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Expired firearm licence?

What the 15 September ruling means

A Gauteng High Court ruling handed down in Pretoria on ***15 September 2026*** has brought new clarity for South African firearm owners, dealers and families dealing with firearms in deceased estates.

Ownership does not disappear

The ruling builds on a principle already confirmed by the Constitutional Court in *Minister of Police v Fidelity Security Services* in 2022: when a firearm licence expires, ownership of the firearm does not automatically disappear with it.

That distinction matters. A licence regulates lawful possession and use; it is not the same thing as ownership of the firearm itself. An owner therefore does not simply forfeit the value of a rifle, shotgun or handgun because the licence has lapsed.

The latest High Court case arose after ***Natshoot and the South African Arms and Ammunition Dealers Association*** challenged police practices that prevented licensed dealers from receiving, registering, storing, selling or transferring firearms where the previous licence had expired, or where the licensed owner had died.

The court found restrictions based solely on licence expiry or the death of the previous owner to be unlawful and invalid.

What may the owner do?

An expired licence is not revived by the ruling. The firearm may not simply be carried, used for self-defence, taken hunting or fired as though the old licence remained valid.

However, following the Fidelity judgment, SAPS introduced a process allowing the owner to apply afresh for a licence. The firearm is verified by the Designated Firearms Officer and the prescribed Annexure B documentation is completed. The firearm must then be stored in accordance with Regulation 86 while the new application is considered.

In practical terms, this allows the firearm to remain secured in the prescribed safe or strongroom during the application process, ***but it may not be used while awaiting the new licence***.

The September ruling also confirms another lawful route. A licensed firearm dealer may receive such a firearm for storage, sale or transfer where the owner does not intend relicensing it personally.

Important for deceased estates

The judgment is particularly significant for farming families dealing with inherited firearms. A firearm does not cease to be an estate asset simply because its licence expired or its licensed owner died.

Executors and heirs therefore have a regulated route to deal with these firearms, including transfer through a licensed dealer and a fresh licence application by a prospective owner.

Conclusion

The ruling does not make expired licences valid again. What it clarifies is equally important: licence expiry does not automatically erase ownership. For firearm owners and farming families, there is now greater certainty about how an expired-licence firearm can be stored, relicensed, transferred or sold lawfully.

Written by (M.O)

NUFARMER Africa



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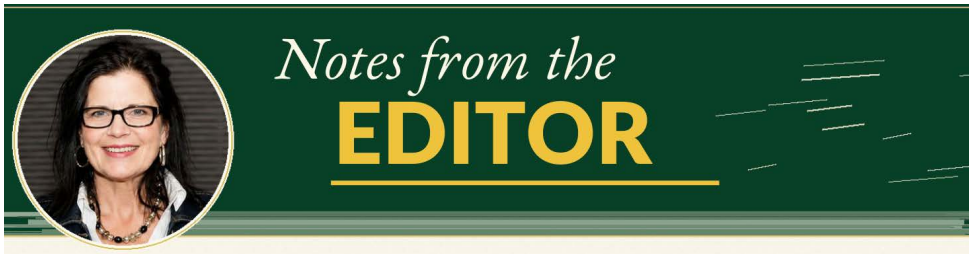
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2026 behind us - 2027 before us

As 2026 draws to a close, we are reminded that farming is never only about crops, livestock and markets. It is about the people who work the land, care for animals and make sure there is food on our tables.

This year has given South African agriculture reasons to be thankful, including exceptional grain production and encouraging opportunities in some livestock markets. But it has also brought difficult questions about animal health, rising input costs, water security and what the next growing season may hold. The work does not stop simply because another year is ending.

Christmas gives us an opportunity to put those pressures aside for a moment and appreciate what truly matters: family, faith, friendship and the privilege of sharing a meal. Behind every Christmas table are farmers, farmworkers and many others whose dedication deserves recognition.

As we look towards 2027, we do so with hope, but also with the understanding that sound decisions, careful planning and perseverance will be needed. May the months ahead bring timely rain, healthy livestock, productive fields and fair returns for the work invested.

To our readers, advertisers and everyone who supports Nufarmer Africa, thank you for walking this road with us. May you and your families enjoy a blessed Christmas and a peaceful, prosperous New Year.

Suzanne Oosthuizen — Nufarmer Africa

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Christmas Melons: Choosing the Sweetest Watermelon and Spanspek for the Family Table

There are some tastes that simply belong to a South African Christmas. A cold wedge of crisp red watermelon. The perfume of a ripe spanspek as the knife opens it. Children with sticky hands, cousins laughing under the trees and grandparents insisting they know exactly how to choose the sweetest melon. But in a market increasingly filled with new colours, miniature fruit, seedless varieties and fashionable innovations, how does the consumer choose a melon that delivers what really matters: flavour, freshness and that unmistakable taste of summer?

Christmas in South Africa does not arrive with snow on the windowsill.

It arrives with heat rising from the paving, the smell of a braai somewhere nearby, cold drinks disappearing almost as quickly as they are put on ice, and tables groaning under the weight of food prepared for far too many people.

And somewhere, almost inevitably, there is a watermelon.

Perhaps it is sitting beneath the kitchen table waiting for somebody to fetch the big knife. Perhaps the spanspek is already chilling in the refrigerator. Perhaps an uncle has tapped three different watermelons at the greengrocer, listening intently while everyone else pretends to understand exactly what he is hearing.

We laugh about these rituals, but they matter.

Watermelon and spanspek are among those simple foods capable of transporting us backwards in time. One mouthful can bring back Christmases spent on a lawn, children competing to see who could eat the biggest slice, juice running down arms and photographs taken before anyone had heard of social media.

So when you are choosing one for the people you love, it is worth choosing carefully.

Start with the watermelon

Forget, for a moment, the dramatic tapping.

Your hands and eyes can tell you quite a lot.

Pick up the watermelon. It should feel heavy for its size, an indication of good water content. Examine the rind for major cracks, punctures, bruising, soft patches or signs of decay.

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Then look underneath.

The area where the watermelon rested on the soil as it matured is known as the ground or field spot. On a mature watermelon this area normally develops a creamy or yellow colour. A very pale or almost white ground spot may suggest the fruit was harvested before reaching optimum maturity.

The rind may also become slightly duller as the fruit matures, although colour and appearance vary considerably between cultivars.

And ***yes, you may tap it.***

A ripe watermelon can produce a deep, relatively hollow sound, but the traditional "thump test" is not infallible. Variety, rind thickness and maturity all influence the sound. Treat it as another clue, rather than the final judgement.

Most importantly, remember that watermelon does not become sweeter after harvesting. Once separated from the vine, the sugar level is essentially established.

If it was harvested too early, leaving it on the kitchen counter will not magically turn it into the intensely sweet watermelon you hoped for.

"A watermelon can become part of a family photograph. It cannot become sweeter simply by waiting on the kitchen counter."

Choosing a beautiful spanspek

A good spanspek announces itself rather differently.

What South Africans commonly call spanspek usually falls within the muskmelon or cantaloupe group, and depending on the cultivar, the skin may show the familiar raised, corky netting over a cream, buff, yellow or lightly coloured background.

Pick it up. Again, good fruit should feel reassuringly heavy for its size.

Examine it carefully. Avoid fruit with cracks, mould, wet patches, large bruises or areas that feel distinctly mushy.

Then smell it.

A ripe spanspek can have that wonderfully recognisable sweet melon fragrance, particularly as it approaches eating maturity. It should smell pleasant and fresh, rather than fermented or overwhelmingly strong.

Gently press the blossom end. A ripe fruit may yield slightly, but it should not collapse under pressure.

Spanspek can continue to soften after harvesting, but consumers should not rely on the fruit becoming substantially sweeter once it has left the plant. Good flavour begins with maturity at harvest.

New is interesting. But is it delicious?

Today's consumer faces a fruit counter very different from the one our grandparents knew.

There are personal-size watermelons, seedless types, different flesh colours, unusual shapes and varieties selected for particular markets and lifestyles.

There is nothing inherently wrong with innovation.

Smaller fruit may be ideal for a one- or two-person household. It can reduce food waste, fit more easily into a refrigerator and suit modern retail and convenience markets. Seedless watermelon is easier to serve to children.



Plant breeders also work continuously on disease resistance, yield, shelf life, texture, colour and, importantly, flavour and sugar content.

Some modern varieties are superb.

But consumers should

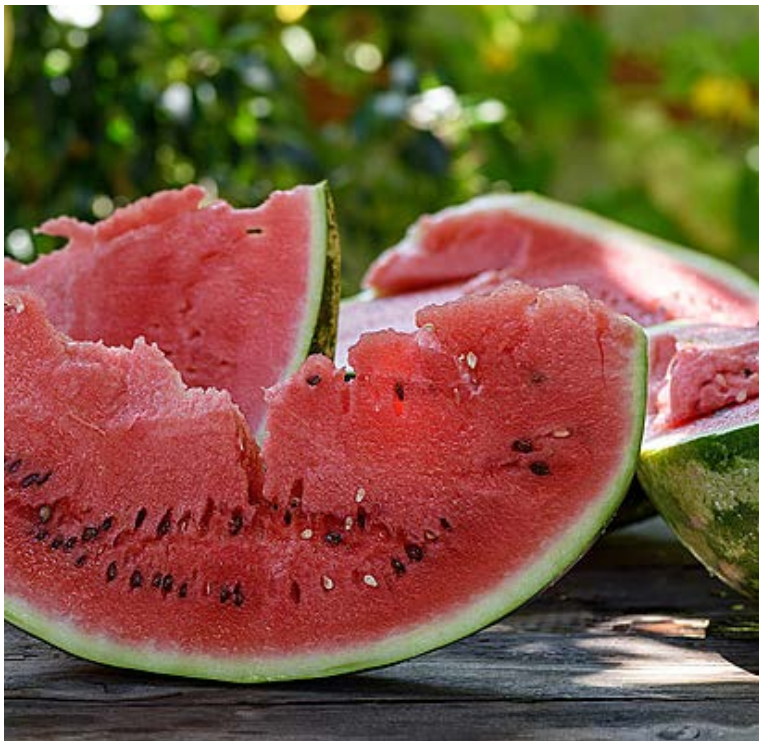
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understand that ***"new" is a description, not a guarantee of better eating.***

Our food system now has to consider much more than flavour alone. Fruit must survive harvesting, packing, transport, retail displays and increasingly different household requirements. Restaurants want consistency. Retailers require shelf life. Consumers want convenience. Smaller households may want smaller fruit.

