agriculture

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COHESIVE APPROACH IN MANAGING AFB OUTBREAK

PRETORIA: Following the outbreak of the American Foul Brood (AFB) in a number of hives in the Western Cape, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry held a series of meetings and discussions with the industry and research bodies, to discuss policy guidelines that will inform decisions required for the implementation of urgent steps to deal with this outbreak.

Representing the Industries were the South African Bee Industry Organisation (SABIO), the Deciduous Fruit Producers' Trust (DFPT), the South African National Seed Organisation (SANSOR) as well as the Agricultural Research Council Plant Protection Research Institute (ARC-PPRI).

Having evaluated various options tabled, a progressive eradication plan was decided upon with the first phase entailing actions relating to the destruction of hives currently known to be infected. In rolling-out this plan, priority will be on pollination hives.

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This plan will be followed by surveillance and eradication processes that will unfold until the delimiting survey is finalised. Meanwhile, a joint launching of the second phase by the National Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry as well as the Western Cape department of agriculture is under consideration.

This phase will combine a delimiting survey with progressive eradication, prioritising on the requirement for bees to be moved for commercial pollination purposes by mid-August. In addition to that, as information is gathered, further decisions will be taken.

Within this context, a policy decision making forum and a steering committee (SteerCo) were established. The latter will function as a command post situated on site in the Western Cape where the disease is prevalent with only six bee-keepers and their hives testing AFB positive.

The AFB poses a number of challenges for the area. Besides commercial honey production, bees are also used as pollinators for commercial crops such as deciduous fruit and vegetable seed production. A lack of bees could therefore cause significant production losses. Hives used for this purpose would need to be moved to the relevant production sites by mid-August, which puts a tight timeline on the urgently required risk management measures.

The industry recognises the complexity of the issues at hand including the immediate term needs such as this year’s pollination needs as well as considerations for long-term effects. In principle it supports the ideal of an eradication strategy while also recognising and taking into account the short-term effects of this strategy.

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Going forth, the industry supports compulsory registration, in terms of which they committed to using only registered producers and marked hives. This collaborative effort will in the long-term work towards building and maintaining healthy hives.

Although the origin of the current outbreak of AFB is not yet known, an investigation to trace its roots is underway to ensure that avenues for future outbreaks are clamped.

AFB is a serious disease of honeybees caused by the bacterial pathogen, *Paenibacillus larvae*. It has evidently been present in many areas in the world at least for over three hundred years except in the sub-Saharan Africa where it has only been found as spores in honey, not in bees. As it was previously not known to occur in South Africa, it has always been regarded as a quarantine pest and a national survey to detect it has been underway for the past years. Early this year, the ARC-PPRI laboratory tests samples of diseased Honeybee brood collected in the Western Cape positively confirmed AFB. .

The AFB pathogen affects only bees. It is not easy to detect because it requires specialised laboratory identification and infections can be sub-clinical and symptoms are not visible at first because nurse bees clean out the infected larvae. Clinical symptoms appear only when the colony has lost control, which can take between two to three years. Internationally it is accepted that such colonies will die if not treated. This effect is currently being seen in the Western Cape.

For more information on this matter, bee farmers may contact the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, or the provincial department of agriculture or SABIO.

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