

# Foot-and-mouth disease task teams formed

By [Marika Brits](#)

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Following a meeting between the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) and the National Animal Health Forum (NAHF), three task teams have been set up to deal with the current FMD outbreak, and the management of the disease going forward.



The first is a technical task team that will look at disease control measures. The second task team will be responsible for communicating information to the general public and livestock owners. The third task team will focus on trade, communicating with SA's trade partners and reassuring them that products are safe for trading.

"We have always had a good working relationship with the NAHF and other industry partners. We are very grateful for their assistance and we are looking forward to working alongside industry within these task teams," said Dr Mpho Maja, director of Animal Health in DAFF.

After the meeting, the media was briefed about the current state of the outbreak and the way forward.

## Key messages from the briefing:

### Extent of the outbreak

The disease is currently limited to a small area in the Vhembe-district. It should be seen as a spillover from the FMD protection zone, rather than an outbreak.

"Animals were tested positive for the disease in an area where we could have expected it.

We have the FMD-infected zone, around that we have the FMD protection zone where we vaccinate and monitor the disease and around that is the FMD free zone. In the FMD free zone right on the edge of the protected zone, is an area where we are still very wary of the disease. The spillover was in that area," explained Dr Pieter Vervoort of the National Animal Health Forum.

Both government and industry confirmed that the necessary steps have been taken to contain the outbreak to this area and prevent further spread of the disease.

DAFF confirmed that vaccination in the 20km radius around the affected village will commence immediately. "Culling of affected or in-contact animals in the area is at the moment not advocated. This is due to a number of factors, and the situation is constantly monitored by the veterinary team," the department said in a statement.

## **A disease management area, enclosed by the R81, the R36, the N1 and the R524 roads, has been declared.**

The specific boundaries of this area will be published in the government gazette.

No movement of cloven-hoofed animals is allowed within, into or out of this area. Products from cloven-hoofed animals may only be allowed within and out of this area with a permit issued by the local state veterinarian. Movement of cloven-hoofed animals (including wildlife), and unprocessed products out of the Mopani District, the Vhembe District and the Molemole Municipality of Capricorn District is discouraged until further notice. Only products processed using methods validated to inactivate the FMD virus may safely be moved out of the area. Movement Permits issued for this purpose are withdrawn.

Reports in the media that millions of animals in the FMD free zone have been affected by the disease are not true, said Vervoort.

"Approximately 50 animals have tested positive or have been identified as possibly infected. We have identified a protection zone around the outbreak area. This area contains millions of animals. These animals are not affected by the disease but are included in the quarantined, and monitored, area to create a buffer between the affected area and the rest of the country."

"We are not dealing with an outbreak that spans hundreds of kilometres and affects millions of animals. We are dealing with spillover from the FMD protection zone that has affected a specific area. The outbreak is limited to the Vhembe-district at Sundani Village between Giyani and Louis Trichardt in Limpopo," said Vervoort.

## **Safe to consume**

Speakers at the press briefing reiterated the fact that FMD has no effect on humans and that South African meat is still safe to consume. DAFF's director of animal health, Maja said FMD is a disease affecting only cloven-hoofed animals. "This includes cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and cloven-hoofed game such as buffalo and antelope."

FMD is a trade-sensitive disease, which is why trade partners have put bans in place. It is not because it is a consumer risk. "The risk is that the disease could spread to cloven-hoofed animals in the country in question," said Maja.

## **Trade bans**

Maja said that it is standard procedure for the OIE to remove a country's FMD free status if and when animals in the FMD free zone tested positive. "It is further standard procedure for trade partners to put trade bans in place as soon as a country's FMD free status is removed," she said.

Dr Pieter Vervoort, chairman of the National Animal Health Forum, explained that trading partners halt trade as soon as FMD is declared in the FMD free area. A negotiation process will follow. "Our trading partners have already come back to the table to discuss the situation. They want to know what exactly happened, where it happened, what the extent of the situation is and whether we have FMD free animals to trade. It is our responsibility to communicate with these trading partners and reassure them that we can provide them with product from FMD free animals. The task team focused on trade will have an important job to do here."

Vervoort said that although the outbreak is a minor one, it has a major impact on the industry and therefore on the country. The department and the private sector have identified better traceability in the livestock industry as a useful tool to lower the impact of this and any future disease outbreaks. "If we can show that animals were reared in disease-free areas, these animals could still be exported or sold in local trad."

"A lot of attention has been given to improving traceability in the [livestock] sector, but this outbreak puts a focus on this and has motivated the department to pay attention to the matter and get the job done," said Minister Senzeni Zokwana.

## **Impact on the industry**

Gerhard Schutte, CEO of the Red Meat Producer's Organisation, said from the perspective of the red meat industry news of the FMD outbreak was bad news for the sector. "After today's meeting I am however confident that there will be a well-managed team effort between DAFF and the [red meat] industry to regain our FMD free status in as short a time as possible," said Schutte.

## **According to Schutte, South Africa was exporting about 3% of its beef at the time of the outbreak.**

"This 3% has now gone back into the local market, which will definitely affect the price of red meat. We all know that the consumer's purchasing power is quite weak following the festive season and the 3% can have a real effect in lowering consumer prices. This is good news for the consumer but bad news for the producer. Producer prices are already under pressure and given the current drought conditions in many parts of the country, this will further put the producer under pressure."

## **Regaining FMD free status**

In a media statement after the briefing, DAFF acknowledged that the question everyone wants answered is when the OIE FMD free status will be regained. This is a long process which the department explained in a recent statement.

"The outbreak must first be contained through movement control and vaccination. At the same time the extent of the outbreak must be investigated. This is currently being done. Then we must prove that it was a limited incident, through active surveillance outside the vaccinated area. Considering that animals in the formerly free zone will be vaccinated, these animals will have to be clearly marked and removed from the area once the situation calms down, if we intend including the same area in the free zone again," said Dr Botlhe Modisane, Chief Director Animal Production and Health.

"Then the real hard work starts. We must review our FMD control strategy to ensure that it still complies with the OIE guidelines. Thereafter, we must implement all these measures and conduct audits to confirm that they are adhered to. All of us need to be working together to achieve this – livestock farmers, industries, veterinarians both private and state employed, National and Provincial Agriculture Departments, This starts with the first line of defence, the fences, followed by all layers which cumulatively reduce the risk of infection reaching the FMD free zone. These layers include vaccination, robust clinical inspections of animals in the protection zones and adhering to movement control requirements."

It is important that everyone understand that there are no short-cuts to regaining an FMD free status. "We must all be committed to containing and eradicating this outbreak and thereafter regaining our FMD free zone status," said Zokwana.

## **The farmer's responsibility**

Livestock farmers are reminded of the role they must play in containing the disease.

"We remind farmers to report it to their state veterinarian as soon they suspect FMD in their herd. Do not wait until it is too late and do not try to keep it a secret," says Maja. Livestock farmers further have a responsibility to not move cattle to and from the infected area, to only buy in cattle from a trusted source and to uphold good biosecurity measures.

"We ask livestock farmers to be on the lookout for possible cases of FMD and report it, even if they only suspect it." Clinical signs of the disease include blisters and lesions around the mouth and on the feet. "This will cause heave salivation and limping in livestock. Livestock may also appear depressed and may be reluctant to eat."

## **ABOUT MARIKE BRITS**

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