Social media has added another ingredient: novelty.



Unusual colours, miniature fruit and something nobody has photographed before can generate attention very quickly.

That can be fun.

But your ***Christmas table does not have to become a tasting laboratory simply because an influencer has discovered the newest variety.***

If your family wants the deeply red, crisp, juicy watermelon you remember from childhood, ***buy for that experience.*** If you love the fragrant orange flesh of a familiar spanspek, there is nothing old-fashioned about looking for it again.

Ask your greengrocer what has been particularly good. If buying directly from a farmer or farm stall, ask what they are harvesting and which variety they recommend for flavour.

Innovation deserves its place.

So does tradition.

Perhaps that is especially true of fruit.

Long before anybody photographed Christmas lunch for Instagram, families photographed one another. Those old albums contain children in swimming costumes, grandparents under umbrellas, watermelon smiles, sticky faces and tables surrounded by people who are no longer all with us.

The watermelon was not chosen for clicks.

It was chosen because everybody wanted another slice.

Getting it home in good condition

"At Christmas, the best new memory may begin with an old tradition."

Once chosen, treat your melon like fresh produce, not like a football in the boot.

Secure watermelon and spanspek so they cannot roll around in the vehicle.

Avoid stacking heavy groceries on top of them and keep fresh produce away from raw meat, poultry or seafood that could leak.

In ***December heat, do not leave groceries unnecessarily in a closed vehicl***e.

At home, keep an uncut watermelon in a cool, shaded place if it will be eaten reasonably soon. Avoid direct sun and excessively hot rooms.

A ripe spanspek is more perishable. Refrigeration is sensible once it has reached the eating stage, particularly if you are not serving it immediately.

Before the knife touches the fruit

Here comes one of the most important rules in the entire article:

Wash the melon before cutting it.

It may sound unnecessary because nobody intends eating the rind.

But the knife passes through that rind and then through the flesh.

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Any dirt or microorganisms present on the outside can therefore be transferred to the edible portion.

Wash your hands first. Rinse the melon thoroughly under clean running water, rubbing the surface well. A clean produce brush is particularly useful on a rough, netted spanspek rind.

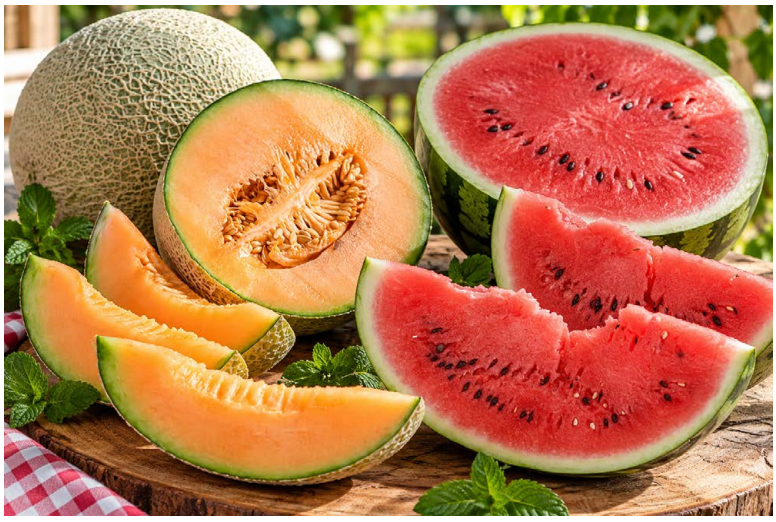
Do not use household detergent, dishwashing liquid or bleach on fruit.

Dry the melon with clean paper towel or a clean cloth, and use a clean knife, board and preparation surface.

Fruit should also be kept separate from utensils or boards that have just been used for raw meat unless those items have been properly washed first.

Christmas Day: cold fruit is happy fruit

Once a melon is cut, its storage requirements change considerably.



Keep cut watermelon and spanspek refrigerated at approximately ***4°C or colder*** until you are ready to serve them.

On a long Christmas afternoon, avoid putting the entire supply onto the table at once. Serve a smaller platter and replenish it from the refrigerator.

As a practical food-safety rule, perishable cut fruit should not remain unrefrigerated for more than about ***two hours.***

If the temperature is above approximately ***32°C, reduce that to around one hour.***

That matters in a South African December.

A beautiful fruit platter standing beside the swimming pool from midday until late afternoon may still look perfectly acceptable. That does not necessarily mean it should go back into the refrigerator for Boxing Day.



If you cannot confidently remember how long it has been standing in the heat, discard it.

And tomorrow?

Place freshly cut leftovers into clean, covered containers and refrigerate promptly.

For a household, aiming to eat refrigerated cut melon within about ***three days*** is a useful conservative rule for maintaining freshness and quality.

Regardless of age, throw it away if you notice mould, fermentation, unpleasant odours, excessive liquid, sliminess or obvious deterioration.

It is also better to portion the fruit rather than repeatedly carrying one enormous container between the refrigerator and the outdoor table.

Don't invite the flies to Christmas lunch

Watermelon rind, spanspek skins, seeds and discarded fruit contain moisture and sugar. In summer they can rapidly attract flies and other pests.

Collect waste as you prepare the fruit instead of leaving a growing pile beside the sink.

Use a refuse bin with a properly closing lid. If rubbish will stand for several days before collection, seal wet fruit waste well.

Melon waste is also useful compost material, but do not simply throw it onto the top of an exposed compost pile. Chop larger pieces if necessary, mix them into the heap and cover them with dry carbon-rich material such as leaves or other garden matter.

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Wipe up juice spills, rinse serving plates and clean preparation surfaces before the remains of Christmas lunch become tomorrow's invitation to flies.

More than something sweet

We spend a remarkable amount of time preparing Christmas.

We choose gifts, decorate tables, plan menus and argue affectionately about who is bringing what.

Yet sometimes the things remembered longest are the simplest.

A father carrying an impossibly large watermelon from the car. A grandmother cutting spanspek in the kitchen. Children disappearing across the lawn with wedges larger than their faces. Somebody shouting that the watermelon is exceptionally sweet this year.

Another photograph.

Another Christmas.

Another small addition to the family's wall of memories.

So try the new varieties during the year. Explore different colours. Enjoy smaller fruit when it suits your household. Celebrate the extraordinary work being done by growers and plant breeders.

But when you buy watermelon and spanspek for Christmas, remember what you are really shopping for.

Not merely size.

Not packaging.

Not novelty.

And certainly not an Instagram trend.

You are looking for a fruit that is ripe, fresh, fragrant, crisp and sweet enough for somebody at the table to say:

"Now this tastes like Christmas."

The Christmas Melon Checklist

WATERMELON

Choose a fruit that feels heavy for its size, has no major damage and shows a creamy-yellow ground spot. Use the tap only as an additional clue.

Remember: watermelon does not become sweeter after harvesting.

SPANSPEK

Look for good weight, characteristic rind development, a pleasant melon aroma and a very slight give at the blossom end. Avoid fruit that is mushy, mouldy, cracked or leaking.

TRANSPORT

Keep fruit secure, shaded and separate from raw meat. Do not leave it for hours in a hot vehicle.

BEFORE CUTTING

Wash your hands. Rinse and scrub the rind under clean running water. Dry it. Use a clean knife and cutting board.

AFTER CUTTING

Keep melon at about ***4°C*** or colder. Refrigerate within two hours, or within one hour during temperatures above roughly ***32°C***.

LEFTOVERS

Cover and refrigerate promptly. For best household quality, try to consume cut melon within about three days.

PEELS AND PIPS

Do not leave melon skins, seeds or discarded flesh exposed around the kitchen, braai or garden. Seal them in a refuse bag, place them in a lidded bin or bury them appropriately within a managed compost heap.

Written by (M.O)



Digging Deeper: Insights into Beet Cultivation

*Producing quality beetroot starts well before harvest. From healthy foliage and precise plant spacing to balanced nutrition and careful irrigation, **Sakata** explores the essential cultivation practices that influence root development, crop quality and ultimately, yield.*

From the first emerging leaves to the final harvest, successful beetroot production depends on getting the fundamentals right. Understanding how foliage, nutrition, spacing and moisture work together can make all the difference to root quality and yield.

Beetroot may be a familiar sight in South African kitchens, but producing a consistent, high-quality crop requires more than simply putting seed in the ground. With consumer expectations for quality remaining high, growers need to pay close attention to the factors influencing plant development.



Although botanically a biennial, beetroot (*Beta vulgaris* L.) is commercially cultivated as an annual root crop. Its success begins above ground, where healthy foliage lays the foundation for root development.

The leaves tell the story

Beetroot starts slowly, with the first leaves generally emerging eight to ten days after planting. Leaf development then accelerates until the canopy closes, when the plant increasingly directs energy towards storage in the developing root.

This relationship makes healthy foliage essential. Diseases that reduce leaf area also compromise the plant's ability to capture sunlight and produce energy.

Giving every plant its space

Plant population directly influences growth, quality and yield. Spacing affects leaf height, spread and development, ultimately shaping the crop's performance.

Sakata recommends spacing plants 3 cm apart within rows, with 20 cm between rows.

Feeding the crop, not just the foliage

While seeds contain sufficient nutrients for

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germination, the developing crop becomes dependent on soil fertility after the cotyledon stage.

Moderate nitrogen promotes healthy growth, but excessive applications can encourage foliage at the expense of root sugars.

Phosphorus and potassium are also required in moderate quantities. Purple leaves in cold soils may indicate phosphorus deficiency, while early abnormal leaf development can signal a shortage of boron.

Protecting the green engine

Cercospora and Alternaria leaf spot, together with downy mildew, can damage the leaf canopy and restrict plant growth.

Preventative spraying and the selection of disease-resistant varieties are important tools in protecting crop performance.

Moisture makes the difference

Consistent moisture is especially important during emergence and early leaf development. Light, regular irrigation helps maintain a cool soil surface and supports uniform establishment.

With a relatively shallow root system, beetroot requires adequate moisture in the upper 30 cm of soil. Poor drainage, however, can contribute to red leaves and stunted growth.

Depending on production conditions, approximately 300–350 mm of water is typically sufficient during the growing season.

Ultimately, successful beetroot cultivation rests on balancing healthy foliage with steady root development, careful nutrient management and consistent soil moisture.

For more production information, visit: www.sakata.co.za.

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TWO CHEQUES FROM ONE SHEEP

Lamb above R100/kg, wool above R240/kg — and Christmas hasn't arrived yet

South Africa's sheep farmers are entering the festive season with an unusual combination: slaughter prices above R100/kg, wool still trading well above year-ago levels and export demand competing with local buyers for quality lamb.

