

NEWS RELEASE

‘There are big changes ahead for plant and animal biosecurity in SA,’ say speakers at UP-hosted National Biosecurity Summit



Minister John Steenhuisen address guests at the National Biosecurity Summit that took place at the University of Pretoria.

PRETORIA - Major changes in how South Africa prevents and deals with outbreaks of plant and animal diseases, including foot-and-mouth disease, could be on the horizon. These include possible new biosecurity legislation, criminal prosecution of those who flout regulations and protocols, the introduction of a traceability system, and increasingly close collaboration among government, industry, academia and civil society.

These were among the longer-term solutions proposed by Agriculture Minister [John Steenhuisen](#) at the National Biosecurity Summit held at the [University of Pretoria \(UP\)](#) in June.

The event took place against the backdrop of foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, which agricultural economists predict will cost the economy dearly unless the country responds proactively, with long-term solutions, rather than reacting when a plant or animal disease breaks out. The broader

aim of the summit was to develop a new five-year national biosecurity strategy under the theme 'Collaborative actions for food security and trade'. "Robust biosecurity has to be practised at all times, not just during a threat or disease outbreak," said UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor Francis Petersen in his welcome remarks.

The high-level composition of speakers from industry, academia and the government reflected the importance of the summit, which was hosted by the [National Security Hub](#), a research partnership between UP, the [Department of Agriculture](#) and the [Department of Science, Technology and Innovation](#). In addition to the Minister of Agriculture, they included the top leadership of the [Agricultural Research Council](#), [Grain SA](#), Red Meat Industry Services, the [Citrus Growers' Association](#) and UP, among others.

"When all of us put our heads together to address problems in the sanitary and phytosanitary field, we have the potential to address them successfully," said [Dr Marinda Visser](#), Director of Strategic Projects and Partnerships in Agriculture at UP's [Innovation Africa](#). "Biosecurity is a system that works best when all stakeholders are communicating with one another."

More agile biosecurity legislation and better enforcement

"Biosecurity is not just about defending against risk but also enabling growth," Minister Steenhuisen said. "Strengthening our biosecurity culture in South Africa opens the door to new markets, safeguards jobs and boosts investor confidence."

He was open to introducing more agile legislation in the form of a dedicated biosecurity act with an offence code, and proposed working with the National Prosecuting Authority, Department of Justice and the South African Police Service to enforce laws and regulations.

"Biosecurity protocols are very important, but the laxity of enforcement has often led to people treating them as optional extras rather than as mandatory," Minister Steenhuisen said at a media briefing during the summit.

He also noted that a recent animal auction at Utrecht in KwaZulu-Natal had fuelled the spread of foot-and-mouth disease.

"We have taken a decision to pursue criminal charges against those individuals."

His department is also going ahead with the introduction of a traceability system to monitor the movement of animals from "farm to ship". International markets demanded traceability and South Africa had to move forward accordingly or risk languishing in the "backwaters of international trade", he said.

Emphasising the need for trust, transparency and inclusivity to strengthen biosecurity in the country, Minister Steenhuisen said it was crucial to work not only with big producers but also subsistence and small-scale farmers, including those on tribal trust and communal land.

"It is very important to bring the whole of society along with us."

Biosecurity investments can pay off handsomely

A key statistic he would take away from the summit, Minister Steenhuisen said, was the finding of an Australian study that for every Australian dollar (AUD) invested in biosecurity in Australia, the return on investment to agriculture amounted to AU\$ 30. This return-on-investment ratio was presented by Australian statistician [Dr Andrew Robinson](#) of the [Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis](#) at the University of Melbourne.

Dr Robinson, who delivered the keynote address at the summit, made the point that maintaining a consistently high performance in biosecurity had been financially beneficial to Australian exporters of agricultural products.

“At least half the time, their products come straight off the boat, straight into the warehouses, with no messing around in port and no messing around waiting for an inspector to become available. That’s an incentive. Biosecurity is worth money to them.”

Closer to home, [Wandile Sihlobo](#), chief economist of the [Agricultural Business Chamber](#) of South Africa, said biosecurity “is the bedrock of anything we do in agriculture because we export about half of what we produce in this country”.

He noted that the agricultural sector brings in R250 billion a year from exports, has R220 billion invested in bank loans and employs about 1.3 million people.

“Those are the jobs that would be at risk if exports come under pressure.”

Domestic consumption cannot make up for export shortfalls

Sihlobo cautioned that in the current international trading environment, “everyone is looking for anything to block your products from entering their country”. Biosecurity lapses could reinforce that trend, even for product lines not directly affected by a disease outbreak.

“Non-tariff barriers will be the talk of the day in the next couple of years, and if you are a country that is consistently in the news about outbreaks, they will make things difficult for you,” Sihlobo said.

It is also unlikely that domestic consumption can expand to compensate for any drop-off in exports of high-end products such as wine, grapes and red meat, he added.

“Domestic consumption levels are as good as they are going to get,” Sihlobo said, adding that it would be wrong to underestimate “how badly the South African consumer is hurting”.

Biosafety must therefore be front and centre of agricultural policy and practice, not just for animal health but plant health, too.

“Plant health is a risk area, and not a lot is happening there,” he said. “Animal health gets a lot of media attention, but plant health is also critical.”

Persuading newly graduated vets to stay in SA

Other biosecurity challenges raised at the summit were anti-microbial resistance to antibiotics, the rampant weed problem in crop production and the shortage of veterinary professionals, especially across rural areas. Minister Steenhuisen pointed out that there are 400 vets in the country and only 70 in the public system.

[Prof Vinny Naidoo](#), Dean of the [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#) at UP, said the University had the biggest pool of veterinary students in South Africa and had graduated 170 vets in 2024.

“The problem is that vets are leaving the country,” he said, adding that a solution could be to create opportunities for students in the agricultural value chain, including getting them onto big farms and involving them in vaccine development.

“That’s where we are not succeeding,” Prof Naidoo said, highlighting the necessity for partnerships with industry, which are limited at this point.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za