

Call for meat tariffs to exclude inferior imports

Parliament's agriculture, forestry and fisheries committee has called for the government to begin implementing tariff protection on red meat imports to protect the country's agriculture sector and consumers from cheap and substandard produce.

By [Paul Vecchiato](#) 27 Mar 2013

Committee chairman Lulu Johnson made the remarks at the conclusion of yesterday's hearing on the mislabelling and possible contamination of red meat products.

Officials from the departments of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, health, and trade and industry, were at pains to point out that South African consumers faced no risk of consuming red meat products that had illegal contents.

Rather, the officials contended that recent research showing that certain food products such as biltong and beef sausages with traces of other animals, such as goats, water buffalo and donkey, were not illegal in terms of the law, but were often mislabelled. The MPs also heard that there was a shortage of funds for inspectors from municipalities and for the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to implement laws that regulated correct labelling and the content of foodstuffs.

Red Meat Industry Forum chairman Dave Ford pointed out recent cases, such as that of Orion Meats, where his organisation had reported mislabelling to various departments, including the police, and nothing had been done. "We have cowboys in the industry, and if cowboys can see that somebody with the enormity of the transgressions that were made goes unchecked, we are going to get more cowboys," Ford said.

He also said SA had to import up to 45,000 tons of red meat a year, including 6,000 tons from Namibia, as reports claimed there was insufficient capacity to meet local demand.

However, Johnson rejected that assertion, saying research showed that the country did have the necessary livestock to meet demand. "To an extent, we have heard a discussion (on how to) allow us to protect our local produce. This is a very important discussion about vulnerable workers ... and in our joint session with the labour committee (recently), one communist, Andrew William, shocked me when he came out and talked about vulnerable farmers. To an extent we are also talking about protection of local produce," he said.

Democratic Alliance MP Annette Steyn agreed with Johnson, saying the health laws needed to be implemented correctly and those found guilty of transgressions needed to be punished.

"All we need to do is make an example of one or two of these companies that are transgressing the laws and punish them severely and the rest will follow suit," she said.

University of Stellenbosch department of animal sciences professor Louw Hoffman told the committee the real reason for seeing imported meats such as kangaroo and other cheap substitutes in processed foods was because of the profit motive. "Why do we inject chickens with brine (saltwater)? If we don't want kangaroo meat in our sausages maybe we should revisit tariffs. Using those meats is all about profit. There are lots of cowboys out there making fast money," he said.

Prof Hoffman said the meat scandal had shown the limitations of voluntary bodies such as the Red Meat Industry Forum, as there was little it could do about it.

Source: *Business Day*

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