Yet El Niño, feed costs and predators could still decide whether this becomes a truly profitable season.

For many South African sheep producers, the end of 2026 is looking like one of those rare moments when both sides of the enterprise are pulling in the same direction.

By 25 September the indicative A2/3 sheep carcass price had risen to **R106.10/kg**, while feeder lambs were trading around R56.26/kg. At the same time, wool — despite a sharp correction at the final September auction — remained substantially stronger than a year earlier. The Cape Wools all-Merino indicator closed at **R246.16/kg clean** on 30 September, with certified wool at R251.10/kg.

For a dual-purpose Merino or Dohne Merino producer, that means two potentially valuable cheques from the same flock: one from meat and another from fibre.

And the festive season has not yet fully entered the market.

Christmas demand meets an already expensive lamb market

November and December traditionally bring stronger demand for the cuts South Africans associate with celebration — braai chops, legs of lamb, shoulders and premium roasts. Tourism, family gatherings and holiday spending add another layer of seasonal demand.

This year, however, that demand will arrive in a market where slaughter lamb is already expensive.

That does not guarantee another dramatic jump in farm-gate prices.

Retailers and consumers can resist high prices, and festive increases often show up most clearly in individual retail cuts. But the starting point matters: South Africa is entering the Christmas buying period with the A2/3 benchmark already above R100/kg.

The strength is not simply seasonal. Supply has been relatively tight and South Africa's sheep-meat export trade has become increasingly important. In 2024, sheep-meat exports reached about **11,400 tonnes**, with the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan and Iran among the important buyers. Those export channels increasingly compete with the domestic market for young, good-quality carcasses.

The local butcher is therefore not always bidding

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only against another South African buyer. For suitable carcasses, he may effectively be competing with consumers thousands of kilometres away.

Wool gives the farmer a second cheque

At the 15 September wool sale, the all-Merino indicator stood at R259.63/kg clean. By 30 September it had fallen 5.2% to **R246.16/kg**, while the certified indicator slipped to R251.10/kg.

The correction sounds less alarming when compared with last year. The latest all-Merino indicator remained about **12.6% above the corresponding sale of the 2025/26 season**.

Fine wool remains particularly sought after. At the 30 September sale, 66% of the offering tested at 20 micron or finer and 55.6% of the Merino offering was sustainably certified. A single bale of 15-micron Merino wool achieved **R379.87/kg clean**.

Certification is also becoming more than a marketing phrase. International apparel markets increasingly demand traceability, animal welfare and demonstrable environmental credentials. Cape Wools recorded a **4.52% weighted difference** between certified and non-certified wool in comparable fleece categories at the latest sale.



For a producer already running sheep for lamb, fine, well-classed and sustainably certified wool can materially strengthen that second cheque.

El Niño could spend the profit first

The danger is assuming that high prices automatically mean high margins.

South Africa is entering the 2026/27 summer with **El Niño** conditions posing a significant agricultural risk. Seasonal forecasts favour below-normal rainfall across much of the country from October to December, accompanied by above-normal temperatures, with the dry and hot risk extending deeper into the summer season.

For a sheep producer, that translates quickly into money.

Poorer veld means supplementary feed. Lower ewe condition can affect conception, lambing percentages and milk production. Lambs may take longer to finish, while feed becomes more expensive precisely when more producers need it.

Government has already urged livestock farmers to keep stocking rates aligned with available grazing, avoid overstocking, practise sound veld management and make provision for additional feed and watering points.

The R106/kg carcass price starts looking very different if a large portion of it must be spent carrying ewes and lambs through a dry summer.

Every lamb lost is worth more

Predators remain another stubborn cost.



Black-backed jackal and caracal continue to cause losses across sheep-producing areas. New research at Stellenbosch University is now using cameras, automated biotelemetry and environmental sensors to better understand when and how black-backed jackals hunt, feed and move.

Researchers hope that better behavioural information will ultimately help farmers develop

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more effective management strategies.

A predator does not simply remove one lamb.

It wipes out months of feed, genetics, animal-health expenditure and future income in a single night.

At current prices, every lamb lost is becoming more expensive.

The sweet spot — if farmers can protect it

So, is the dual-purpose sheep back in the sweet spot? For well-managed enterprises, the opportunity is difficult to ignore.

Lamb is above R100/kg before festive demand reaches full stride. Wool remains substantially stronger than a year ago. Fine and certified fibre continues attracting buyer attention, while export markets increasingly compete for South African sheep meat.

But the risks remain just as real. El Niño threatens grazing and feed costs. Predators continue taking valuable lambs. International wool prices can correct sharply from one sale to the next. And consumers will eventually resist meat prices that move too far.

The months ahead may therefore be less of a windfall than a test of management.

For the producer who enters summer with feed reserves, controlled stocking rates, good reproduction, effective predator management and a quality wool clip, however, the old attraction of the dual-purpose sheep is becoming very easy to see again.

One animal can turn veld into premium protein while simultaneously growing a natural fibre demanded by some of the world's most discerning clothing markets.

This festive season, the South African sheep may be doing something few farm enterprises manage particularly well: **earning two cheques at once.**

The challenge is making sure enough of both remain in the farmer's pocket.

Written by (M.O)





Soybeans break the 3-million-tonne barrier

South Africa's soybean harvest has reached an all-time high, breaking through three million tonnes for the first time. Behind the headline number lies an equally important story: record national yields, sharp regional shifts and a processing industry expected to absorb considerably more locally produced beans.

South Africa's soybean industry has crossed a significant threshold. The Crop Estimates Committee's eighth production forecast for 2026 places the commercial soybean crop at **3.010 million tonnes — the largest crop yet recorded in the country**.

That is around **210,000 tonnes, or 7.5%, more than the 2.8 million tonnes harvested in 2025**. The area planted increased from 1.154 million hectares to **1.213 million hectares**, a rise of just over 5%.

But more hectares tell only part of the story. The expected national yield has climbed from 2.43 t/ha last season to approximately **2.48 t/ha — the highest soybean yield on record**.

South Africa has not simply planted its way to a record soybean crop — productivity has risen as well.

A record with very different regional stories

The national figure masks some dramatic differences between production regions.

The **Free State** remains South Africa's soybean powerhouse. Its crop is estimated at **1.457 million tonnes**, up from 1.306 million tonnes in 2025.

The biggest percentage jump, however, comes from **North West**. Production is forecast at **478,500 tonnes**, compared with 347,800 tonnes last year — an increase of almost **38%**. Planted area rose from 148,000 ha to 165,000 ha, meaning production increased considerably faster than hectares.

Mpumalanga moved in the opposite direction. Its planted area was virtually unchanged at about 314,500 ha, yet expected production dropped from 771,750 tonnes to **676,175 tonnes**, a decline of roughly 12%.

The contrast is a useful reminder that even during a record national season, local growing conditions and realised yields can produce very different outcomes.

More beans — and more demand

Producing three million tonnes also raises an obvious question: **can South Africa absorb all those soybeans?**

Current projections indicate that demand is expanding with supply.

Grain SA expects approximately **2.5 million tonnes to be crushed for oil and oilcake during the 2026/27 marketing season**, up from about 2.21 million tonnes previously. Total domestic soybean demand is projected at around **2.64 million tonnes**.

That processing demand is critical. Soybeans provide vegetable oil, while the resulting high-protein oilcake is an important ingredient for livestock and poultry feed.

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Exports could provide another outlet. Grain SA projects around **370,000 tonnes of whole-soybean exports**, compared with about 247,000 tonnes in the previous season. Of this, around 190,000 tonnes could move to neighbouring countries and approximately 180,000 tonnes to deep-sea markets.

From rotation crop to heavyweight

Soybeans have become an increasingly important part of South Africa's summer-cropping system, providing farmers with a valuable rotation partner for maize while supplying a growing domestic processing and animal-feed value chain.

The 2026 record therefore represents more than one exceptional harvest. It demonstrates just how substantial the industry has become.

It also raises the next challenge. **Processing capacity, export markets and infrastructure must continue expanding alongside production.** Grain SA already expects commercial soybean demand to be about 15% higher this season, driven by stronger domestic use and export potential.

And agriculture never stands still. Mpumalanga's weaker crop shows that regional weather and yields remain capable of changing the picture rapidly.

South Africa has now broken the three-million-tonne barrier.

The question facing the industry is whether 2026 will stand as an exceptional record — or ***whether three million tonnes is becoming the new benchmark for South African soybeans.***

Written by (M.O)

