

SA red meat industry in alert on safety

SA's red-meat industry representative body says agriculture minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson is failing to take measures that would help ensure food safety in the country, and is costing the sector billions in lost income.

The Red Meat Industry Forum has submitted a strongly worded complaint to the portfolio committee on agriculture, forestry and fisheries in which it says Joemat-Pettersson and her department have failed to comply with important legislation regarding the registration of abattoirs and an independent meat inspection service.

In addition, it says the department has failed to ensure the reinstatement of SA's status as a foot-and-mouth-free zone with the World Organisation for Animal Health. The failure to upgrade the status after an outbreak earlier this year is costing SA's livestock industries about R4bn/year in lost sales.

In its 41-page submission the forum raises serious concerns about the manner in which the department administers border fences, quarantine stations and the importation of animals and animal products. If this is not done adequately, it says, safety is compromised.

"The forum has unsuccessfully attempted to engage the minister ... [as well as] the department and the various responsible functionaries," the submission says.

The submission is signed by forum chairman Dave Ford.

He alleges that besides "a series of issues which are directly endangering food safety", Joemat-Pettersson and the department have created a situation that "undermines the ability of the red meat industry to maintain its commercial viability and provide the basic food needs of the SA population."

With regard to the registration of abattoirs, "very few" are compliant with the regulations and operating legally. This has implications for food safety throughout SA and the "significant cost advantages" of noncompliant abattoirs make it difficult for legal ones to operate.

Provision in the Meat Safety Act for a meat inspection service that is independent of the abattoirs is routinely disregarded, the forum says. In practice the function is "performed directly or indirectly by abattoir owners", again with serious implications for safety.

Meat that is unfit for human consumption is being certified fit in the unregistered abattoirs to avoid financial losses, says the forum. "The rights, interest and health of the SA consumer are ignored or circumvented in the interest of commercial gain."

With regard to quarantine stations for imported animals or animal products, the forum says it is "alarmed" that the department is approving "private stations".

"A high-risk quarantine facility should not be on the premises of a party that has a direct financial interest in the animals being quarantined.

This "unacceptable" practice directly affects SA's "export status, ability to import, the safety and health of the national herd and food safety", it says.

In addition, "illegal importation of meat into SA, especially through neighbouring countries, has increased considerably and the department has shown itself unable to prevent this or cope with the situation".

Large sections of SA's international border fences have not been maintained, allowing "uncontrolled movement of ... domesticated animals and wildlife".

PwC senior manager and agricultural expert Luther Erasmus says food safety is a "critical element" of food security.

Though declining to comment on the forum's submission, he says it is crucial to secure the entire agricultural supply chain as the movement of food, people and animals across borders increases.

He says regulators have a key role in food safety. He highlights the recent Ecoli outbreak in Germany, which killed 50 people across Europe.

Earlier this month US-based food marketer Cargill destroyed more than 16mkg of turkey after one death from salmonella infection.

The forum is not the only organisation that has recently registered a complaint alleging that the minister and department officials are inaccessible.

The African Farmers Association of SA says it has complained in a letter to President Jacob Zuma about Joemat-Pettersson's lack of accessibility despite numerous requests for meetings.

"We want to align our strategies with hers on the training of black farmers," says the association's president, Mike Mlengana.

He says the minister's promise of 50000 trained black farmers by 2014 was "empty" and that she was "ducking and diving".

"She is inaccessible to both black and white farmers and doesn't seem to realise that she is a public servant. When I see this I understand the service delivery problems plaguing the country," he says.

Joemat-Pettersson's spokesman, Selby Bokaba, declined the opportunity to respond to the allegations immediately.

"We can't respond to these things piecemeal in the press. We have 21 days to file a comprehensive response to the portfolio committee and we will look at the totality of the submission to refute most, if not all, of the allegations."

Source: Financial Mail