



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

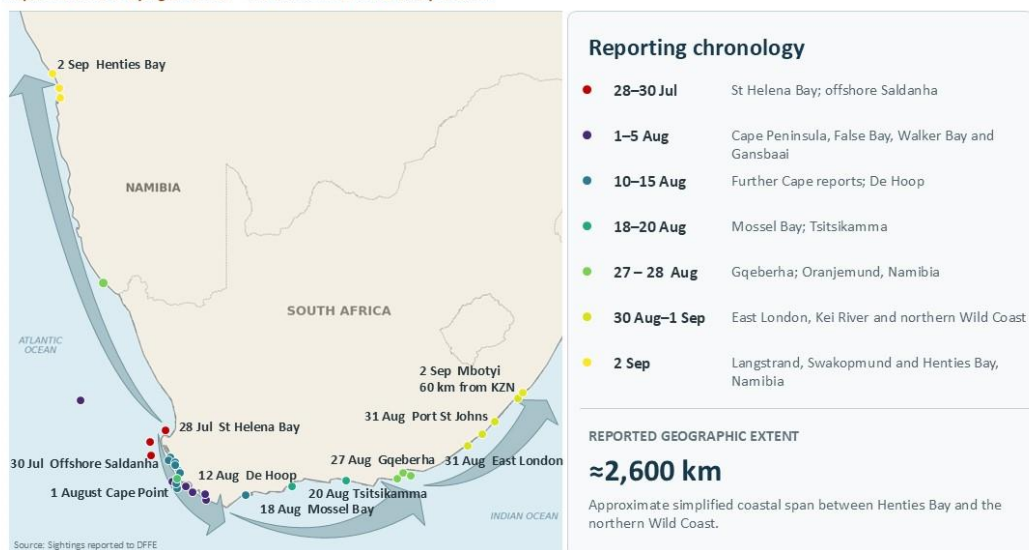
CURRENT SITUATION

- 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.

25. Did DFFE estimate that 1% of the sardine population died?

No. DFFE did not produce or approve an estimate that the mortality represented 1% of the sardine population. An illustrative calculation discussed during preliminary scientific deliberations applied a surface density recorded near Dyer Island across a much larger area. It produced a quantity of the order of 1% of the biomass measured earlier in the year, but this was explicitly a crude illustration with major assumptions and uncertainties, not an estimate of total mortality.

26. Has DFFE assessed fish that may have died and sunk to the seabed?

No comprehensive seabed assessment has been conducted. An unknown proportion of fish may have sunk, washed ashore or remained undetected. This is one of the reasons why the current mortality estimates remain uncertain.

27. What does DFFE currently conclude about the scale of mortality?

Preliminary investigation of the available diagnostic information, reported progression, mortality estimates, fishery and observer data, seasonal catch patterns and ecosystem concerns scenarios does not indicate that the mortality represents a large proportion of the overall sardine stock. However, the estimates remain highly uncertain, the event may not yet have fully run its course, and continued monitoring is required.

28. Does the current assessment mean that the sardine stock is safe?

It would be inappropriate to describe the stock as unaffected or to imply that uncertainty has been resolved. The current scenarios do not indicate a large proportional stock loss, but the event may not yet have fully run its course. The October/November hydroacoustic survey will provide the first reliable fisheries-independent post-event estimate of sardine biomass and distribution.

29. Why can't the Australian 60–70% mortality figure simply be applied to South Africa?

The Australian PHV events provide an important warning and are relevant to understanding the potential seriousness of PHV. However, the Australian estimates and conversion factors cannot be transferred directly to South Africa because survey methods, spatial coverage, coastline, oceanography, fish distribution and stock context differ. South Africa therefore needs to assess its own mortality and stock impact from its own evidence.

30. When will DFFE know the full impact on the sardine population?

There is unlikely to be a single test that provides an immediate answer. The DFFE is combining mortality sightings, transect counts, photographs and videos, fishing information, observer records and diagnostic results. The October/November hydroacoustic survey remains the first opportunity for a reliable fisheries-independent post-event estimate of biomass and distribution. Stock-assessment work will then incorporate the survey and other relevant information.

31. Does the Marine Living Resources Act require a precautionary approach?

Yes. The uncertainty surrounding the scale and consequences of the mortality is therefore relevant to fisheries-management decisions. A precautionary approach does not, however, prescribe one automatic

response. Management measures must be proportionate to the evidence and capable of being reviewed as new information becomes available.

32. Does PHV automatically require the sardine fishery to be closed?

No. Detection of PHV does not automatically result in closure of the fishery or a reduction in the TAC. Any management intervention must consider the evidence on stock impact, the possibility of further mortality, ecosystem implications, existing allocations and the need for a scientifically defensible and proportionate response.