BY THE NUMBERS

3.010 million tonnes
2026 crop — **largest on record**

+7.5%
Increase from 2025

1.213 million ha
Area planted

2.48 t/ha
National yield — **highest on record**

1.457 million tonnes
Free State production

+38%
Approximate increase in North West production

2.5 million tonnes
Projected for crushing into oil and oilcake

370,000 tonnes
Projected whole-soybean exports





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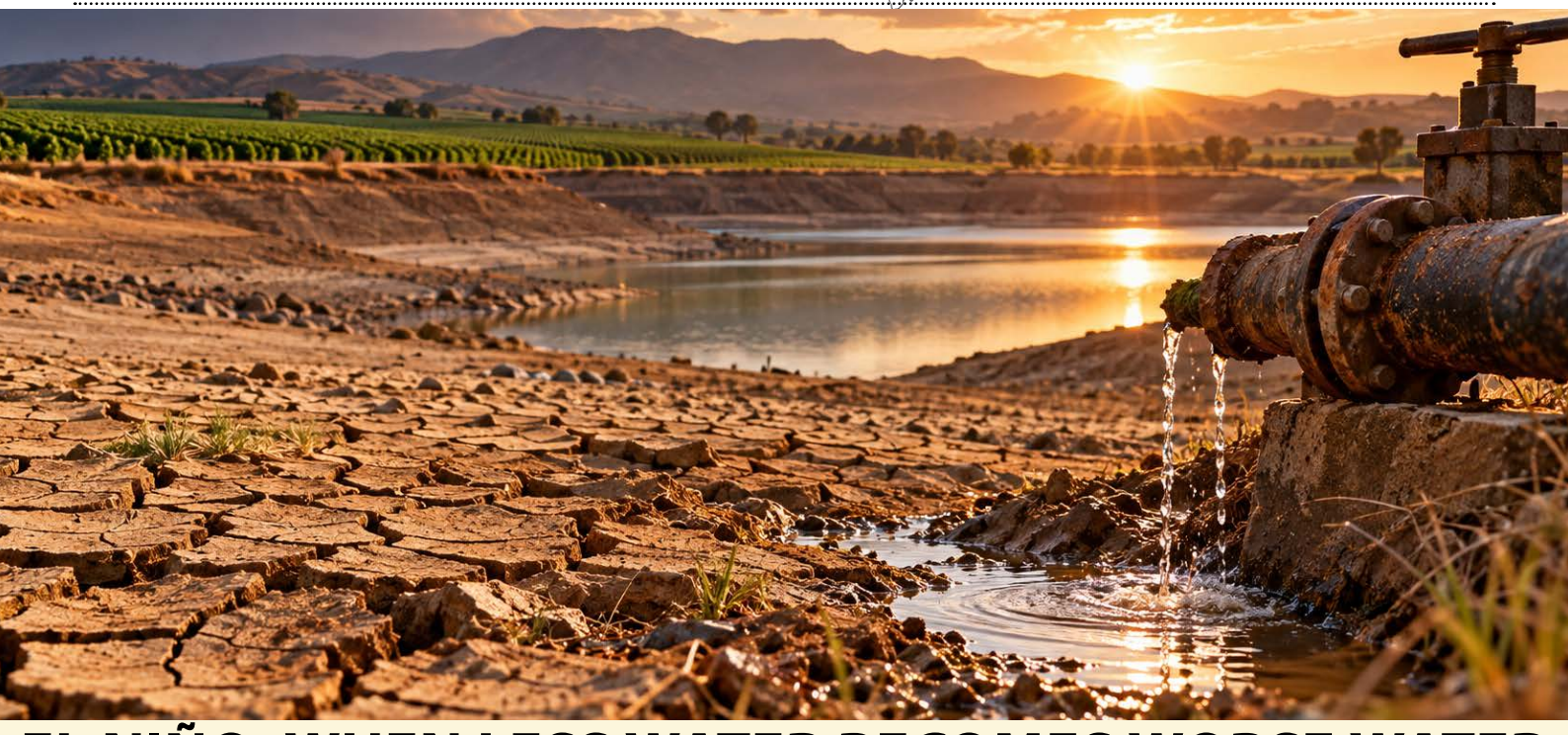
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EL NIÑO: WHEN LESS WATER BECOMES WORSE WATER

How El Niño-related conditions could affect farm water

By Dr Kyle van Heyde,
Dr Sarah Roffe and
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Agricultural Research Council – Natural Resources and Engineering (ARC–NRE)

With a very strong El Niño firmly established over the tropical Pacific, attention in South Africa is understandably turning to rainfall, dam levels and irrigation supply. But water quantity is only half the challenge. Extended hot and dry conditions can alter the quality of the water that remains in rivers, dams, canals and boreholes, while the first substantial rains after a dry period can rapidly mobilise accumulated pollutants. For farmers, the coming season may therefore be about more than simply asking whether enough water is available — it may also be about whether that water remains safe, suitable and feasible to use.

ENSO influences far more than rainfall

The El Niño–Southern Oscillation, better known as ENSO, is a naturally occurring cycle in the tropical Pacific Ocean that influences weather patterns across the world.

El Niño and La Niña are the warm and cool phases of this cycle respectively, with conditions fluctuating irregularly between El Niño, neutral and La Niña phases, generally every two to seven years.

ENSO is one of the major drivers of seasonal climate variability globally, but it does not act alone. Its interaction with other ocean–atmosphere systems and regional processes means that its influence can vary substantially between regions and from one event to another.

In South Africa, ENSO's influence is generally most evident during the summer months from December to February, particularly across the country's summer rainfall regions.

El Niño events are generally associated with conditions that are drier and warmer than the long-term average. La Niña events, by comparison, are typically associated with wetter and cooler conditions.

These remain statistical tendencies rather than guarantees.

South Africa has experienced wetter-than-average conditions during some El Niño events, drier-than-average conditions during some La Niña events and near-average rainfall during either phase. This is why the presence — or even the strength — of an ENSO event should never be interpreted as a precise forecast for an individual farm.

For water resources, however, ENSO's influence extends far beyond rainfall totals.

Reduced rainfall can contribute to lower runoff and reduced inflows into rivers and dams, while warmer

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conditions can increase evaporative demand, water losses and water temperatures.

Higher rainfall can produce its own challenges. Heavy or increased rainfall can mobilise large quantities of sediment and pollutants, while also causing localised flooding and crop damage.

Ultimately, the amount and intensity of rainfall along with land use, vegetation cover and individual catchment characteristics determine how pollutants are transported and mixed through watercourses.

"Water quantity is only half the challenge."

A very strong ocean signal — but not a farm-level forecast

At the time of writing in early October 2026, very strong El Niño conditions are firmly established across the equatorial Pacific Ocean and continue to strengthen.

Current forecasts indicate a high likelihood that El Niño conditions will persist through the remainder of 2026 and into 2027, potentially until around June 2027.

Further strengthening is also possible during the austral spring and summer months.

But the strength of an El Niño event does not directly determine the severity of its impacts in South Africa.

Every event develops against a different combination of oceanic and atmospheric conditions. These can strengthen or weaken El Niño's influence at regional level.

A very strong El Niño signal, therefore, does not automatically mean equally strong impacts at every location.

El Niño can increase the risk of drought, hot spells and heatwaves across South Africa's summer rainfall regions, but the severity and geographical extent of those impacts cannot be determined from El Niño strength alone.

What matters particularly for South African agriculture is the seasonal outlook.

The latest seasonal forecast indicates an increased likelihood of below-normal rainfall across most of South Africa's summer rainfall region during the October–November–December, November–December–January and December–January–February periods.

During October to December, much of the summer rainfall region has at least a **40% probability of receiving below-normal rainfall.**

The dry signal strengthens further during November to January and December to February, when larger parts of the region have a **greater than 60% probability of below-normal rainfall.**

Temperature forecasts show an even stronger signal. Above-normal minimum and maximum temperatures are forecast across most of South Africa throughout all three periods.

Taken together, these forecasts point to an increased risk of **drier- and warmer-than-normal conditions during the 2026/27 summer season.**

The latest seasonal forecasts and information on the developing El Niño can be obtained from seasonal forecasts issued by the **South African Weather Service and the University of Pretoria's Seasonal Forecast Worx.**

Even then, seasonal forecasts cannot say exactly how much rain will fall, when it will arrive or precisely what will happen in a particular catchment or on an individual farm.

Monitoring conditions as the season develops therefore remains essential.

The ARC's **Agricultural Drought Early Warning System, or ADEWS,** provides information on current drought conditions and now includes information showing drought experienced at different timescales during previous El Niño events. This enables users to place the developing season within a historical context.

The ARC's **Weather Risk website** complements this longer-term information with shorter-term forecasts, enabling farmers to monitor rainfall, temperature and other weather risks relevant to their location.

Using information across these different timescales — ENSO conditions, seasonal forecasts, short-term weather forecasts and drought monitoring — provides a much stronger basis for preparedness than relying on the El Niño signal on its own.

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When dry weather changes water quality

The relationship between ENSO and water quality is complex.

Research conducted on the **Crocodile River (East) in Mpumalanga** illustrates this clearly. Between 2016 and 2021, chemical oxygen demand, suspended solids and E. coli responded differently during El Niño, La Niña and neutral periods.

Research on Gauteng's **Klip River** similarly found poorer overall water quality during the hot, dry 2015–2016 El Niño season than during the wetter 2016–2017 season.

But even there, the pollutants of greatest concern — and the areas where the largest problems occurred — changed from one season to another.

The lesson is not that El Niño produces one predictable water-quality outcome.

Instead, ENSO influences the way existing pollution is **diluted, retained and transported,** while local conditions such as land use, infrastructure, wastewater treatment and runoff determine the eventual result.



El Niño-influenced dry periods can modify water quality. Lower flows may concentrate pollutants and salts, while returning rainfall can rapidly mobilise accumulated contaminants in the first flush.

What happens as rivers slow and dams shrink?

During prolonged hot and dry periods, declining river flows provide less water in which to dilute sewage, industrial effluent and agricultural return flows.

At the same time, evaporation can concentrate dissolved salts.

Warmer water generally holds less oxygen, while slower-moving water also experiences less mixing.

Where water contains high nutrient concentrations, conditions may encourage algal growth or cyanobacterial blooms. These can result in high oxygen concentrations during daylight hours, followed by sharp declines at night or when the algae begin decomposing.

Low dissolved oxygen within the water column can also allow ammonium to persist.

At the same time, low-oxygen conditions can enable bacteria to convert nitrate into nitrogen gas, effectively removing the nitrate from the water.

Closer to the bottom of a river or dam, oxygen depletion can have another consequence: phosphate that was previously bound to iron compounds in the sediment may be released back into the water.

That phosphate may, in turn, help sustain algal or cyanobacterial blooms.

The international picture shows just how variable the response can be

Research elsewhere in the world reveals similarly varied water-quality responses.

During the strong 2015/16 El Niño, reduced rainfall in Malaysia's Kampar River coincided with unfavourable changes in dissolved oxygen, suspended solids, turbidity and ammonium.

In Spain, a **44-year study of the Sau Reservoir** linked declining inflows to an estimated **20% reduction in reservoir oxygen conditions.**

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Agricultural studies have also demonstrated why it is important to distinguish between pollutant **concentration** and pollutant **load.**

Research in **Georgia in the United States** found that ENSO was reflected more clearly in nitrate loads than in nitrate concentrations because the total quantity being transported depended strongly on streamflow.

Meanwhile, a modelling study across the **US Corn Belt** found that different types of El Niño could produce contrasting changes in nitrogen and phosphorus loads.

These international findings cannot simply be transferred directly to South African conditions.

They do, however, highlight the kinds of changes worth watching — including **flow, temperature, salts, oxygen, sediment, nutrients and microbial contamination.**

The outcome of any particular El Niño event remains dependent on local rainfall, land use, pollution sources and infrastructure.

For that reason, a single parameter — or a single water sample — cannot tell the entire story.

The ARC Water Science division has developed a **water-quality toolbox** to assist farmers, citizen scientists and water practitioners in screening key indicators in the field, tracking changes in their water over time and determining when more detailed laboratory testing may be necessary.

Further information on the toolbox, together with testing results, is available through the **Water Research Observatory** citizen science website.

What this could mean for South African farmers

For the 2026/27 summer season, the practical message is not that every farm will experience deteriorating water quality.

Rather, water conditions may change surprisingly quickly as rainfall, river flow and dam levels change.

