

## Progress in combating facial eczema

Milk SA continues to collaborate with international research partners on the project *Exploring the facial eczema problem in dairy cattle in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, with a focus on the fungus Pseudopithomyces chartarum*, led by Dr Neriman Yilmaz from the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute of the University of Pretoria. The other role-players are Beef and Lamb New Zealand, the Westerdijk Fungal Biodiversity Institute, and the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research.

Through this international collaboration, the researchers have been conducting gene knockout experiments to disrupt the fungus's toxin-production genes. This involves advanced genetic techniques conducted partly in Austria. While some challenges remain, ongoing work aims to identify the genes that control toxin synthesis, which could lead to new ways to prevent the fungus from producing the harmful toxin.

## Request to relax SCC standards amid the FMD crisis

The Department of Health has been requested to consider relaxing somatic cell count (SCC) standards in response to the ongoing foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) crisis. FMD infection significantly increases SCC levels in raw milk, often resulting in poor quality. Although FMD primarily causes lesions, associated udder damage can lead to secondary bacterial infections, further increasing SCC.

This rise in SCC is accompanied by a marked decline in milk yield and reductions in fat, protein, and lactose content. Elevated SCC levels may persist for several weeks following vaccination and recovery. While such milk can be rendered safe for consumption through appropriate pasteurisation, it does not comply with the requirements of Regulation 1555 of 1997 – the elevated SCC counts are, in most cases, more than the prescribed limits.

To address this issue, proposals have been submitted to the Department for a time-bound increase in SCC levels for milk intended for further processing, along with additional measures. Adoption of these proposals would help reduce unnecessary milk disposal during a period of significant strain on affected farms.

## Promoting market access for FMD-affected products

Dr Mark Chimes, Milk SA's programme manager: animal health and welfare, together with the Milk SA FMD work group and the ministerial task team (MTT), continues to play a critical role in reshaping the regulatory and marketing environment to support market access, livelihoods, and the sustainability of the South African dairy industry.

The MTT is currently negotiating fixed export standards to be applied to specific trade partners to remove trade barriers. Export access has already been restored to Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Dr Chimes is further advocating for the application of the World Organisation for Animal Health principle of 'equivalence', whereby dairy products subjected to processing methods equal to or exceeding ultra-high temperature (UHT) treatment or double pasteurisation would automatically qualify for export.

He also recently attended the International Dairy Federation Regional Dairy Conference in Zimbabwe, where he engaged with industry stakeholders to strengthen collaboration and facilitate trade with South Africa's neighbouring countries.

## Ensuring that dairy remains a priority at municipal level

During the first quarter of 2026, the Dairy Standard Agency engaged with municipal health authorities to clarify the interpretation of food safety legislation under the *Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972 (Act 54 of 1972)*, with specific reference to hygienic processing, packaging, and retail practices, as well as the sale of raw milk and cheese.

These efforts aim to improve awareness among law enforcement officials regarding the risks posed by non-compliant dairy products on retail shelves. Follow-up initiatives included webinars and radio discussions highlighting the public health implications of substandard dairy.

New initiatives have been identified to assist the Eastern Cape municipalities of Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela Metro. These initiatives focus on expanded collaboration, training workshops, enhanced monitoring, and outcome-based strategies to improve compliance, particularly among small and medium enterprises.

## Section 10 scheme to expand FMD vaccination control

The minister of agriculture on 4 May published the *Section 10 Routine Vaccination Scheme for Foot-and-Mouth Disease* in the *Government Gazette*. As gazetted, the scheme focusses on supporting existing FMD control measures, allowing voluntary vaccination under state oversight, encouraging public-private cooperation, and supporting business continuity, food security, and animal health.

Practical and technical details are instead addressed through operational guidelines and a peer-reviewed FMD manual, to be released within 90 days of the scheme's publication.

In the final scheme, formal industry representation is limited to a single veterinarian nominated jointly by the cattle stud, dairy, and feedlot sectors. **SF**