

Bird flu batters South African ostrich farms

September 20 2011, by Jean Liou

Once filled with hundreds of ostriches, the fields of the Klein Karoo are strangely empty.

An [outbreak](#) of bird flu has forced South African farmers to [slaughter](#) thousands of [ostriches](#), undermining the economy of this valley in the south of the country.

First detected on April 9, bird [flu](#) spread quickly through the ostrich stock, raised mainly for their meat.

South Africa accounts for 77 percent of the global ostrich market, and the EU buys 90 percent of its exports. Or did, until Brussels banned the meat because of the outbreak.

"The [birds](#) won't look sick or anything. If you look at them, they look healthy. The virus can't be transmitted to humans, and it is destroyed while cooking," said Anton Kruger, head of the South African Ostrich Business Chamber.

"The primary risk is that the virus could mutate and then affect [poultry](#)."

The virus afflicting South African farms is known as H5N2, related to the highly contagious [H5N1 virus](#) that struck Asia in 2004.

A single positive test results in an entire farm going under [quarantine](#), and all the ostriches are slaughtered. About 33,000 have been killed so far, about a quarter of the region's total population. They end up as

fertiliser.

Farms spared the disease were barred from taking birds to the abattoir before July, meaning they had to be fed for longer than expected. Any transport of the birds was banned.

Normally South Africa produces 250,000 birds per year, earning 2.1 billion rands (\$284 million, 210 million euros) a year in exports. Most of that comes from the meat, but also their eggs and leather, which are sought after by designers.

And South Africa sends 15 tonnes of ostrich feathers to Brazil each year for Carnival.

Now the industry is losing 108 million rands (\$14.6 million, 11 million euros) a month, Kruger said.

Johan Keller had to sacrifice 4,500 birds in early May when the virus was found on his sprawling farm.

The government paid him 2,000 rands a head, or about 80 percent of the bird's value, but he's still waiting for aid that was promised to help him keep his 44 employees on the payroll.

"So far we have not received anything," he said.

"We are not really sure we need to try to become a big ostrich farm again, as we used to be," given the health risks, he said.

Johan van Niekerk, an ostrich butcher on the main street in Klein Karoo's main town Oudtshoorn, said the outbreak is dragging down the regional economy.

"The ostrich industry is quite labour-intensive. There are less people working on the farms. The economy of the whole district is going down," he said.

His own business is down about 20 percent, he said.

"The poorer people are suffering the most," he added.

[Bird flu](#) has also frightened tourists, who provide another source of income on farms like Keller's, where he runs a guesthouse -- now serving ostrich steaks bought from his competitors.

"Lots of people misunderstood the health situation. We got lots of cancellations, some people bypassed Oudtshoorn because they thought that there are no more ostriches here," Keller said.

The town holds a prominent spot on the tourist circuit, offering visitors a chance to learn about the birds, watch them race, and even ride them.

One of the biggest farms, Highgate, closed its doors in June as its sick birds were culled.

Now the farm that once brought in busloads of tourists is deserted. About 40 people lost their jobs, said Eudes Etsala, a Congolese man who now directs tourists to another farm.

The industry hopes that the latest battery of tests will give them a clean bill of health. Even then, exports couldn't resume until December, said Kruger.

"It will take us at least three years to rebuild the industry," he said.

In the meantime, South Africans hope that Brussels will agree to allow

exports from other parts of the country.

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