Two periods deserve particular attention.

The first is an **extended hot and dry spell.**



The second is the **first substantial rainfall event that generates runoff**.

During a severe drought associated with El Niño conditions, farmers may face what can best be described as a **water quantity–quality paradox**.

Reduced rainfall and dam inflows may lead to lower irrigation allocations and reduced reliability of farm dams.

At the same time, higher temperatures increase crop water demand, accelerate soil-moisture depletion and increase evaporation losses.

"Saltier water means more water is needed to leach salts out of the root zone, and that extra water is needed just when it's scarcest."

But while less water is becoming available, declining river flows and increased evaporation may also cause salts to become more concentrated in irrigation water.

Poorer-quality irrigation water can increase the amount of leaching required to prevent salts from accumulating in the crop root zone.

And that creates the paradox: **additional water may be required to manage salinity at precisely the time when less water is available.**

Crops can therefore experience water stress and salinity stress simultaneously, potentially causing

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yield losses even where some irrigation water remains available.

Vaalharts shows why salinity deserves attention

Salinity data from the **Vaalharts Barrage right canal,** measured as electrical conductivity between 2004 and 2018, helps illustrate the problem.

Readings above **70 mS/m** exceed the salinity stress threshold shown in the ARC's Figure 2.

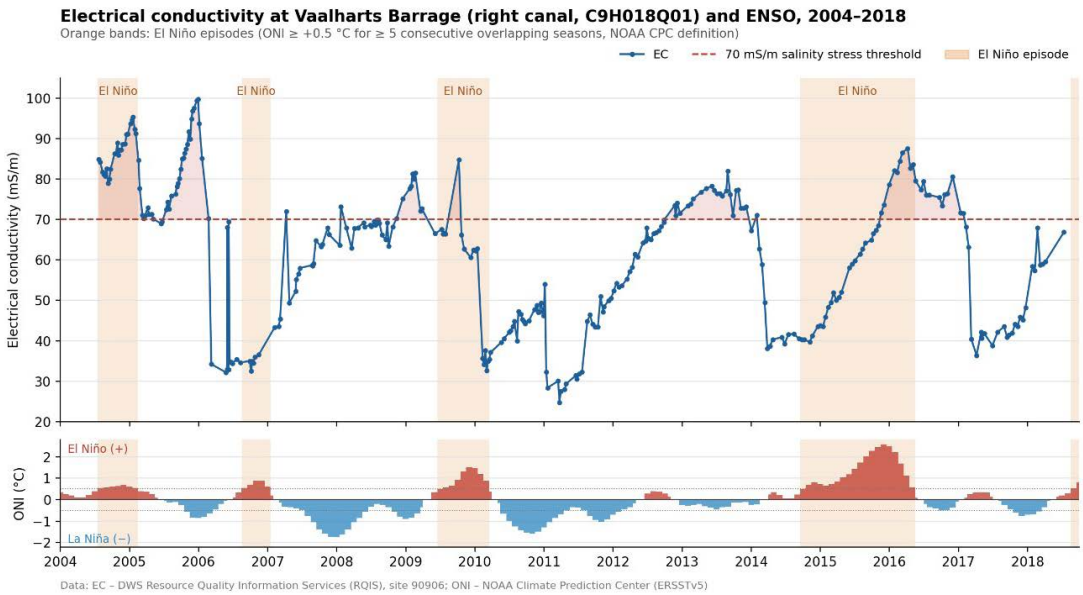
The graph also identifies El Niño periods and compares them with the strength of El Niño and La Niña over time.

The data indicate that salinity can build gradually over several years before dropping sharply, most likely when large summer flows flush the system.

Importantly, elevated salinity is **not confined to El Niño or drought periods.** High readings also occurred during neutral and La Niña conditions.

Nevertheless, when salinity does increase during drought, irrigators face a double problem.

Saltier water requires more water to leach salts from the root zone, and that additional requirement arrives at precisely the time when water is most scarce.



Salinity, measured as electrical conductivity or EC, in water from the Vaalharts Barrage right canal between 2004 and 2018. Readings above the dashed line exceed the 70 mS/m salinity stress threshold. Orange bands indicate El Niño periods, while the lower panel shows the strength of El Niño in red and La Niña in blue. Salinity builds gradually over several years and then falls sharply, most likely when large summer flows flush the system. Elevated salinity also occurs during neutral and La Niña periods, but rising salinity during drought presents a particular problem for irrigators. **Data:** *Department of Water and Sanitation, site 90906, and NOAA Climate Prediction Centre.*

The first rain can introduce another risk

Farmers who depend on rivers, canals and other watercourses should not assume that low flow automatically means cleaner water.

Poorly treated wastewater and other continuous discharges can represent a larger proportion of the available flow during dry periods.

Then, when rain returns, the picture changes again.

Rainfall may increase water availability, but runoff can simultaneously transport **sediment, manure, fertiliser, pesticides, sewage and litter** into rivers and dams.

Elevated salinity and sodicity can affect sensitive crops and gradually damage soil structure, particularly where limited rainfall provides insufficient flushing of the root zone.

This is why the **first substantial runoff-producing rainfall after a prolonged dry period** deserves particular attention.

Farm dams can change quietly

Changes in farm dams and livestock watering points may occur gradually enough to go unnoticed.

As water levels decline and less fresh water enters the dam, the remaining water can become warmer.

Salts, nutrients and organic material can also become increasingly concentrated.

These conditions may encourage algal or cyanobacterial blooms.

Farmers should take note of warning signs such as **surface scums, unusual green or blue-green water, strong odours, livestock avoiding the water or unexplained animal illness.**

Visual appearance alone, however, is not enough.

Water that looks clear is not necessarily safe. Salts,

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pathogens and certain toxins cannot always be seen with the naked eye.

Boreholes may show the effects later

Groundwater normally responds more slowly than rivers and dams.

Reduced groundwater recharge may therefore only become apparent later in the season through **falling groundwater levels, declining borehole yields or longer pumping times.**

Farmers may understandably respond to declining surface-water availability by increasing groundwater abstraction.

But increased pumping can worsen the problem and may draw more mineralised water towards the borehole.

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WATCH THE WATER — NOT JUST THE WEATHER

Farmers *cannot prevent drought or drier conditions, but they* ***can reduce the impact by****:*

- *planning water use early,*
- *directing scarce supplies to where they deliver the greatest value,*
- *maintaining irrigation systems,*
- *conserving soil moisture and*
- *monitoring both water quantity and quality.*

A useful approach is to:

- *establish a pre-season baseline for important water sources;*
- *repeat measurements during extended low-flow periods and after the first major runoff-producing rainfall.*

Electrical conductivity *provides a quick indication of changing salinity, while temperature, pH, turbidity, nutrients and E. coli can help identify other emerging concerns.*

The most effective response *is a staged plan with clear thresholds for adjusting irrigation, crop area, water sources or livestock numbers as conditions change.*

The aim is not to predict water quality from the El Niño label alone, but to detect change before unsuitable water is repeatedly applied to crops, supplied to livestock or compensated for through excessive groundwater pumping.

"Water availability without suitable water quality is not water security."





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The Poultry Value Chain: Unlocking Greater Profitability for Emerging Farmers in South Africa

Poultry farming has become one of the most important agricultural enterprises in South Africa, offering emerging farmers an opportunity to establish profitable and sustainable businesses.

Compared with many other livestock industries, chickens require relatively small areas of land, reproduce quickly, have short production cycles and produce products that are in constant demand. Chicken meat remains one of the most affordable sources of animal protein in the country, while eggs continue to play an essential role in household nutrition. These factors make poultry farming an attractive option for new entrants into agriculture.

But successful poultry farming extends far beyond simply raising chickens.

Many farmers focus solely on producing meat or eggs, overlooking the numerous opportunities that exist throughout the poultry value chain.

Understanding how value is created at every stage of production enables farmers to maximise profits, reduce waste, improve sustainability and diversify their income streams.

Every activity, from purchasing day-old chicks to marketing finished products and utilising poultry manure, contributes to the overall success of the enterprise.

Understanding the poultry value chain

A value chain is the sequence of activities involved in producing a product and delivering it to the final consumer.

In poultry farming, this chain begins with the suppliers of chicks, feed, equipment and veterinary products, continues through production and processing, and ends with marketing, distribution and customer satisfaction.

Importantly, the value chain does not end with the sale of meat or eggs. Materials that were once considered waste, such as manure, feathers and used litter, have become valuable products that can generate additional income.

Farmers who understand the complete value chain begin to see every aspect of their enterprise as an opportunity to create value. Instead of relying on a single source of income, they develop multiple revenue streams while improving the efficiency and resilience of their businesses.

Building a strong foundation

Every successful poultry enterprise starts with quality inputs.

Purchasing healthy day-old chicks from reputable hatcheries provides the foundation for good

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production. Healthy chicks grow more rapidly, utilise feed more efficiently and are less likely to suffer from disease.

Although cheaper chicks may appear attractive, poor-quality birds often result in higher mortality rates, slower growth and lower profits.

Equally important is providing suitable housing that protects birds from extreme temperatures, predators and disease. Poultry houses should provide adequate ventilation, sufficient floor space and easy access to clean drinking water and balanced feed.

Proper lighting programmes also influence growth rates and egg production, particularly in layer operations.

Good management during the first few weeks of a chick's life has a lasting impact on production performance. Farmers who pay close attention to brooding temperatures, hygiene and nutrition during this critical period often achieve significantly better results throughout the production cycle.

"Good management during the first few weeks of a chick's life has a lasting impact on production performance."

Feed: The largest investment

Feed represents the single largest expense in poultry production, often accounting for between 60% and 70% of total production costs. Efficient feed management therefore plays a major role in determining profitability.

Different stages of growth require different nutritional formulations. Starter feeds provide young chicks with the nutrients needed for rapid development, while grower and finisher feeds are formulated to optimise muscle growth in broilers or egg production in layers.

Providing the correct feed at the appropriate stage ensures efficient feed conversion and healthy bird development.

Preventing feed wastage is equally important. Feed should be stored in dry, rodent-free facilities to maintain its nutritional quality. Feeders should be adjusted to minimise spillage, while birds should always have unrestricted access to clean, fresh water.

Even minor improvements in feed efficiency can have a significant impact on overall profitability.

"Feed represents the single largest expense in poultry production, often accounting for between 60% and 70% of total production costs."

Protecting the flock through biosecurity



ARC researchers at a poultry site

Disease remains one of the greatest risks facing poultry farmers. A single disease outbreak can destroy months of investment within a matter of days.

