

Report-back from RMIF chairman

Despite many challenges during the past year, the RMIF achieved several successes in influencing official policy.

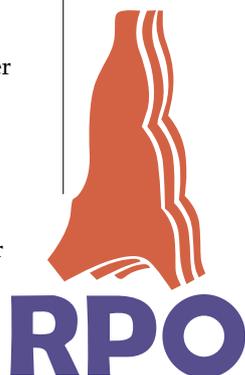
The Red Meat industry had discussed at great length the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' (DAFF) draft policy on a national animal identification, recording and traceability programme. This was according to Dave Ford, who delivered his chairman's report at the recent annual general meeting of the Red Meat Industry Forum (RMIF).

Ford said the industry deemed the programme too ambitious and costly to implement. He added that DAFF was constantly trying to introduce unrealistic new policies while reneging on implementing current ones that were fundamental to the sustainability of the industry.

VACCINE SHORTAGES ARE NOW CRITICAL

"It's therefore imperative that the RMIF sort out [members'] differences and stand together to take the industry forward in this very difficult business environment."

According to Ford, the draft policy had been met with mixed reaction from role players, with the least support for the document in its present form coming from livestock producer organisations. RMIF had therefore submitted a proposal to DAFF to phase in the policy, including streamlining the present animal identification system. This proposal, together with DAFF's objectives, would be debated at a public consultation meeting later this month.



AGOA

No real progress had been made with establishing the benefits that the industry could receive from the AGOA trade agreement, Ford said. RMIF had held discussions with DAFF officials on the organisation's concerns about the concessions made by DAFF and the Department of Trade and Industry in this regard, and requested that the red meat industry participate in future consultations.

During the meeting, it was also suggested that a suitably qualified person be appointed to assist with preparing the documentation for US authorities, as well as compiling a bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) dossier, which would enable South Africa to apply for BSE-free status.

HIDE EXPORTS

The new policy for exporting hides which was now a reality, would have far-reaching economic implications for the cattle and abattoir industries, Ford said. He suggested that the current hide grading system be upgraded, as in its present form, poorer quality hides had advantages over better ones.

The new policy includes a total ban on the export of raw cattle hides, a 20% tariff levied during the first year on wet blue and split hides, and a 40% tariff levied from the second year. As Treasury had not responded to communications from RMIF on this policy, legal advice was being sought.

Following the RMIF's court application to compel the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Senzeni Zokwana, to institute an independent meat inspection service for all abattoirs and all species, as required

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under the Meat Safety Act of 2000, a notice was published in the Government Gazette in July. It was expected that the final implementation would take place by the end of the year, Ford said.

"The regaining of our foot-and-mouth disease-free (FMD) status, together with an advantageous exchange rate, have presented the industry with an opportunity for increased red meat exports. [Approximately] 40 000t have reportedly been exported during the past year."

An RMIF analysis on the impact of an FMD outbreak on the industry had been submitted to DAFF during recent discussions on the state of the country's border fences.

VACCINE CRISIS

Not having consistent availability of vaccines from Onderstepoort Biological Products (OBP) had become critical, Ford said. The compliance committee would therefore proceed with legal action to force OBP to post updates on vaccine stock availability.

"The RMIF has for a number of years been encouraging DAFF to apply controls that are practical and fair. Lengthy discussions have taken place again this year and eventually it appears as if the RMIF proposals on behalf of all the self-mixing livestock industries have been accepted in the latest draft out for comment," Ford said.

The impact of the drought had been reflected in reduced livestock volumes, resulting in unrealistic prices. Coupled with a weaker economy and reduced consumer buying power, some abattoirs and butcheries had had to close down, and many livestock farmers struggled to survive, Ford concluded.

• Phone RPO on 012 349 1102/1103, or email rpo@lantic.net.