



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

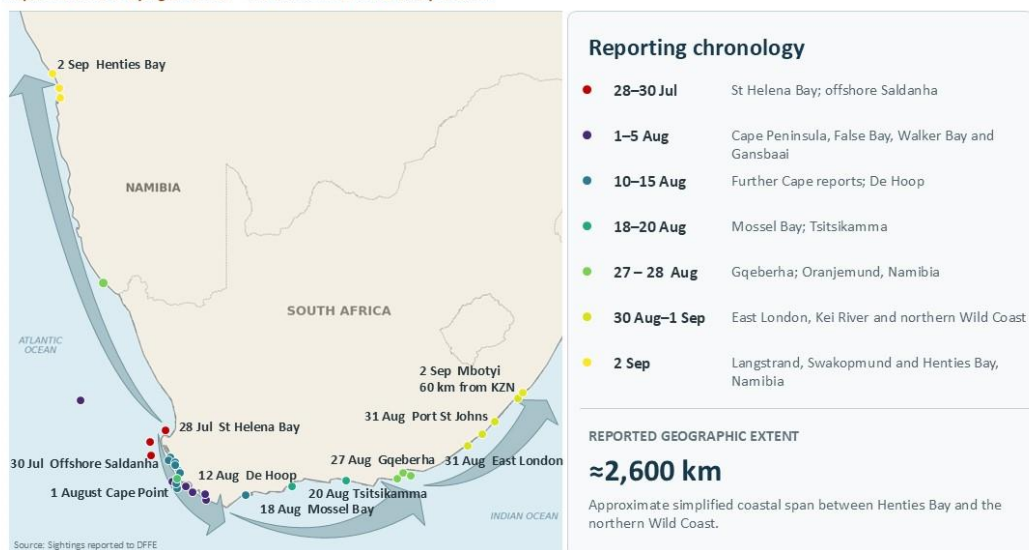
CURRENT SITUATION

- 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

Reported progression of sardine mortality sightings

First reports recorded from 28 July to 4 September 2026

Reported dead or dying sardines — not confirmed PHV at every location



pets dead or dying sardines found on beaches or at sea, because of the risks associated with decomposition and contamination.

9. Why is pathology important?

Pathology can provide evidence of active disease rather than simply the presence of viral genetic material. In particular, scientists are looking for characteristic inflammation and tissue damage in the gills. Earlier Western Cape samples were too deteriorated after death for reliable interpretation because gill tissue undergoes rapid autolysis. Freshly dead or moribund fish are therefore being prioritised for histopathology.

10. What other causes are being investigated?

Investigations include harmful algal blooms and associated toxins, low dissolved oxygen, unusually cold water and strong upwelling, other changes in water quality, other infectious agents, and environmental stress that may have triggered or intensified disease in infected fish.

11. What have the harmful-algal and toxin tests shown?

Testing of sardines from Saldanha Bay, the Cape Canyon and Gansbaai, together with an apparently healthy comparison sample from St Helena Bay, found none of the paralytic shellfish toxins associated with the harmful algal bloom in Saldanha Bay. Domoic acid and yessotoxin were detected only at low levels, with the highest levels in the apparently healthy comparison sample. The toxins tested for are therefore unlikely to have been the primary cause, although environmental stress cannot be completely excluded.

12. Could cold water, upwelling or low oxygen have contributed?

Yes, environmental conditions may have contributed stress, but this has not been demonstrated. Unusually cold water and low oxygen were observed in parts of the West Coast, but broadly similar conditions occurred during the July recruitment survey before the mortality event, when no dead or dying sardines were observed. Low oxygen also occurs periodically on the West Coast without previously producing sardine mortality on this scale.

13. Could climate change have caused the mortality event?

It would be premature to attribute the event directly to climate change. Changing ocean conditions can influence the health, distribution and susceptibility of marine organisms and may influence disease dynamics. Whether longer-term environmental change contributed to this event requires further scientific investigation.

14. Could pollution have caused the mortality event?

There is currently no evidence that pollution caused the mortality event. The reported deaths occurred over a wide area and have been overwhelmingly associated with sardines. The DFFE is nevertheless considering other environmental factors as part of the investigation.

15. Could fishing have caused the sardine mortalities?

There is no basis to assume that fishing caused the current mortality event. Disease and environmental conditions are important components of the investigation. Fishing information, search effort, catches and

observer records are also being incorporated into the assessment of the scale and implications of the event.

16. Could PHV affect other fish species, such as anchovy?

PHV is associated with sardines and there is currently no evidence that it represents a general disease of South African marine fishes. There is no basis to assume that it will cause an equivalent mortality event in anchovy. Other fish species will nevertheless continue to be monitored.