

Ostrich cull grows as flu virus spread

SA's beleaguered ostrich industry, already collapsing under a European Union (EU) export ban as it waits for at least three months for bird flu tests to prove negative, has suffered a blow after the virus was found in the Breede River to Great Brak River area last week.



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Since the H5N2 virus was first detected on Oudtshoorn farms in April last year, more than 50000 ostriches have been culled.

The industry, which relies on exports to the EU for 90% of its R1bn annual income, will not be allowed to resume trade until farmers meet new hygiene standards. These include chlorinating drinking water to prevent wild birds from transmitting the virus, improving access and movement controls, and ensuring that farmers have re-registered with the department of agriculture.

SA must also be disease free for three months.

A total ban has been placed on the movement of ostriches and the sale of ostrich products from the area, which runs from Swellendam to George and various farms have been quarantined.

One farm in Albertinia tested positive for the virus and its entire flock was culled, Western Cape agriculture department spokesman Wouter Kriel said Tuesday, 3 July. Two farms in the Heidelberg area were also affected and birds are currently being culled.

Kriel said 7000 birds had to be culled in the new outbreak area, which is between 74km and 246km from Oudtshoorn. "This is really a terrible setback for us."

Kriel said industry role players had been hopeful after the latest tests in the Oudtshoorn area came back negative, but now export hopes have been dashed again.

Kriel said trying to eradicate the avian flu virus was proving difficult. "We are farming with wild animals in nature, so it's very difficult to isolate them. It's not like other livestock that can be isolated to contain an infection."

Western Cape agriculture MEC Gerrit van Rensburg on Tuesday again urged farmers to cooperate with officials and to re-register their farms.

Van Rensburg is trying to get the government to allow farmers who already comply with regulations to export, hoping to encourage reluctant farmers to lay out the cash for reformation costs. But the government insists the industry must get its house in order before exports resume.

The government has paid out R50m in compensation to farmers and the provincial agriculture department initiated a retraining programme to save 20000 jobs threatened by the crisis.

Source: *Business Day*

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