Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease outbreak update report

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agriculture, land reform & rural development

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

Report compiled by:

Directorate: Animal Health

1. Introduction and Summary

Prior to November 2022, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) had never occurred in South Africa. Outbreaks have since been confirmed in all Provinces of South Africa. RHD is now considered endemic in South Africa and is in the process of being declared as such with WOAH. When the endemic state has been declared, outbreaks will no longer be reported on an immediate basis to WOAH, but will form part of the 6 monthly reporting system. The monthly Technical Update Report will now be discontinued. The disease will remain notifiable in South Africa.

2. Epidemiology

Outbreaks have been detected in wild populations, commercial colonies and pet rabbits. The virus is highly resistant and stable, even when exposed to harsh environmental conditions. Carcasses of RHD-infected rabbits are a major source for viral spreading and biosecurity measures are difficult to implement in wild populations. These factors, combined with the spread of the disease to all South African Provinces, have informed the decision to declare the disease as endemic.

Table 1 provides a summary of all reported RHD outbreaks and cases in 2022-2024. 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 OPEN OUTBREAKS AND REPORTED NUMBER OF CASES PER PROVINCE

PROVINCE	OUTBREAKS	CASES
Free State	3	414
Western Cape	43	326
Eastern Cape	5	93
Northern Cape	166	2101
Gauteng	58	5063
North West	1	1
Limpopo	1	5
Mpumalanga	3	32
Kwazulu-Natal	2	15
Totals	**282**	**8050**

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

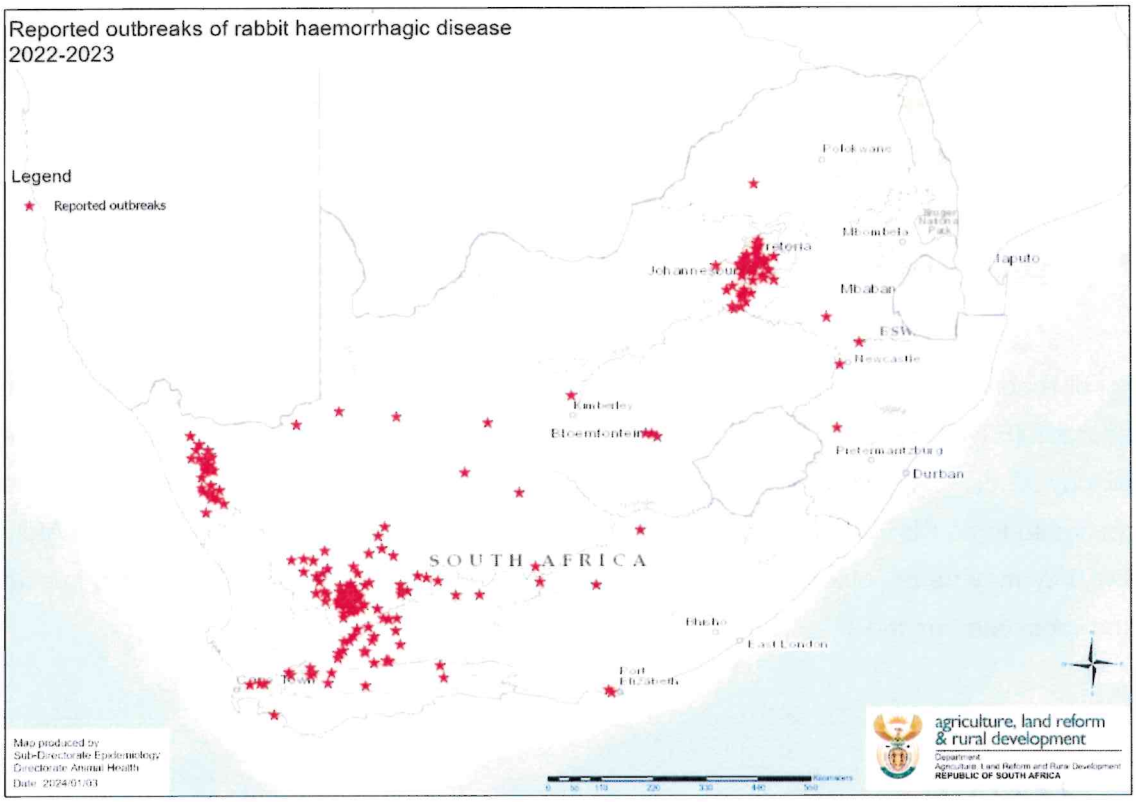

FIGURE 1: THE LOCATIONS OF OUTBRREAKS REPORTED FROM THE STARTING DATE OF THE OUTBREAK IN 2022 UP TO THE DATE OF THIS REPORT

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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