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Minister's failure to issue food price report 'a disgrace'

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The failure by Thoko Didiza, the minister of agriculture and land affairs, to release a food price report given to her six months ago was a "disgrace", said Pat Tilley of The Consumer League.

Tilley said by the time the food price monitoring committee's report - which was handed to the minister in January - was released, its data would be useless. "Petrol has gone up so many times, inflation has changed, the price of oil has shot up

and prices of basic food items are a lot more expensive ... that type of report has impact when it is released immediately," she said.

The food price monitoring committee was set up 18 months ago to investigate food price increases caused by the rand's depreciation by as much as 35 percent between November 2001 and early 2002. Food prices shot up as the exchange rate worsened, with the rand dropping to R13,85 to the dollar. The currency is now around R6,40 to the dollar.

Professor Johan Kirsten, the chairperson of the committee and

who heads the department of agriculture at the University of Pretoria, confirmed that the report had been handed to the minister.

Steve Galane, a spokesperson for the department of agriculture, confirmed the report would be discussed by the portfolio committee on agriculture, but at a date and time still to be announced.

He said the minister did not want to release the report until it had been discussed by the cabinet.

A departmental source said the report was supposed to have been released a month ago, but the process

appeared to have been delayed because of administrative glitches.

"It's very frustrating because the research may be out of date by the time it's released."

Neo Mashitela, the chairperson of the parliamentary portfolio committee on food, said he had not seen the report.

According to the report - based on a study of 26 basic food items at six monitoring points throughout the country since October 2002 - food prices had stabilised and were coming down when compared with the levels of 2001.