

**Please keep an eye out for any lagomorph deaths on your properties and report unusual deaths to your local state vet.**

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10 July 2023 – Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus2 (RHDV2) caused [widespread mortalities of wild hares and domestic rabbits](#) across the Northern-, Western and parts of the Eastern Cape between October 2022 and February 2023. The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) has received several reports confirming that the disease has reemerged.

### **Rapid Spread across the Cape**

Following the initial reports from the Sutherland-Middelpos area in the Northern Cape last year, the disease spread rapidly across the Cape, and the most recent reports indicate that the disease is active in the Knysna area in the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape in the Langkloof area. The disease is specific to rabbits and hares (lagomorphs) and cannot be transmitted to people and other animals. However, between lagomorphs, it is highly contagious and easily transmitted, normally through direct contact, but may also be carried by flies and scavengers feeding on carcasses, on clothes, shoes, and car tyres, or carried on the wind.

### **RHDV is a controlled animal disease**

Members of the public are advised not to handle or move carcasses to avoid the further spread of the disease. Pet rabbit owners are advised to exercise strict quarantine of their pets at home. Where unavoidable contact occurs, for example, when a pet rabbit dies,

contact your local vet or state veterinarian for advice on safely disposing of the carcasses. Disinfect all affected surfaces with bleach and warm-wash contaminated clothing items.

The disease could continue to spread across South Africa, and if the same pattern is followed as has been recorded elsewhere, such as in the USA, these smaller outbreaks could eventually be followed by extensive outbreaks impacting lagomorphs across the whole country. The EWT is working closely with State Veterinarians and the provincial conservation authorities to monitor and map the spread of the disease.

### **Conservation concern for Riverine Rabbits**

Conservationists are concerned about the impact on wild lagomorph populations, as mortality rates can be as high as 80%. We do not know what the impact is likely to be on the Critically Endangered Riverine Rabbit, which occurs in low numbers and often in fragmented populations. Riverine Rabbits are endemic to the Karoo and occur in three distinct geographical regions. Theoretically, wild lagomorphs may develop a level of immunity, and populations may not be impacted as badly over time. However, smaller isolated populations of lagomorph species are at greater risk from diseases as there may not be enough surviving individuals to maintain the genetic diversity and health of the population. This highlights the importance of maintaining large enough natural areas to support viable populations that can withstand catastrophic events like disease outbreaks.

Currently, no options are available for vaccinating wild lagomorphs. A limited number of vaccines are available for domestic pet rabbits, and pet rabbit owners are advised to contact their local veterinarians for more information. The vaccine is not yet registered for use in South Africa and is therefore not freely available yet. Rabbit owners must work through their veterinarians to get access to the vaccine.

## **Members urged to report unusual deaths**

The Endangered Wildlife Trust is urging farmers and members of the public to report unusual deaths (hares found dead in the veld with no visible sign of trauma) to [ewt@ewt.org.za](mailto:ewt@ewt.org.za) and your nearest state veterinarian, including your name, farm name, cell number, GPS location of the incidents (if possible), and also a photograph of the animal. **Farmers with Riverine Rabbits on their farms are requested to monitor the riparian areas closely and immediately report any Riverine Rabbit deaths to the EWT. The most important areas include the river catchments between Williston, Sutherland, Frazerburg, Loxton and Victoria West in the Northern Cape and around the Touwsriver, Robertson and Uniondale-Baivaanskloof areas in the Western Cape.**

Western Cape contact details can be found here: <https://www.elsenburg.com/veterinary-services/animal-health-and-disease-control/>

Or contact your closest state vet.

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