

FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE *WHAT IS NEW?*

8 JANUARY 2026

Dear Producer.

The new year has arrived, and from the National RPO, we would like to wish each of you a prosperous 2026. A new year often means new things, but unfortunately, at the beginning of the year, we are still faced with Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), which has spilt over from last year.

Some things remain the same

Much of the situation surrounding FMD remains unchanged. The disease is still spreading like wildfire, and we are still without a vaccine. The Ministerial Task Team on Animal Diseases continues to hold meetings and develop plans, which are not being shared with the industry.

It is still stated, but not confirmed, that the *Botswana Vaccine Institute* (BVI) vaccine will be available by the end of January 2026, and that other suppliers are also being considered. The ball is apparently in the court to import the *Dollivet* (Turkish) vaccine, but we do not know when it will arrive, as a chain of applications and signatures must first be met. All discussions regarding vaccine imports appear to be ongoing, but this is still happening without our FMD field strains being sent to the *Pirbright* Institute to ensure the effectiveness of the vaccines.

The plan is still to vaccinate the entire country, but only a sober person knows what the plan looks like. In the meantime, red meat producers with positive or adjacent farms are still without a market, without income, and with higher-than-normal costs because they cannot sell their weaners. KwaZulu-Natal still has a DMA with stricter rules, while the rest of the province, as well as other provinces, are riddled with FMD. The producers are suffering catastrophic losses. They are discouraged, and there are no answers or concrete solutions on the table.

What has changed?

What is new about the situation is that we are now seeing deaths of young calves due to *Tiger Heart Syndrome*, where the virus affects the heart muscle, whereas extensive cattle previously showed very mild symptoms. It is not only the calf deaths that are worrying, but lactating extensive production cows are getting severe mastitis, and adult animals are lying down because they are so crippled that they cannot stand or walk.

We are receiving reports that dairies that were vaccinated six weeks ago have now picked up the virus and, despite vaccination, are still experiencing huge losses in

production, morbidities and mortalities. There are confirmed cases at pig farms, while there is no approved vaccine for pigs in South Africa.

There are increasing questions about how the virus is spreading, as cattle more than a kilometer from the nearest livestock have tested positive. The virus has infiltrated pig farms despite the presence of excellent biosecurity measures. There are questions about the effectiveness of the vaccine, as vaccinated animals show severe symptoms. Speculation is rife about the virus having drastically mutated, because what is happening now is something we have never seen before.

What happens now?

The fact is that FMD is still a state-controlled disease, but unfortunately, it is not under control. Drastic intervention is necessary regarding vaccine production, based on our field strains, vaccine availability and procurement, as well as collaboration between the government and private sector for vaccine administration, is crucial.

The plan to vaccinate the entire country is a step in the right direction, but currently, there is no publicly available workable plan on how this will be done. According to the Ministerial Task Team, a plan exists, but there has been no consultation with industry. Until the plan is released for public comment, the general feeling is that it does not exist. The Ministerial Task Team consists of a bunch of incredibly knowledgeable people, but the information is not flowing out of the task team, and it feels like there is no progress. We do not know if the problem lies with the task team or with the implementation of decisions made by the task team, because things are currently happening under a proverbial cloak.

FMD is busy bringing the largest agricultural industry in SA (primarily cloven-hooved animals) to its knees, but it feels like the solutions are coming too slowly.

Meanwhile, the industry is left to rumours, hearsay, reports, and press releases. This creates division about what we should do. Some argue that the entire country should be vaccinated, while others are opposed to it. Some are trying hard to implement biosecurity, while others feel that the virus should run its course, as all animals will be vaccinated in any case. There are calls to join hands with the government and find solutions, but others believe that this approach will not be effective and that the government should be taken to court instead, forcing them to intervene.

Everyone is certainly entitled to their own opinion, and no one is going to agree on everything; however, the common denominator is that every producer believes we can no longer continue on the current trajectory.

What should producers do?

Although we cannot dictate to producers how to manage their farms, we would like to request the following:

- ***Apply biosecurity measures as strictly as possible.*** Although the plan is to vaccinate the entire country, this will not happen quickly. We are increasingly seeing the virus causing more severe symptoms, so do everything in your power to prevent it from spreading to your farm.

- **Report clinical signs.** There is a feeling that it is no longer necessary to report clinical signs, as it currently harms your market access, and the entire country will be vaccinated anyway. Please note that current indications are that “hot spots” where the virus is present will receive the vaccine first. The only way to ensure that your area, which is positive, gets to the top of the list is to report the virus.

What does the RPO do?

The RPO is often asked what we are doing about the situation. In short, there are basically two paths. One is to work with the government to find solutions to the state-controlled disease, and the other is to take the Department to court and thereby attempt to prove that not enough is being done, thereby having the court to intervene.

We have decided to go the cooperative route. This does not mean that we do not apply pressure and do not ask the necessary questions; it means that we are willing to cooperate, and therefore, we are listened to, and we still manage to achieve successes. In our opinion, several problems will arise if we make a court case pending, the most important of which are the following:

- Firstly, there will be no further discussions between the industry and the Department. Since the matter will be *sub judice*, any discussions and flow of information will be stopped immediately.
- Secondly, the length of a court case. Our feeling is that it is too late for that. We need solutions now. If a case is pending, all progress can come to a halt. The time course of a court case can be very long, and we do not have the luxury of adding more time to the current problem.
- Thirdly, the past has proven that an industry lawsuit against the Department puts the brakes on the entire industry. Although FMD is a significant problem, the state also performs several other functions for which we need them. If we take them to court over one problem, then they become so busy with that lawsuit that there is no more “time” to do the rest of the functions they are supposed to perform.
- Fourthly, the general motivation for taking the Department to court is the demand that drastic action must be taken regarding FMD. If we consider litigation, it must be much more specific. Not even the court can force the Department to do something that is not practically feasible. The urgency of the application for a specific matter must be proven; negligence in acting must be proven; the matter must be practically feasible; and the urgency of the application must be obvious.

We believe that we are currently achieving more by working together. Looking for solutions together, making suggestions, and constantly asking the questions. Yes, there are problems. The flow of information is one. The availability of concrete plans with timelines is another. We are attempting to obtain this information and will disseminate it as we receive it; however, we currently do not see that a lawsuit will expedite these challenges. This does not mean that litigation is off the table for the future, but it is not currently on the table.

The RPO is also part of the Red Meat Primary Cluster (RMPC) and the Red Meat Industry Services (RMIS). Dewald Olivier and his team are working very hard on

solutions, proposals and research as FMD is a very good example of something that affects the entire primary industry (producers, feedlot and abattoir) and therefore the red meat statutory levy and services under the levy are being used as much as possible to find solutions to the problem.

The other members of the RMPC are also actively involved. The Feedlot Association has applied to have a scheme registered with the government, allowing cattle entering feedlots to be vaccinated. This will restore market access for producers. Dr Gerhard Neethling of the Red Meat Abattoir Association is not only a member of the Ministerial Task Team but also negotiates the necessary plans, permits, and agreements with the government on behalf of the industry to promote local and international market access.

In Conclusion

The RPO is an organisation that consists of producers. The organisation is led by producers, and we can therefore assure you that we experience your frustration, loss and pain first-hand. What you experience, we also experience. We make decisions and strive to find solutions to the best of our ability, promoting the interests of all our members.

If you believe there is more that needs to be done, want to contribute to our efforts, or have a different perspective and would like to suggest an alternative approach, please get involved. There is a provincial RPO structure in every province, which collectively forms the national structure. Get involved with the organisation that works *by producers, for producers*.

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