For this reason, biosecurity should never be viewed as an optional expense, but rather as an essential investment.

Effective biosecurity begins by limiting unnecessary visitors to poultry houses and ensuring that all equipment entering the farm is properly disinfected. Workers should maintain high standards of personal hygiene and use dedicated protective clothing when working with birds.

Rodents, wild birds and insects should be controlled because they often spread disease between flocks.

Vaccination programmes should be followed carefully, while birds should be monitored daily for signs of illness. Early detection allows farmers to respond quickly before diseases spread throughout the flock.

Good ventilation, clean litter and proper stocking densities further reduce stress and help maintain healthy birds.

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"Biosecurity should never be viewed as an optional expense but rather as an essential investment."

Adding value through processing

One of the most effective ways to increase profitability is through value addition.

Rather than selling live birds or loose eggs, farmers can process and package their products to meet the needs of different markets.

Broilers may be sold as whole dressed chickens or divided into popular cuts such as breasts, thighs, drumsticks and wings. Marinated chicken portions, smoked products and ready-to-cook meals often command premium prices because they offer greater convenience to consumers.

Egg producers can similarly increase product value through grading, attractive packaging and branding.

Clean, well-packaged eggs presented under a recognised farm brand often sell more easily and at higher prices than unbranded products. Developing a reputation for quality and consistency encourages customer loyalty and repeat business.

Marketing: Connecting with the consumer

Producing high-quality poultry products is only part of the business. Farmers must also identify profitable markets and establish reliable customer relationships.

Emerging farmers have numerous marketing opportunities, including local communities, butcheries, supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, schools, hospitals, informal traders and farmers' markets. Social media platforms and online marketing have also opened new opportunities for direct sales to consumers.

Understanding customer preferences allows farmers to tailor their products accordingly.

Some markets prefer fresh whole chickens, while others demand portioned products or free-range birds. Indigenous chickens often attract premium prices within traditional and cultural markets because of their distinctive flavour and perceived health benefits.

Building long-term relationships with customers creates a stable income and reduces the uncertainty associated with finding new buyers for every production cycle.

Making use of other by-products

Chicken manure is not the only by-product with commercial value.

Poultry feathers can be processed into feather meal, which is used in specialised fertilisers and certain industrial applications. Used poultry litter can be composted and applied to crop fields or orchards as a valuable soil conditioner.

Even mortalities can be managed responsibly through composting systems where legislation permits, reducing environmental risks while returning nutrients to the farming system.

By making productive use of materials that might otherwise be discarded, farmers improve both profitability and sustainability.

Challenges facing emerging poultry farmers



Chicks drinking water from the waterer

Despite the many opportunities offered by the poultry value chain, emerging farmers continue to face significant challenges.

Rising feed prices remain one of the greatest threats to profitability, while disease outbreaks can quickly eliminate months of hard work. Load shedding and unreliable electricity supplies increase production costs, particularly where artificial lighting, heating or refrigeration are required.

Access to finance, quality markets and transport infrastructure also limits the growth of many small-scale producers.

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Nevertheless, farmers who maintain accurate production records, invest in biosecurity, control production costs and continuously seek opportunities for value addition are generally better equipped to overcome these challenges.

Agricultural extension services, farmer organisations and cooperatives also play an important role in providing technical advice, training and improved market access for emerging producers.

From primary production to a resilient farming business

The poultry value chain demonstrates that successful chicken farming involves far more than producing meat and eggs.

Every stage of production — from selecting quality chicks and managing feed to processing products, building markets and utilising valuable by-products — offers opportunities to increase profitability and strengthen the farming business.

Perhaps the greatest lesson for emerging farmers is that ***nothing on a poultry farm should be regarded as waste.***

Chicken manure can become premium organic fertiliser, feathers can be processed into valuable products, and used litter can improve soil fertility for crop production. By transforming by-products into marketable commodities, farmers not only generate additional income but also contribute to environmentally sustainable agriculture.

As South Africa continues to seek greater food security, employment opportunities and sustainable agricultural development, emerging poultry farmers are well positioned to play a significant role.

Those who embrace the entire poultry value chain, rather than focusing only on primary production, will be better equipped to build resilient, profitable businesses capable of growing for generations to come.

By Francois Swanepoel
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ARC – Natural Resources and Engineering

Chicken manure: A hidden gold mine

Many emerging farmers focus exclusively on the value of meat and eggs, yet one of the most valuable products produced on a poultry farm is often overlooked.

***Chicken manure** is frequently regarded as waste, but in reality it is one of agriculture's most valuable organic resources.*

Poultry manure** contains high concentrations of **nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium** — the three primary nutrients required for plant growth — as well as **calcium, magnesium, sulphur and numerous trace elements.

These nutrients improve soil fertility, stimulate microbial activity, increase organic matter and enhance the soil's ability to retain water. As fertiliser prices continue to rise, demand for high-quality organic fertilisers has increased significantly.

Fresh poultry manure should preferably be composted before application or sale. Composting stabilises nutrients, reduces unpleasant odours, destroys many harmful pathogens and produces a safer, easier-to-handle product.

*Properly composted **poultry manure** is highly valued by vegetable growers, fruit producers, nurseries, landscapers and home gardeners.*

*Many successful poultry farmers have developed profitable side businesses by packaging composted **chicken manure** into branded bags for retail sale. Others supply bulk quantities to crop farmers, vineyards and commercial vegetable producers.*

By viewing manure as a valuable product rather than a disposal problem, farmers create an additional source of income while reducing environmental pollution.

Can chicken manure be used as livestock feed?

One question that occasionally arises is whether poultry manure can be utilised as livestock feed.

In some countries, properly processed poultry litter has historically been incorporated into ruminant diets because it contains residual protein, fibre and minerals.

*However, this practice is subject to **strict animal health regulations and scientific oversight**. It should only be considered where legislation specifically permits its use and under the supervision of qualified animal nutritionists and veterinarians.*

*Poultry litter should **never be fed back to chickens or other poultry species** due to the risk of disease transmission and food safety concerns.*

For most emerging farmers in South Africa, the safest, simplest and most profitable use of poultry manure remains composting and marketing it as an organic fertiliser.

Digital Agriculture for Some, Not for All

By Dr Calvin Sambo
ARC – Natural Resources and Engineering

As AI and IoT transform South African agriculture, millions of smallholder farmers remain excluded from the digital revolution that could improve productivity, resilience and water security.

Somewhere on a commercial farm in Limpopo Province, South Africa, a soil-moisture sensor detects that moisture levels have dropped below an allowable threshold.

It instantly notifies the farmer and automatically activates a centre pivot to apply the exact amount of water required before the maize crop on a 50ha block begins to show signs of stress.

Later that day, an app notification provides a farm health report, showing all systems operating optimally except for the early detection of a pest outbreak in the south-eastern corner of the farm. The farmer deploys a drone, targets the affected area with precision, and monitors the operation remotely while relaxing on the veranda.

A few kilometres away, under scorching temperatures, a smallholder farmer walks her 5ha communal plot, assessing crop health and soil moisture by sight and touch, just as she was taught.

To her alarm, she discovers pests damaging a section of her crop. She reaches for her mobile phone to contact an agricultural advisor, only to find there is no network signal.



The contrast between a commercial farmer and a smallholder farmer (image generated with assistance of AI: ChatGPT)

Without timely support, the problem remains unresolved, resulting in losses she cannot afford. Those losses immediately affect her household's income, food security and resilience.

One country, two very different farming realities

Both farmers cultivate crops in the same water-scarce country. Yet one has access to digital tools that are transforming modern agriculture, while the other is left to confront climate stress, pest pressure and water scarcity with limited information and delayed support.

This difference is not merely about convenience.

It determines who can respond faster, use water more efficiently, protect crops more effectively and avoid preventable losses.

Digital agriculture is rapidly becoming a defining factor in agricultural productivity, resilience and competitiveness.

Studies show that ***Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted irrigation systems can reduce water use by up to 35%***, precision monitoring technologies can increase yields by approximately ***20–25%***, and Internet of Things (IoT)-based systems have improved operational efficiency in greenhouse production by as much as ***40%***.

Yet despite these proven benefits, most smallholder farmers remain excluded from the AI and IoT revolution because investment in the digital infrastructure required to support these technologies remains concentrated elsewhere.

If left unchecked, this exclusion could undermine national food and water security, considering the critical role smallholder farmers play in food production and natural resource management.

Smallholder farmers cannot be left behind

Smallholder farmers are the backbone of rural economies.

They contribute approximately ***0.5% to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP***), with significant unrealised potential to contribute more, while supporting food security, employment and rural development.

They also utilise a substantial

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share of the estimated ***62% of freshwater consumed by the agricultural sector.***

This matters because South Africa is a water-scarce country that cannot afford inefficiency in sectors responsible for most of its water use.

Despite their importance, smallholder farmers continue to face information asymmetries, knowledge and skills shortages, ageing infrastructure, uneven technology distribution, unreliable water availability and excessive resource losses.

AI and IoT technologies have the potential to address many of these challenges.

However, unlocking their benefits requires sustained investment in digital infrastructure, technology development, training and programmes that encourage adoption.

Digital infrastructure: the first barrier

AI-driven analytics and IoT sensor networks expose a troubling reality: the provinces that host the largest concentrations of smallholder farmers often have the weakest digital infrastructure.

Investing in digital connectivity in rural areas is fundamental to the successful deployment of AI and IoT solutions.

Although an estimated ***89% to 94% of rural communities have access to 3G and 4G/LTE*** networks, many farming areas still experience unreliable or inadequate coverage.

South Africa's fastest network technology, ***5G, currently covers only about 30.7% of rural areas.***

MTN and Vodacom, the country's leading telecommunications providers, have proposed infrastructure-sharing arrangements that would allow passive tower infrastructure to be shared in deep rural areas where standalone investments are often commercially unattractive.



Vodacom's Rural Coverage Acceleration Programme has introduced solar-powered mobile stations and committed significant investments to expand connectivity in underserved municipalities across Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal.

While these initiatives are commendable, they raise an uncomfortable question:

Why must rural communities wait for connectivity that urban consumers have long considered essential?

The pace of expansion remains slow relative to the urgency of the challenges facing agriculture.

This delay discourages AgriTech companies from developing AI and IoT solutions for smallholder farmers, creating a cycle where poor connectivity justifies limited innovation, and limited innovation justifies poor connectivity.

Technology development: designed for hundreds of hectares

The reality is that most AgriTech solutions remain financially out of reach for smallholder farmers.

