



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

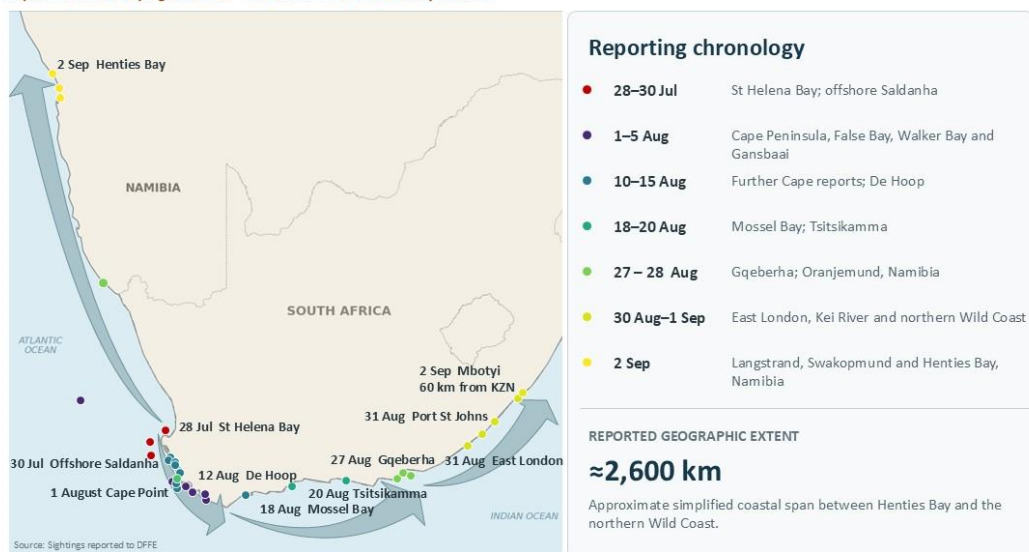
CURRENT SITUATION

- 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.

41. Can dead sardines be used as bait?

No. Until more is known about the distribution and persistence of PHV, dead or visibly unhealthy sardines should not be used as bait.

42. Should recreational fishers change their activities?

Recreational fishers should continue to comply with the applicable Fisheries Regulations and should not use dead or visibly unhealthy sardines as bait. DFFE will continue to communicate any additional measures that may be required as the scientific and management assessment progresses.

43. Could this event affect sardine prices, exports or jobs?

It is too early to predict the economic consequences. The eventual effect will depend on sardine availability, future catches, imports, market demand and any management measures required to protect the resource. DFFE is monitoring possible implications for fishing, processing, employment, coastal communities, markets and exports. There are currently no international reporting requirements specific to PHV, although importing countries may request additional information.

44. Is PHV a national disaster?

Not at this stage. Government is responding through existing fisheries, scientific, aquatic-animal-health and intergovernmental coordination mechanisms while the investigation and management assessment continue.

45. What is Government doing in response to the mortality event?

DFFE is implementing a coordinated, science-based response covering disease surveillance, laboratory testing, pathology, environmental investigations, mortality reporting, fisheries-resource assessment, ecosystem monitoring, stranded-fish management, public-health communication and stakeholder coordination. The High-Level PHV Task Team coordinates the broader response, while DFFE is working with provincial authorities, municipalities, SAIAB, Rhodes University, the fishing industry, Namibian counterparts and other relevant institutions.

46. What are the immediate scientific priorities?

Priority work includes continued PHV testing and sequencing, obtaining fresh fish for interpretable histopathology, consolidating mortality sightings and transect information, monitoring catches and catch rates, assessing sardine size composition and predator responses, and expanding regional surveillance. The October/November hydroacoustic survey remains a key priority for assessing post-event sardine biomass and distribution.

47. When will the next management and scientific review take place?

The High-Level PHV Task Team is scheduled to meet on 8 September to consider the updated distribution, diagnostic work, coordinated surveillance and sampling, ecosystem monitoring and communication. DFFE is currently considering possible precautionary, time-limited management of the fishery.

48. What lessons has South Africa drawn from the Australian PHV experience?

The Australian experience highlights the importance of coordinated scientific investigation, consistent sampling and case definitions, combining PCR and sequencing with pathology, documenting the distribution and progression of mortality, retaining samples for future work, monitoring predators and basing fisheries-management decisions on evidence from the affected stock. The Australian events are informative but cannot be used as a direct forecast of the South African outcome.

49. Where can the public obtain reliable information?

Members of the public should rely on updates issued by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and other competent government authorities, rather than unverified information circulating on social media. The Department will continue to provide updates as confirmed scientific results and management decisions become available.