



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

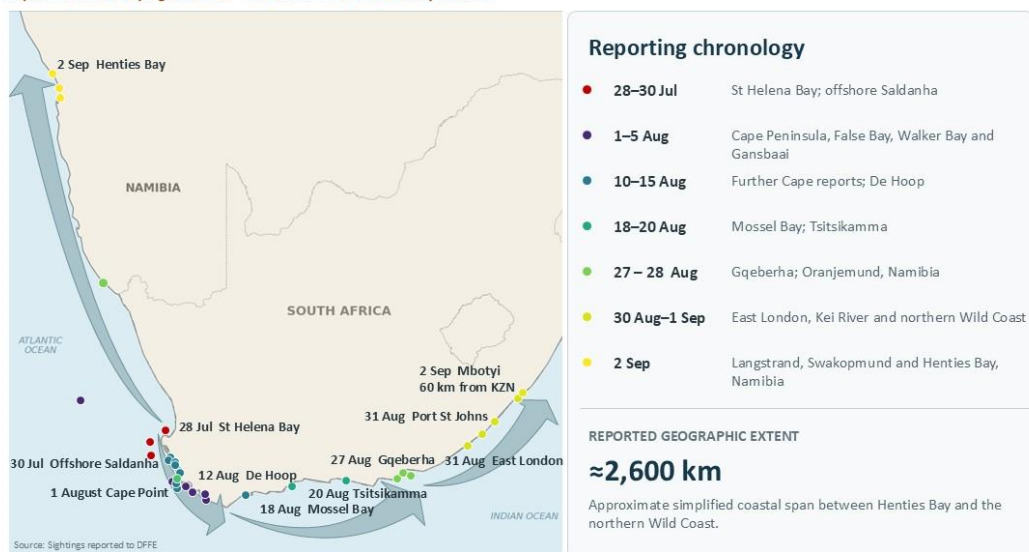
CURRENT SITUATION

- 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.

33. Could the TAC be reduced?

Potentially, if scientific assessment indicates that the mortality has materially affected stock status, recruitment or the assumptions underlying the applicable management procedure. The detection of PHV itself does not automatically require a TAC reduction. Any change would be considered through the established scientific and management process.

34. Why was the sardine Total Allowable Catch (TAC) increased shortly before the mortality event?

The July 2026 TAC decision was based on the scientific information available at that time, including revised survey-timing corrections, conversion of existing sardine total allowable by-catches and finalisation of a new sardine management plan. Short-term availability and socio-economic considerations were also taken into account. The subsequent PHV detection is new information and is being incorporated into ongoing scientific monitoring and management.

35. What management measures could be considered if the evidence indicates a material stock impact?

Depending on the evidence, measures could include intensified monitoring and reporting, increased sampling, temporary catch controls, changes to catch limits or fishing-season duration, spatial measures, or broader temporary restrictions. The appropriate response would depend on the magnitude and distribution of the risk and would be reviewed as new information becomes available.

36. Is commercially purchased sardine safe to eat?

Yes. The presence of PHV in wild sardines does not mean that commercially produced sardine products are unsafe. Commercially caught sardines entering the formal food chain are handled under controlled conditions and remain subject to normal food-safety controls.

37. Is it safe to eat canned sardines?

Yes. DFFE and the National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications (NRCS) have confirmed that there is no reason to discontinue consumption of commercially produced canned sardines processed under NRCS oversight. Approved canning facilities are inspected by the NRCS, and the validated commercial heat-treatment process used in canning inactivates viruses, including PHV, as well as spoilage-causing and pathogenic microorganisms.

38. Why should people not eat sardines found dead on the beach if PHV is not known to infect people?

The advice is not because PHV is known to make people ill. It is because the public cannot know how long a stranded fish has been dead or how far decomposition has progressed. Fish that have decomposed may contain harmful bacteria or other microorganisms capable of causing illness. The public should therefore not collect, handle, eat or feed dead or dying sardines to pets.

39. Can people swim at beaches where dead sardines have washed ashore?

There is no evidence that PHV makes seawater unsafe for swimming or that it poses a known risk to people. People should nevertheless avoid unnecessary handling of dead fish and follow any practical guidance issued by municipalities during beach clean-up operations.

40. Can dogs or other pets eat dead sardines found on the beach?

No. Pets should not be allowed to eat dead or dying sardines. The concern is not that PHV is known to infect pets, but that decomposed fish may contain harmful microorganisms or other contaminants.