



Charl de Villiers

Game-meat market outlook

by Charl de Villiers

Charl started in the game meat industry in Graaff Reinet in 1994, he currently manages the game meat division at Mosstrich (Pty) Ltd based in Mossel Bay and is Vice Chairman of Game SA. GAME SA is the representative organization of the game meat exporters of South Africa and the acronym stands for: Game Abattoir and Meat Exporters of South Africa.



▲ Burchell's zebra (*Equus quagga*).
Photo © Donovan van Staden



EXPORT MARKETS

The European Union (EU) is by far the most lucrative market for South African wild game meat. However, an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in KZN in 2011 caused all exports of meat from cloven-hoofed animals from South Africa to be suspended by the powers that be within the EU. Since the suspension, which has now been in place for seven years, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), as well as the agricultural departments of some of the northern provinces, have failed to implement sufficient FMD management controls to satisfy the EU to the extent that they are willing to lift the suspension.

“Early in 2017, the EU sent an audit team to audit the residue monitoring control system in South Africa. The audit report, which highlighted certain shortcomings in the residue testing programme pertaining to ‘farmed game’, was released to DAFF in December 2017.

‘Farmed game’, according to the EU definition, includes ostrich and crocodile meat, which must be distinguished from the EU’s definition of ‘wild game’ (which includes other game species that are not farmed, for instance springbok, kudu, blesbok, zebra and so on).

In February 2018, the ostrich- and crocodile-meat industries were informed that due to these shortcomings and the fact that DAFF has not implemented or presented the EU with acceptable corrective actions all meat exports of ostrich and crocodile will be suspended until such time that acceptable corrective actions have taken place.

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◀ At the deboning factory, the carcasses are weighed and scanned into the meat management system (Management & control systems (MCS)). After de-boning, the individual portions are vacuum packed, weighed and boxed.



▲ Zebra carcasses in chiller. All game slaughtered for export purposes must come from a farm approved and registered by the DAFF for export. All game slaughtered for export must comply with the relevant legislation for export. These requirements are controlled by the State Veterinarian on-site.

During the FMD audit at the end of 2017, the EU auditors mentioned that during their audit they came across certain game animals, mainly animals that have been bred for the live trade, which were, in their opinion, being farmed as there appeared to be significant intervention from the farmer in the rearing of the animals. Because of this, they needed to consider changing the classification of South African game from 'wild game' to 'farmed game'. If this should indeed be the case, then the export suspension applicable to ostrich and crocodile meat will also apply to all other species of game in South Africa."



▲ The vacuum-packed cuts are packed in Mosstrichs' Amatola branded carton for the export market which is either shipped frozen by sea or transported chilled by air. The labels have all the information required to trace the meat contents of each carton to the date and place where the animals were harvested. Maintenance of the cold chain is critical from loading the product at the plant until delivery to an overseas port/airport.

The EU suspension caused massive job losses in the industry and loss of much-needed foreign currency for the country. Immediately after the suspension, prices of game carcasses dropped substantially, then moved sideways for six years, and only lately seem to have started increasing – mainly due to the increase in price of other red meat.

With the export ban in place, it has been impossible to increase prices to farmers consistently from year to year, as it should be. We know that farmers work on the principle of 'if it pays it stays' and our greatest fear is that farmers start replacing their game with domestic livestock to earn a better income. The export situation is extremely frustrating. It



is critical that government supports DAFF financially to ensure that the department is adequately manned with the necessary skills in order to meet the ever-increasing requirements and protocols required by the EU and other countries to ensure that we have a sustainable export market, the benefits of which are obvious.

As zebra are not susceptible to FMD, it is the only species currently being exported to the EU. Zebra meat is mainly exported to countries such as France, Belgium and Holland, where traditionally horse meat is also consumed. Zebra is regarded as an exotic meat in the EU and only caters to a relatively small niche market. Approximately 1 000 to 2 000 zebra are harvested per annum for this purpose.



The owner or the responsible person of the farm must apply in writing for a registration certificate issued by the Provincial Veterinary Authority (PVA) if he/she wishes to register or re-register a farm with the intent to harvest wild game animals for abattoirs approved to export wild game meat.

Domestically, the biggest issue has been that there have never been any regulations governing the supply and sale of game meat. The result has been:

No meat inspection during the harvesting or processing phases.

Any private hunter, farmer, professional hunter or processor can sell meat carcasses directly into the wholesale trade without any regulation.

No meat hygiene or food safety systems are in place – the result being low-quality, tainted meat with no food safety guarantee for the end consumer.

With no traceability systems in place, meat fraud occurs where one specie is sold as another.

Low prices offered as, in most cases, meat is a by-product of the hunt.

Because of these results (as stated left), it is extremely difficult for processors who comply with at least the bare minimum standards of meat hygiene and food safety to generally compete and add value in the market.

Game-meat processors who adhere to meat safety standards, even in the absence of regulations, have realised that this situation cannot continue if the idea is to build a quality brand and add value for the farmer. GAME SA (Game Abattoirs and Meat Establishments of South Africa), which previously represented South African game-meat exporters only, expanded to include domestic processors with the goal of formalising the industry. GAME SA and industry stakeholders have pushed hard for DAFF to formulate and draft game-meat regulations and, after many years of discussions, these regulations should finally be published during 2018.



SOUTH AFRICAN MARKET

As mentioned above, the result of the export suspension was that farmers received lower prices for carcasses. This, together with rising lamb and beef prices, made game meat a cheaper alternative, which resulted in more and more local processors entering the market during the seven-year export suspension. However, prices to farmers remained low. The main cause of the lower prices was that game meat from recreational hunters was being supplied into the market at low prices. For processors to be competitive, they had to match these prices and were therefore not in a position to offer farmers more. This will hopefully change with the proposed game regulations, the publishing of which has been delayed by DAFF for some time.

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▲ Carcasses in refrigerated truck. Continuous thermo-control recording must be done from loading to arrival and unloading at the game export establishment.

In years gone by, it has been difficult to convince the South African consumer to buy game meat at a fair price, mainly because:

They either hunt themselves or know a hunter/farmer or family member who will supply them with game meat during the hunting season. This will always be the case in South Africa.

They do not know how to prepare

game meat. This is slowly changing, however, with many television shows/magazines providing recipes and correct preparation methods. If the meat is of good quality, preparation is really quite simple.

They have had a bad experience, for instance where meat was tainted, or it was tough and inedible. This comes down to the way that the animal was hunted, and the meat was processed.

The new game-meat regulations will ensure that game meat that is sold commercially has been harvested and processed professionally, with independent inspection, which will present the consumer with a final product of far greater quality.

There is a huge difference in the taste and texture of game meat that was harvested professionally and that which has been hunted.

In the past, a lot of game meat has been sold into the restaurant trade – mainly to those restaurants catering for tourists – but over the past couple of years, supermarkets are stocking more and more game-meat products. This will hopefully expose more consumers, and if they have a good eating experience, demand should increase.



Harvesting may not commence without a valid game harvester registration certificate. All game harvesters must provide a harvesting program to the Provincial State Veterinary (PSV) office before any harvest can take place, to arrange for ad hoc inspections.



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Over the next year, there will be a shortage of game available for harvesting due to the devastating drought experienced in many parts of the country.

The shortage of game, an increase in demand, and high red-meat prices coupled with the game-meat regulations, should ensure increased retail prices and therefore increased carcass prices to the farmer.



For many years, I have been told that game meat is the meat of the future because of its natural goodness. I hope we are now moving closer to the point where game meat can take its rightful place.



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