

Government will not compensate poultry farmers for losses

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The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development does not have funds to compensate farmers for their losses as a result of the deadly avian influenza outbreak across South Africa, according to the department's chief director Dipepeneng Serage, who was responding to questions posed by the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development this week.



The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development does not have the funds to compensate farmers who have experienced losses due to the avian influenza outbreak in the country.

The department and the South African Poultry Association (SAPA) appeared before the committee to brief them on the interventions that have been put in place to arrest the bird flu that has affected the South African poultry industry and led to supply shortages to the detriment of consumers.

The committee heard about the devastating impact of the disease, which has led to well over 7,5 million chickens being culled so far, and how this would have a detrimental effect on food security, levels of employment and the sector's transformation agenda.

Dr Abongile Balarane, general manager for SAPA's Egg Organisation, said that as a result of the outbreak, South Africa has had to import eggs from neighbouring countries.

"It will take 17 months before the local sector recovers from its lost production. As a result, Namibia is an alternative [to supply] South Africa's table eggs."

He recommended that affected farmers receive adequate compensation so that they can ramp up egg production once the outbreak has passed. However, the department said that it would not be compensating farmers at this time.

Izaak Breitenbach, general manager of SAPA's Broiler Organisation, said the broiler industry was in distress, and that the bird flu crisis had been exacerbated by load-shedding, interrupted water supply, infrastructure failures and high feed costs.

He called on the department to implement various measures, including capping the export of broiler hatching eggs, importing 53 million broiler hatching eggs to meet the demand shortfall and relaxing grading criteria.

Breitenbach also said that because farmers feared not being compensated for their losses, they refused to cull their stock, which worsened the spread of the disease and posed a huge risk to containment measures.

Breitenbach said that at this time, the extent of the impact on farmers was immeasurable, but that many who had lost their entire flocks would be forced to start from scratch at their own expense or shut down altogether.

He also said strict implementation and monitoring of biosecurity measures needed to be used as a substitute to culling.

Responding to the committee's questions on compensation and insurance against loss, Serage said that the department did not have the funds to compensate farmers for their losses and emphasised that biosecurity and regular quarantine of farms remained the responsibility of farmers.

"A farmer from North West transported chickens to the Western Cape, which was not yet affected by the virus, in the middle of an outbreak and now those chickens have spread the virus in the Western Cape.

"Some farms whose flocks were infected in 2021, [are now again infected]. They seemingly have not learnt any lessons or taken necessary precautions to prevent [an outbreak] from happening again in future. And if we were to fund culling, the

department would be in the business of compensating culling of poultry stocks year in and year out.”

He also explained that there was currently no insurance company willing to underwrite the risk of avian influenza because it was expensive and likely to recur intermittently.

The committee also queried why a vaccination had not been introduced and wanted to know what strategies the department had put in place to contain the outbreak.

On the issue of a vaccine, Serage said it was not a simple matter.

“Many countries are not in favour of it because the bird flu virus may mutate and infect other animals and humans, which could, in turn, lead to human-to-human infections.”

Dr Mpho Maja, director of animal health at the department, said that vaccination was not a silver bullet.

“Biosecurity and quarantining of farms remain better options for preventing outbreaks of avian influenza on chicken farms,” she said.

She said the department was currently investigating the efficacy of certain vaccines, but that so far, the results of these investigations had not warranted their introduction to the market.

Maja added that if a vaccine were to be introduced, it would have to be done in a strictly controlled manner to avoid any unintended consequences.

Serage assured the committee that the department would gazette strict biosecurity regulations on the movement of chickens and would roll out, evaluate and monitor biosecurity training and campaigns in various sectors of the poultry industry as a mechanism to curb infections in the future.