

Faculty of Veterinary Science's Equine Research Centre key to success of new horse export strategy

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In spite of significant international interest in South African horses, investment in this sector currently falls far short of its potential. The main reason for this is the prevalence of African horse sickness (AHS). In a multi-disciplinary collaboration to improve research initiatives in AHS, UP's Equine Research Centre based at the Faculty of Veterinary Science and the University of the Witwatersrand, along with various other role players, have developed a strategy to be presented to various potential trading partners.

AHS is a vector-borne, severe viral infection in horses that has a high fatality rate and there is concern about the possible spread of the disease to importing countries. Not only has this disease had an adverse effect on the South African economy, but it has also drastically reduced employment in the horse racing industry from around 100 000 fifteen years ago to only 15 000 in 2014. South Africa is currently losing out on investment amounting to potentially R1 billion per annum because of the onerous process of importing horses from South Africa, in particular our highly regarded racehorses and endurance horses.

AHS is seasonally endemic in South Africa and has led to a ban on exports of live horses to uninfected countries for many years. In 1997, an AHS-controlled area, including a small free zone, was established in the Western Cape, enabling horse exports to the European Union (EU). This trade has however been disrupted several times due to outbreaks of AHS in the controlled area (although never in the free zone). Both the EU and the World Organisation for Animal Health have rejected proposals for the reinstatement of free zone status in recent years. The reinstatement of free zone status by the EU and the World Organisation for Animal Health generally takes two to three years and requires two years with no outbreaks, followed by the submission and consideration of a dossier.

The new strategy will be implemented with involvement from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Department of Sport and Recreation, as well as the Department of Trade and Industry. Key to the success of the strategy will be the work of UP's Equine Research Centre (ERC) at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, headed by the Director of the Centre, Professor Alan Guthrie, in terms of the surveillance and research required.

The primary goal of the newly developed export strategy is to reinstate the safe export of horses from South Africa to AHS-free countries on a long-term basis, adhering to quarantine requirements consistent with animal welfare and safe exports and ensuring minimal disruption to future trade. In the long term the strategy also aims to allow for short-term movements of horses into and back out of South Africa, such as for participation in international equine competitions.

All options presented in the strategy, however, require significant funding and support from the equine industries of South Africa. At the same time it also requires improved organisational and functional powers within the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and high-level government support for international

negotiations with potential trading partners. This will be achieved by the proposed formation of a high-level government and industry representative body, which will be charged with implementing the strategy.

'Currently South Africa experiences problems with both inward and outward movement, with outward movement presenting the most frustration. South Africa needs to develop a foolproof export protocol and thereby provide trading partners with the assurance that we won't export AHS', says Dr Mpho Maja, Director of Animal Health at the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

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