

SA takes first step toward modernise pesticide governance

The National Department of Agriculture hosted a landmark Colloquium on Pesticide Policy Framework, bringing together government departments, farmer associations, scientists, civil society, industry, labour, farmworkers, and human rights organisations.



Source: Supplied

The event marks the first multi-sectoral dialogue aimed at modernising South Africa's pesticide governance.

The colloquium addresses the Farm Feeds, Fertilizer, and Agrochemical Remedies Act 36 of 1947 moving from a fragmented, outdated framework toward a science-based, socially accountable system.

Organisers emphasised a One Health approach, integrating human, animal, plant, and environmental health in pesticide risk assessment and policy design, while reviving the 2010 Pesticide Management Policy, which has remained unimplemented for 15 years.

Civil society and farmworkers at the table

"For the first time in history, civil society was not merely in the room, but at the table," said Anna Shevel, network coordinator of UnPoison.

Civil society and human rights representation included the Women on Farms Project, the South African Human Rights Commission, and the South African People's Tribunal on Agrottoxins.

Academia was represented by the University of Pretoria's Plant Sciences Department and the University of Cape Town's Divisions of Public Health Medicine and Environmental Health, alongside the Red Cross Children's Hospital Poison Information Centre.

Industry and farmer bodies participating included CropLife, South African Bioproduct Organisation (SABO), GrainSA, Hortgro, and the Citrus Growers Association, with government representation from multiple provincial and national departments, including Health, Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, and Employment and Labour.

Key commitments from government

The colloquium concluded with clear commitments from deputy director-general Dipepeneneng Serage, including:

- Public access to the national pesticide registration database within two weeks.
- Revival of an interdepartmental committee to address legislative fragmentation.
- Adoption of a One Health framework in policy design.
- Increased capacity and technical expertise in the agrochemical registration office.
- Phasing out problematic pesticides banned internationally.
- Establishment of a sustainable finance mechanism for the registration office.
- Enhanced transparency and stakeholder participation, especially involving civil society and farmworkers.

"The transparency, willingness to acknowledge past mistakes and intent to reorganise the need to change how business is done are strongly welcomed and it gives us a sense of hope and optimism that there will be meaningful change," said Professor Leslie London, chair of public health medicine at UCT.

Background and context

The colloquium follows years of advocacy and public pressure, including:

- Women on Farms' campaigns against EU pesticide double standards.
- UnPoison's legislative reform advocacy.
- The UPL disaster of 2021.
- UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Toxic's report of 2023.
- Naledi child deaths in 2024 due to accidental pesticide poisoning.

- Work by the South African People's Tribunal on Agrotoxins.
- Global calls for highly hazardous pesticide bans and EU Green Deal compliance for exports.

Shevel emphasised that the reform is aimed at future-proofing agriculture while protecting public health and ecosystems: "The outcomes we are advocating for in this process are not about dismantling agriculture, they're about future-proofing it.

"Every stakeholder involved, from farmworkers to regulators to civil society, shares a common goal to protect the viability of farming while safeguarding health and ecosystems.

"There is no appetite for a 'win-lose' outcome. Our shared commitment is to a win-win-win path forward, where agriculture flourishes, communities are protected, and environmental ecosystems restored."

The event signals a historic turning point for pesticide regulation, governance transparency, and democratic participation in South Africa's agricultural sector.

