Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA) reached a milestone last month when the developed international standard guiding the production of game meat from ranch to consumer was registered by International Standards Certification (ISC), a globally accredited certification body headquartered in Australia. Within a period of less than two years, compliance was obtained for WRSA.

This world-first – WRSA is the first wildlife organisation in the world to have ownership of its own standard – means that WRSA is now accredited to run its own game-meat scheme for commercial purposes in South Africa.

More than 120,000 tonnes of game meat that are regarded as illegal are consumed and utilised (including processed meat products) in South Africa annually. Although WRSA had been in negotiations with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) for a decade, the approved scheme was not promulgated as promised and further delays seemed assured when the Department declared in 2013 that the proposed scheme was too similar to the existing draft game regulations and the regulations should be re-drafted and published for public comment to enable its final promulgation. A similar process was followed in 2004 and terminated by DAFF for various reasons.

Rather than again wait for the department, it was decided to take the proposed standard to an international body,” says Dr Maretha van der Merwe, consultant to WRSA. “The standard is still in compliance with South African legislation, so government cannot object to it. It is in compliance with three International Organization for Standardization (ISO) specifications, which are industry benchmarks: ISO 14 000, which is the environmental standard; ISO 22 000, which is the food safety management standard in conjunction with food safety risk management standard HACCP, and ISO 9001:2008 (a generic quality management standard).

“However, this is the world’s first standard for game meat that is compliant with ISO 22 000, which is a food safety management standard of the highest order,” says Dr Maretha van der Merwe. “This is a huge step forward for the global game industry.”

Over 600,000 people in South Africa are involved in the hunting and processing of game meat. Over 1.2 million tons of game meat are produced annually from the hunting of wild game. The game meat market is valued at around R500 million per annum. Game meat is considered a natural, healthy and nutritious food source and is eating up market share from conventional meat sources.

Dr Maretha van der Merwe delivering a keynote speech at the 2015 WRSA conference, Sun City, South Africa.

An interview with Dr Maretha van der Merwe by Fiona Zerbst.
SA Conservation Success Stories

management system that all ISO standards are based on.) WRSA had to prove it was broadly compliant with these specifications, so it submitted to an audit by ITL – at WRSA’s head office, on a game ranch with a registered rural game abattoir.

The result is that WRSA is now a market leader in what is a largely uncontrolled, unregulated industry and consumers are assured that game meat bearing the WRSA logo is safe, quality-assured and complies with every possible standard of hygiene and safety.

“...game meat bearing the WRSA logo is safe, quality-assured and complies with every possible standard of hygiene and safety:

In addition, game animals are not killed in the same way as domestic animals and there is an emphasis on the more humane process to obtain game meat.

“Although this standard comes at a price, because compliance always costs a bit, consumers will be assured that they are getting a safe, quality-assured product that is traceable – it is important to know the area and farm the animal came from, to adhere to disease control mechanisms and if it was exposed to residues,” says Maretha. “WRSA, as the custodian of game-meat, has put itself in a position of...
accountability – thus assuring peace of mind for all consumers.” Maretha believes that circumventing DAFF was a necessity because although approximately 100 000 tons of meat are hunted locally by trophy and biltong hunters every year, most of it is sold in an unregulated market.

“The problem is not with the animals themselves – 99.9% of our game animals are healthy,” she says. “But as soon as you begin secondary processing, you introduce the ‘human factor’ and you need control mechanisms including legislation.”

For those keen on sampling WRSA’s product, which will be labelled according to meat-safety protocols and WRSA’s own code of conduct (for WRSA game-meat-producing members), note that WRSA has in principle agreed on a Memorandum of Agreement with Spar to stock the accredited game meat and that other retailers such as Pick n Pay, Rump & Ocean at Food Lover’s Market and Woolworths should follow when the first game-meat facilities have been accredited for full compliance with the WRSA standard.

Maretha says game meat can fill the protein gap on the continent of Africa and could go a long way towards sustaining food security. “Protein is a scarce commodity in Africa and game meat is a natural, healthy, nutritious protein food product that will ensure healthy communities and above all a healthy South African nation,” she says.