compliance.
5. Launch a public awareness campaign comparable to the COVID-19 messaging.