The digital agriculture market increasingly caters to producers operating at commercial scale, where returns on investment are larger and technology deployment is easier.

Sensors, drones, AI-powered decision-support systems and subscription-based farm management platforms are typically designed and priced for farmers managing hundreds, not a few, hectares.

As a result, digital agriculture risks becoming another mechanism through which inequality is reproduced.

Farmers with capital gain access to tools that improve productivity and resilience, while those without capital fall further behind.

What is often marketed as agricultural innovation is, in practice, increasingly becoming agricultural stratification.

The challenge is compounded by patchy network coverage and persistent load-shedding, which reduce the reliability of cloud-based technologies precisely when farmers need them most, whether making irrigation decisions during a heatwave or responding to pest outbreaks

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before rainfall.

Access to finance amplifies this exclusion.

Without title deeds, collateral or a formal banking history, many smallholder farmers struggle to secure financing for basic inputs, let alone investments in digital technologies.

Consequently, the farmers who arguably stand to benefit most from AI-driven efficiency gains are often the least able to access them.

Training and awareness: technology alone is not enough

Technology alone will not solve the problem.

South Africa must invest in digital literacy and practical training that enables smallholder farmers to understand and use AI and IoT technologies effectively.

Adoption depends not only on access to technology, but also on confidence in its value and application.

This is particularly important in a sector grappling with an ageing farmer population.

Most smallholder and commercial farm operators are between ***45 and 65 years old***, while youth participation remains limited and is often confined to assisting family enterprises rather than establishing independent farming businesses.

Digital agriculture has the potential to reshape how young people perceive farming.

Rather than viewing agriculture as physically demanding, low-status work, they may see it as a technology-enabled industry offering innovation, entrepreneurship and problem-solving opportunities.

In this regard, AI and IoT technologies are not simply productivity tools; they may be essential for attracting the next generation of farmers.

Automating and digitising aspects of smallholder agriculture could provide a lifeline to rural economies while improving the sustainable management of water and other natural resources.

The bottom line

Digital agriculture in South Africa is increasingly becoming a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion.

It rewards farmers who already possess land, capital, connectivity and scale, while millions of vulnerable producers are expected to confront climate shocks, pest outbreaks and water scarcity with weak networks and limited support.

This is no longer merely a technology gap.

It is a policy, investment and development failure.



Government, telecommunications operators and AgriTech companies must stop treating smallholder farmers as a secondary market.

Telecoms providers should accelerate investment in digital infrastructure in areas where smallholders operate, supported by regulatory reforms that remove barriers to infrastructure sharing and reduce the cost of expanding connectivity into underserved regions.

At the same time, AgriTech companies must resist the temptation to chase only profitable commercial markets.

The future growth opportunity may lie precisely where the industry has invested least: among smallholder farmers who represent an untapped market with substantial developmental impact.

Government should complement these efforts through targeted incentives that encourage the development of affordable AI and IoT solutions designed specifically for smallholder farming systems.

Capacity building, digital literacy programmes and awareness campaigns must accompany these interventions to strengthen adoption.

Co-design technology with farmers

Most importantly, technology should be ***co-designed with farmers, not for farmers.***

Prototypes should be piloted

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in partnership with smallholder communities, ensuring that users help shape the solutions intended to serve them.

History has repeatedly shown that innovations developed in isolation from their intended beneficiaries often struggle to gain traction.

The real debate, therefore, is not whether South Africa can afford to invest in digital agriculture for smallholder farmers.

It is whether the country can afford ***not to.***

As climate pressures intensify and water becomes increasingly constrained, denying vulnerable farmers access to digital innovation may prove far more costly than the investment required to include them.

By Dr Calvin Sambo
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The digital agriculture divide — by the numbers

The potential benefits of digital agriculture are already substantial:

Up to 35%
Reduction in water use reported for AI-assisted irrigation systems.

Approximately 20–25%
Potential yield increase associated with precision monitoring technologies.

Up to 40%
Improvement in operational efficiency reported from IoT-based systems in greenhouse production.

89–94%
Estimated proportion of rural communities with access to 3G and 4G/LTE networks — although many farming areas still experience unreliable or inadequate coverage.

30.7%
Approximate current rural coverage of 5G.

45–65 years
The age range in which most smallholder and commercial farm operators fall.

These figures illustrate both the potential of digital agriculture and the access gap that remains between farmers who can use these technologies and those who cannot.





Vaccinate or Cull?

What Namibia's hard line on FMD could teach South Africa about the real value of premium beef markets

When Namibia made it clear that cattle in its prized FMD-free southern zone were not to be vaccinated — and warned that illegally vaccinated animals could be destroyed — the policy sounded almost brutal. South Africa, meanwhile, has embarked on the biggest FMD vaccination campaign in its history. Why would two neighbouring beef-producing countries confront the same disease with such radically different strategies? The answer lies not only in veterinary science, but in the value of the markets they are trying to protect.

Namibia's message could hardly have been more different from South Africa's: **do not vaccinate — protect the FMD-free status.**

Earlier this year, Namibia's chief veterinary officer, Dr Kenneth Shoombe, warned cattle producers that vaccination against foot-and-mouth disease in the country's valuable southern free zone was not an option under the existing control system. Cattle vaccinated illegally could be culled.

Then, in September, the threat Namibia had been preparing for became real.

Foot-and-mouth disease was detected in the Karasburg State Veterinary District, inside the zone that had enjoyed international recognition as **FMD-free without vaccination**.

The World Organisation for Animal Health — WOAH — suspended that status with effect from 22 September 2026.

Across the Orange River, South Africa has chosen almost the opposite route.

Instead of attempting to slaughter its way out of the FMD crisis, South Africa is vaccinating on an unprecedented scale. By the end of May, government had procured 13.5 million vaccine doses and vaccinated almost 4.4 million animals. Its objective is to vaccinate around 80% of a national cattle herd of roughly 14 million animals by the end of 2026.

Two neighbouring countries. One disease. Two very different strategies.

Why?

The answer begins with the scale of the problem.

South Africa is not dealing with an isolated outbreak

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on one or two farms. By April, government had recorded 1,317 FMD cases across all nine provinces.

Under those circumstances, an aggressive "stamping-out" programme based predominantly on destroying infected and exposed herds could involve enormous numbers of cattle, massive compensation costs, severe disruption to milk and meat production and the loss of valuable breeding animals.

For South Africa, vaccination is therefore not an admission of defeat. It is arguably the only realistic bridge out of a crisis that has become geographically widespread.

Vaccination protects cattle, reduces viral circulation and gives veterinary authorities time to strengthen surveillance, movement control, identification and traceability.

Government's stated objective reflects this. South Africa first wants to achieve **FMD-free status with vaccination**. The longer-term ambition is to become completely FMD-free **without vaccination**.

That second part may ultimately prove just as important as the vaccination campaign itself.

Because Namibia demonstrates that "without vaccination" is not merely a veterinary phrase.

It can be an economic asset.

The value of a veterinary certificate

Before September's outbreak, Namibia possessed something South Africa currently does not: a WOAH-recognised zone officially free from FMD where vaccination was not practised.

That status helped underpin Namibia's ability to sell beef into **some of the world's most valuable markets**.

The difference between markets can be extraordinary.

Meatco's 2024/25 annual report records an average sales realisation of **N$222.70/kg in Norway**, compared with **N$101.44/kg in the European Union** and **N$61.38/kg in Asian markets**. Because the Namibian dollar is pegged one-for-one to the rand, the Norwegian figure is effectively about **R223/kg**.

That does **not** mean an unvaccinated animal automatically produces R223/kg beef.

Norway is a specialised market. Namibia benefits from preferential quota access, established veterinary certification, traceability, customer relationships and branded programmes that have been developed over many years.

But the important point is this:

The animal-health status gives Namibia access to the room in which those premium prices are negotiated.

Without that access, the value of the beef may fall considerably because the exporter has fewer destinations available for the most valuable cuts.

South Africa already exports substantial volumes of good-quality beef and obtains respectable prices in markets such as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

In 2024, South Africa exported about 4.15 million kilograms of fresh or chilled boneless beef to the UAE for US$27.7 million — roughly US$6.68/kg. Jordan took almost 4.49 million kilograms worth US$25.7 million, or around US$5.72/kg.

Those are worthwhile markets.

But they also demonstrate why premium-market access matters.

The real business of beef exporting is not simply selling an animal. It is **finding the market willing to pay the most for every part of that animal**.



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A fillet may have one destination. A rump or striploin another. Forequarter meat can go somewhere else, while manufacturing beef and offal find their own markets.

Meatco's own reporting has previously made this distinction clear: prime cuts have largely been directed towards premium markets such as the EU, UK and Norway, while lower-value products are sold into Namibia, South Africa and other markets.

That is how export market access increases the value of the entire carcass.

The whole ox does not have to sell for R223/kg.

Only the right parts need to reach customers willing to pay a substantial premium.

Thousands of rand per animal

This is where the FMD debate becomes far more interesting than a discussion about vaccines.

Using Meatco's slaughter and premium-market volumes as a guide, the value created by access to top-end export markets can plausibly amount to **several thousand rand per slaughter animal**.

The precise figure will change with grade, carcass weight, market demand, quotas and exchange rates. It would therefore be misleading to declare that an "unvaccinated cow is worth R4,000 more".

Vaccination itself does not magically reduce the eating quality or food safety of the beef.

The premium comes from the **commercial opportunities associated with animal-health status**.

And Namibia's September outbreak demonstrates how quickly those opportunities can come under threat.

Once FMD was confirmed in its previously recognised free zone, WOAH suspended the zone's "FMD-free without vaccination" status.

Suddenly, a disease detected in a comparatively small population of cattle placed a much larger export system at risk.

That explains why Namibia's veterinary philosophy can appear so severe.

The economic decision is not simply whether to save one infected animal.

It is whether saving that animal in a particular way could compromise access to markets supporting tens of thousands of future slaughter cattle.

South Africa should vaccinate — but vaccination must have a destination

South Africa cannot simply copy Namibia.

The epidemiological starting points are too different.

Namibia was defending an established disease-free zone against a localised incursion. South Africa has been dealing with widespread outbreaks across every province.

Attempting to destroy enough cattle to eliminate infection under South Africa's present circumstances could devastate producers while offering no guarantee that the virus had been eradicated.

For South Africa **today**, vaccination is a sensible strategy to save the national herd and regain control of the disease.



But it should not become the ultimate ambition.

