

Brazil bird flu outbreak could place SA poultry under severe pressure

By [Fred Hume](#)

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It is not a matter of if, but when Brazil will face a bird flu outbreak - and the consequences may prove to be dire for South Africa's poultry supply. As a result, South Africa urgently needs to agree on a heat treatment protocol for mechanically deboned meat (MDM) in case of a bird flu outbreak, such as the protocol currently in place for pork sourced from approved markets abroad.



Fred Hume, managing director of Hume International

Imported chicken provides a crucial complement to local production for satisfying local demand. For example, Hume International alone imported roughly 60,000 metric tonnes of poultry last year, while South Africa as a whole imported three times as much poultry as it exported in terms of nominal value.

As a result, the global bird flu outbreak is posing a significant risk to the country's food security, especially given the dependence of many households on chicken as an affordable protein. The outbreak has already reached countries such as Argentina – which represents real cause for alarm given that the country is neighbours with Brazil, the biggest source of imported chicken in South Africa.

In fact, Brazil supplies the country with more than half of our imported poultry meat. By comparison, the United States of America provides only 10% to 15% of our imports annually.

In general, MDM is already subjected to heat treatment to reduce the risk of microbial contamination and improve its safety for consumption. The process typically involves cooking meat at a high temperature for a specific period of time. And while the presence of bird flu typically does not impact the safety of poultry for human consumption, having such a protocol in place could simultaneously safeguard MDM supply chains while setting consumers' minds at ease.

Without this, South Africans should brace for impact, as the serious threat of an outbreak in Brazil could have a devastating impact on local supply chains, significantly driving up prices or even causing shortages.



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Prices are about to get out of hand

To emphasise the urgency of the situation, poultry is an important, high-protein, low-cost food staple for the majority of South Africans. Any increases in this vital food's price would therefore have a severe impact on vulnerable low-income households, who already spend a significant portion of their monthly budgets on food.

We are already in a difficult situation locally. The Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group reports in its

[March 2023 Household Affordability Index](#) that frozen chicken portions saw an average price increase of 9% relative to the same period last year.

Chicken feet, gizzards, and chicken livers saw a rise of 11%, 10%, and 5% respectively over the same period. This is in addition to the meteoric price increases of other important foods such as cooking oil at 16%, samp at 24%, maize meal at 26%, and potatoes at 52%, to name but a few.

A sharp hike in prices from chicken suppliers, or a marked shortage of supply will have a devastating effect on our economy and lead to increased food scarcity. Usually, local producers can offset import food shortages and slow runaway prices with local supply, but South Africa simply does not produce enough poultry to meet local demand and be price competitive. Additionally, the local industry is facing enormous cost-pressures as a result of power, water, and infrastructure challenges.

The result of limited poultry imports from Brazil brought on by a bird flu outbreak is, therefore, that poorer communities could be forced to give up their primary source of animal protein; companies and factories that trade in and process imported chicken could grind to a halt, leading to a spike in unemployment; food security could come under even greater threat; and inflation could skyrocket.



Source: www.pexels.com

Additional intervention required to avoid catastrophe

It's imperative that our government intervenes before it is too late – which it quite nearly is. The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform, and Rural Development (DALRRD) bans entire countries when they face a bird flu outbreak, although it has a special provision in place for America.

Beyond implementing effective heat treatment protocols, we are appealing to government to enact a similar policy with regards to Brazil as it does with America, and only ban imports from individual states impacted by bird flu, as opposed to a blanket country-wide ban. Additionally, once a country has been declared bird flu free, DALRRD must be more proactive than they have in the past in reinstating import permits for that particular country. In some cases, bans have remained on countries for years after they have been declared bird flu free.

This is not the time to drag our feet. Government must start being proactive rather than reactive if we are to avoid what

could be South Africa's next major food crisis.

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