forestry, fisheries & the environment

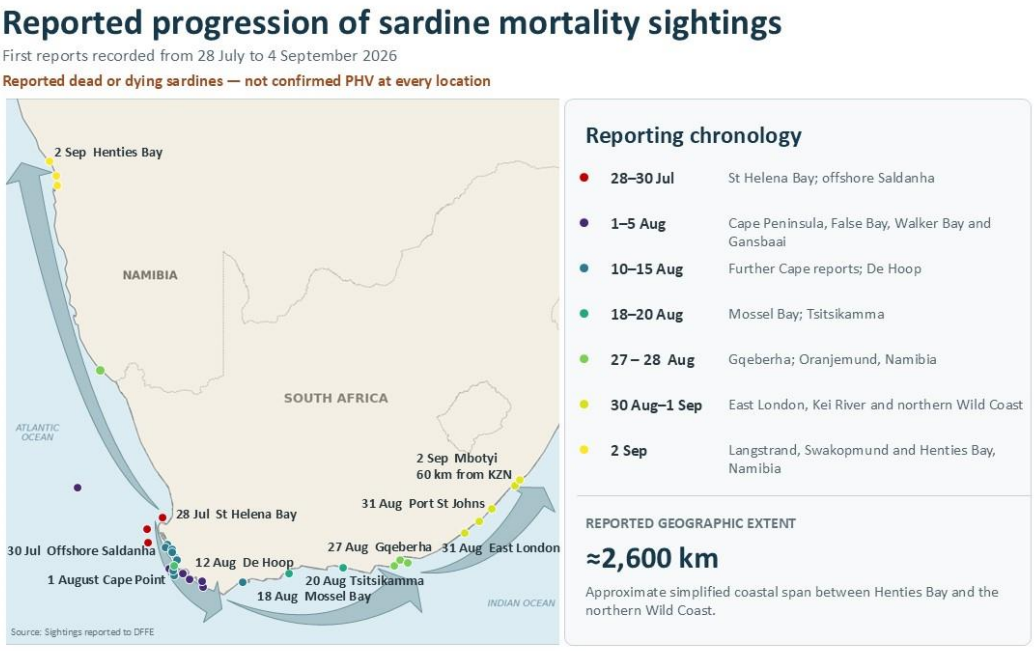
Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
PILCHARD HERPESVIRUS-ASSOCIATED SARDINE MORTALITY EVENT

Updated 8 September 2026

CURRENT SITUATION

- South Africa is experiencing an unusual sardine mortality event that has now been reported over a very wide geographic area, extending from the Western Cape through the southern and eastern coasts, into the northern Wild Coast and along the Namibian coast.
- Pilchard herpesvirus (PHV) has been confirmed in sardines associated with the mortality event, including sardines collected in Gqeberha. PHV remains the leading explanation for the observed mortalities, although the role of the virus and the possible contribution of environmental factors are still being investigated.
- The full extent and impact of the mortality event are not yet known. **The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (**DFFE) and its scientific partners are continuing to monitor new reports, undertake diagnostic testing and investigate the distribution, scale and progression of the event, as well as its potential implications for the sardine population and the wider marine ecosystem.
- PHV is not known to infect people. Commercially produced canned sardines processed under approved conditions remain safe to consume. The public should not collect, eat or feed to pets dead or dying sardines found on beaches or at sea, because of the risks associated with decomposition and contamination.



1. What is happening to South Africa's sardines?

South Africa has experienced an unusual sardine mortality event. Reports began on 28 July 2026 and subsequently occurred at a number of locations along the South African and Namibian coasts. The DFFE is continuing to assess the geographic extent, progression and population-level implications of the event.

2. How extensive is the reported mortality event?

Reported sightings have extended from the West Coast through the southern Cape and into the Eastern Cape, with later reports along the East Coast and the northern Wild Coast. Reports have also extended along the Namibian coast to Henties Bay. The accompanying map shows a simplified reported coastal span of approximately 2 600 km between Henties Bay and the northern Wild Coast. This is a geographic extent of reported sightings, not an estimate of the number of fish affected.

3. Does the map show the spread of Pilchard Herpesvirus (PHV)?

No. The map shows where and when dead or dying sardines were reported. PHV has not been confirmed at every mapped location, and the sequence of sightings cannot by itself demonstrate the movement or speed of the virus. Fish movement, ocean currents, uneven surveillance and reporting delays also need to be considered.

4. What is pilchard herpesvirus?

Pilchard herpesvirus, or PHV, is a virus associated with sardines (pilchards). In Australian mortality events, PHV-associated disease was associated with inflammation and damage of the gills, which can interfere with oxygen uptake and lead to respiratory distress and death. PHV has been associated with major sardine mortality events in Australia and New Zealand in the 1990s.

5. Has PHV been confirmed in South African sardines?

Yes. Laboratory testing has confirmed PHV genetic material in South African sardines associated with the current mortality event. PHV has also been confirmed in sardines collected in the Gqeberha area, supporting a link with the earlier Western Cape event.

6. Is this the first confirmed detection of PHV in South African sardines?

Yes. This is the first confirmed detection of PHV in South African sardines. Previous surveillance in 2016 did not detect PHV. The historical negative result provides a useful baseline, but it does not establish when PHV may have entered South African waters.

7. Does finding PHV mean that PHV caused the fish deaths?

No. Detection of viral genetic material confirms that the virus is present, but does not by itself demonstrate active disease or causation. Scientists are considering PCR and sequencing results together with viral levels, pathology, the distribution and progression of mortality and other possible contributing factors. PHV remains the leading explanation, but its causal role is still being assessed.

8. What does the detection of PHV in both dead and apparently healthy sardines tell scientists?

PHV has been detected at consistently high levels in the initial dead fish tested, while levels in apparently healthy fish were lower and more variable. This strengthens the association between PHV and the mortality, but also shows that the presence of the virus alone may not be sufficient to produce mass mortality. Apparently healthy fish may have been in an early stage of infection, may have tolerated or recovered from infection, or may have carried the virus at lower levels.