Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease outbreak update report

28 November 2023*

agriculture, land reform & rural development

Department:
Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Report compiled by:

Directorate: Animal Health

* This report includes all information as available by close of business on the indicated date. All the updates contained in this report may not currently reflect on the WOAH WAHIS system due to technical difficulties with the WOAH reporting system.

1. Introduction and Summary

Prior to November 2022, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) had never occurred in South Africa. In November 2022, an outbreak was confirmed in the Western Cape and Northern Cape Provinces of South Africa. Outbreaks have since also been confirmed in rabbits in Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Free State, North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces. South Africa currently has 279 open RHD outbreaks reported to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH).

2. Epidemiology

Carcasses of RHD-infected rabbits may be a major source for viral spreading, since the virus seems to be highly resistant and stable, even when exposed to harsh environmental conditions. Biosecurity measures are difficult to implement in wild populations. The occurrence of RHD in the Karoo is therefore of great concern, as South Africa's indigenous Red Rock rabbit, endangered Riverine rabbit and hare species are highly susceptible to this disease.

The following table (Table 1) provides a summary of all reported RHD outbreaks and cases in 2022-2023. A 'case' means an individual animal, while 'outbreak' means the occurrence of one or more cases in the same epidemiological unit. An 'epidemiological unit' means an area with similar conditions in which the animals that occur in the unit have contact with each other and the same likelihood of being exposed to the virus.

TABLE 1: THE NUMBER OF OUTBREAKS AND REPORTED NUMBER OF CASES PER PROVINCE

PROVINCE	OUTBREAKS	CASES
Free State	6	414
Western Cape	43	326
Eastern Cape	7	63
Northern Cape	166	2101
Gauteng	54	4699
North West	1	1
Limpopo	1	5
Mpumalanga	1	17
Totals	**279**	**7626**

The location of outbreaks is illustrated on map in Figure 1. Please note that due to the proximity of some outbreaks to each other, it may appear as single dots.

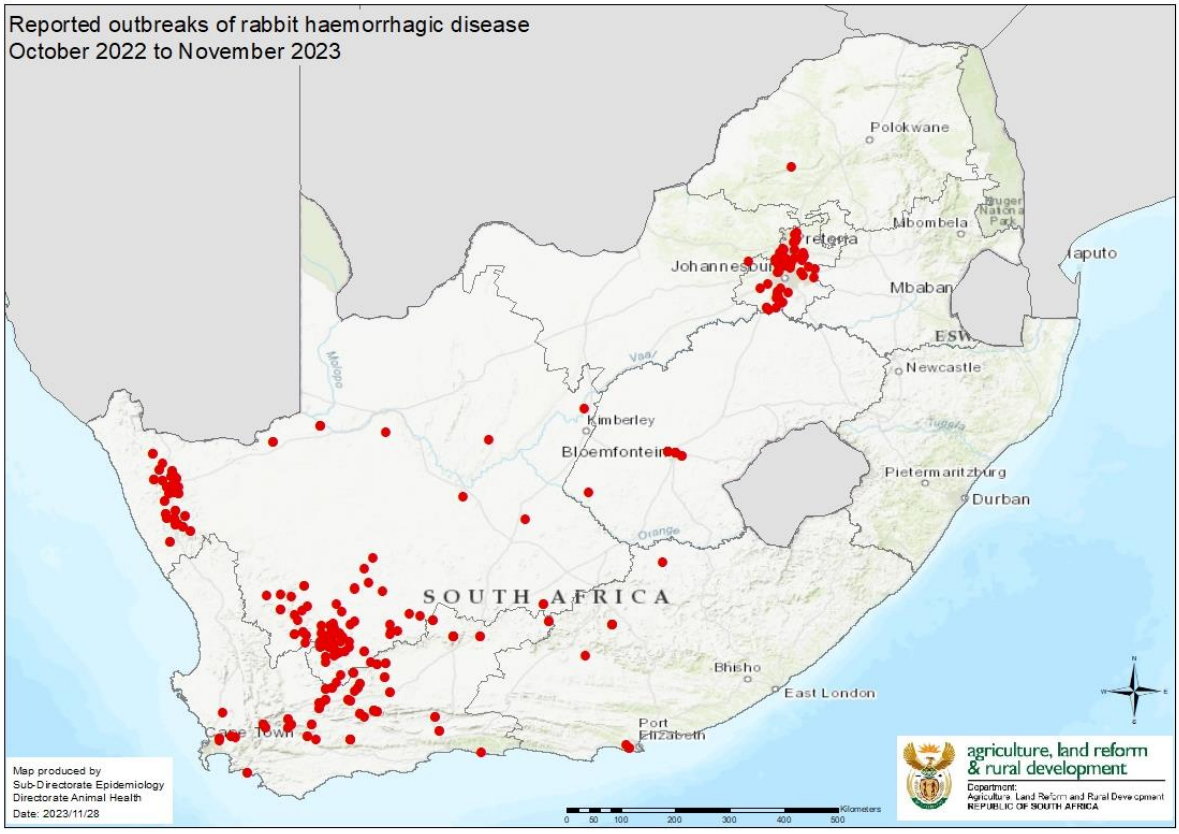

FIGURE 1: THE LOCATIONS OF OUTBRREAKS REPORTED FROM THE STARTING DATE OF THE OUTBREAK IN 2022 UP TO THE DATE OF THIS REPORT

3. Control Measures

3.1 Biosecurity

Rabbit owners are advised to practice good biosecurity, ensure that their rabbits are securely confined and must prevent any contact with other rabbits or hares. Section 11 of the Animal Diseases Act (Act No 35 of 1984) states that it is the responsibility of the owner of animals and the owner and manager of the land on which animals are kept, to prevent disease from entering the animal population and if already present, to prevent the further spread thereof. Members of the public are encouraged to report any dead or dying rabbits or hares to the nearest State Veterinarian for investigation.

3.2 Vaccination

South Africa had been historically RHD free and vaccination against the disease was not previously allowed in the country. However, the need for voluntary vaccination to protect rabbitries became clear. DALRRD, SAHPRA and the Registrar of Act 36 of 1947 worked together to make provision for the legal use of inactivated vaccines for RHDV-2 in South Africa. Vaccine has now been successfully imported and rabbit owners have the option to prevent or control the disease by requesting vaccination through their private veterinarians.

4. Diagnostic tests

For all reported cases, confirmation of disease was done using a Real Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) diagnostic tests at the ARC Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Molecular Biology (Viral PCR) laboratory. The virus strain responsible for the current outbreaks has been confirmed to be RHDV2. Serological test methods are currently not available in South Africa and they may be of limited value going forward as they cannot distinguish between infected and vaccinated animals.

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