If South Africa wants to transform itself from a country that merely exports surplus beef into a sophisticated supplier competing for the world's highest-paying markets, the national target must eventually move beyond controlling FMD.

It must return to eliminating it.

That requires far more than vaccines.

South Africa will need credible individual animal identification, traceability from farm to slaughter, disciplined movement controls, functioning

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veterinary services, rapid diagnostics, surveillance, biosecurity and the ability to respond immediately when an outbreak appears.

It is also worth stressing that vaccination does not automatically prohibit trade with every premium market. International veterinary rules provide pathways for trade from countries and zones where vaccination is practised when suitable safeguards, certification and processing requirements are met.

But **FMD-free without vaccination remains the gold-standard animal-health position**.

It gives exporters more options.

And in beef, options create value.

The more countries willing to accept South African beef, the greater the ability of processors to direct fillets, loins, rumps, forequarters, manufacturing meat and offal into the markets willing to pay the most for them.

Namibia understood this long before the current outbreak.

That is why a policy of destroying animals rather than simply reaching for a vaccine should not automatically be dismissed as unnecessarily harsh. It reflects a country fiercely defending an asset built over decades: veterinary credibility and access to premium beef markets.

South Africa's mass vaccination programme should therefore be measured against two objectives.

The first is urgent and immediate: **save the herd, stop transmission and stabilise the livestock industry.**

The second will take much longer: **use vaccination as the road back to a South Africa that no longer needs to vaccinate against FMD at all.**

If South African beef exporters genuinely intend competing for the most lucrative international markets, that second objective may ultimately prove to be the more valuable one.

For now, South Africa needs the vaccine.

But Namibia is reminding us why the real prize is the day we no longer need it.

Written by (MO)



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WHAT IS PREMIUM MARKET ACCESS WORTH?

THE RANDS BEHIND FMD-FREE STATUS

Namibia's determination to protect its FMD-free export status starts making sense when one follows the money.

*Meatco's 2024/25 figures show just how differently the same commodity can be valued once beef is divided into cuts and directed to different international markets.

Market	Approximate beef realisation
Norway – Namibia	R222.70/kg
UAE – SA fresh/chilled boneless beef	≈ R122/kg
Jordan – SA fresh/chilled boneless beef	≈ R105/kg
European Union – Namibia	R101.44/kg
Asia – Namibia	R 61.38/kg

*Meatco reported an average Norwegian sales price of **N$222.70**/kg in 2024/25, compared with **N$101.44**/kg in the EU and N$61.38/kg in Asia. The Namibian dollar trades at parity with the rand.

For comparison, South Africa exported 4.15 million kg of fresh or chilled boneless beef to the UAE for US$27.7 million in 2024, and 4.49 million kg to Jordan for US$25.67 million. That equates to approximately US$6.68/kg and US$5.72/kg respectively, or roughly **R122**/kg and **R105**/kg using the average 2024 dollar/rand exchange rate.

But what could that mean per animal?

*Meatco's cattle slaughtered south of Namibia's Veterinary Cordon Fence averaged a 246 kg cold carcass in 2024/25.

The entire carcass does not go to Norway — nor does it need to.

Consider just **30 kg** of suitable high-value cuts from that animal.

If those 30 kg can be sold into Norway at **R222.70**/kg rather than into a market equivalent to South Africa's UAE trade at about **R122**/kg, the difference is approximately:

R3,000 per animal

Against the Jordan-equivalent value of about **R105**/kg, the difference rises to approximately:

R3,500 per animal

If **50 kg** of suitable cuts were able to capture a similar differential, the theoretical additional value could exceed **R5,000 per carcass.**

These are ***illustrative calculations, not a guaranteed premium***. Different markets buy different cuts and grades, quotas limit volumes, and freight, tariffs, processing, exchange rates and customer specifications all influence the final return.

47% OF THE BEEF. 84% OF THE REVENUE.

Perhaps the most revealing number comes directly from *Meatco.

During 2024/25, ***international markets accounted for only 47% of Meatco's beef sales volume*** — but ***generated 84% of its total beef revenue***. Meatco says boneless chilled and frozen cuts were sent to the ***EU and Norway*** specifically to ***maximise market realisation***, while lower-value and bone-in cuts were directed to markets such as China.

That is the real value of premium market access.

It is not necessary to sell an entire ox for R220/kg. The exporter needs the freedom to send each part of the carcass to the customer prepared to pay the most for it.

Meatco is Namibia's state-owned meat processing and export company, buying cattle from producers and marketing Namibian beef locally and internationally. It plays a central role in accessing premium export markets such as Europe and Norway.



South Africa enters 2027 with grain in the silos — but the crop now going into the ground faces a convergence of expensive energy, fertiliser, finance, global markets and El Niño risk.

2027: THE YEAR FARM MARGINS WILL BE TESTED

Diesel relief offers brief respite, but fertiliser, El Niño, grain markets and costly finance threaten farm margins.

South African agriculture enters 2027 with something valuable: grain in the silos. Yet that buffer should not create false comfort. Record fuel costs, expensive fertiliser, high interest rates and El Niño are converging as farmers finance the summer crop. Government's new fuel-levy relief will help temporarily. Domestic grain prices remain linked to world markets, while imported wheat faces freight and energy costs. Both farm profitability and food affordability may be tested.

Diesel changes the calculation

October's fuel increase made the energy shock real.

From 7 October, 50ppm diesel rose R3.24/litre and 500ppm R2.84/litre. Higher oil prices and Middle Eastern instability drove the adjustment as summer-grain producers began planting.

Government has now intervened. In the 21 October Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana announced R10 billion in temporary fuel-levy relief. The diesel levy will fall R3/litre from 4 November to 1 December, then R1.50/litre until 5 January 2027.

Despite underlying increases, late-October Central Energy Fund indicators suggested levy-adjusted wholesale decreases of R1.76/litre for 50ppm and R1.71/litre for 500ppm diesel. These remain provisional estimates.

Qualifying farmers can claim diesel refunds on 100% of eligible on-land use, up from 80%. SARS's new diesel-refund system also requires fresh registration. Refunds and levy cuts are distinct; farmers should verify their net benefit.

Diesel powers tractors, irrigation and transport. Relief during planting matters, but the concession ends in January; the energy shock may last longer.

The US Energy Information Administration forecasts Brent crude averaging $84/barrel in 2027. Russia lifted its diesel export ban in October, but refinery damage and conflict still cloud markets.

Fertiliser brings the world onto the farm

South Africa imports over 80% of fertiliser raw materials and intermediates.

In July, SA Grain reported local fertiliser prices about 57% higher year-on-year, with urea around 91% higher. Prices fluctuate, but fertiliser can represent 35% to 50% of grain-production costs.

Farmers remain exposed to energy, shipping and exchange rates. Once diesel, fertiliser, seed, chemicals and finance are committed, yield becomes

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critical. The economics of six tonnes per hectare look very different when heat and inadequate rainfall reduce the harvest to four or five tonnes.

El Niño is therefore more than a weather story. NOAA's October outlook indicated a strong-to-very strong event extending into early 2027, while the South African Weather Service favoured hotter, drier conditions across much of the country. Drought is not inevitable, but production risk is rising.

Grain in the silo still has a world price



South Africa's 2026 commercial maize harvest is estimated at 17.52 million tonnes, the largest on record. That provides a food-security buffer.

Yet abundant maize can depress farm-gate prices while costs rise.

Domestic stocks cannot isolate consumers from world markets. FAO reported white and yellow maize prices rising in July and August despite strong local supplies, partly as international quotations lifted export-parity prices.

"South African grain may be grown in rands, but in a global shortage its opportunity value can increasingly be determined in US dollars."

South African grain may be grown in rands, but its opportunity value can increasingly be determined in US dollars.

If El Niño causes substantial crop losses at home or abroad, international prices and regional demand could strengthen. Export markets might then compete more aggressively with local processors for grain held in South African silos. Global cereal supplies nevertheless remain abundant.

Wheat exposes the other side

Wheat presents the reverse problem.

South Africa's 2026/27 wheat crop is estimated at 1.81 million tonnes, roughly 5% lower year-on-year and the smallest in eight years. Imports could approach 2 million tonnes.

Global wheat supplies are adequate. The concern is landed cost.

Ships burn bunker fuel. Freight rates respond to energy prices, vessel availability, insurance and geopolitical risk. The Strait of Hormuz is a critical energy chokepoint, while Black Sea trade remains exposed to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Imported wheat carries a chain of costs: dollar prices, exchange rates, bunker fuel, freight, insurance, ports and transport to mills.

Fertiliser uses many of those supply chains. Agriculture can be hit twice: by costly inputs and by food imports when local output falls short.

Expensive money meets a stretched consumer

The South African Reserve Bank expects inflation to remain above 5% until the second quarter of 2027, easing towards its 3% target late in the year. Its policy rate has risen by a cumulative 50 basis points to 7.25%.

September headline inflation was 4.5%, while food and non-alcoholic beverages rose only 1.2% year-on-year. Strong harvests protect shoppers, but transport costs are rising. Levy relief may ease inflation, not guarantee cheaper credit.

Farmers face costly working capital. Consumers

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face higher transport bills, borrowing costs and constrained incomes. Black Friday and Christmas may leave some households entering 2027 with greater debt and less capacity to absorb higher food prices.

Agriculture ultimately depends on those consumers.

The crop that could define 2027

There is no reason for panic. South Africa has substantial grain stocks, global wheat supplies remain adequate and temporary diesel relief offers welcome breathing space.

But that protection is conditional.

A reasonable summer harvest could allow good domestic production to absorb much of the shock, although low grain prices against high input costs could still squeeze farmers.

A hot, dry El Niño season would produce a different equation: expensive inputs committed to fewer tonnes, possible international price increases, greater competition for grain and consumers confronting higher transport and borrowing costs as temporary relief fades.

South Africa could remain food secure while becoming considerably more expensive to feed.

For farmers, 2027 may therefore be about protecting margin as fiercely as yield.

For consumers, much depends on the crop now going into the ground.

Written by: (M.O)

THE 2027 PRICE CHAIN

A loaf of bread or bag of maize meal carries far more than a grain price. Energy, fertiliser, the rand, bunker fuel, sea freight, insurance, port charges, diesel transport, milling and finance all enter the chain.

Temporary fuel relief eases one link; pressure elsewhere could still reach consumers in 2027.

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JEREMIAH 29:11
"For I know the plans
I have for you,"
declares the Lord,
"plans to prosper you
and not to harm you,
plans to give you
hope and a future."
2026 behind us - 2027 before us