

Foot-and-mouth disease: Reflecting on Dr Chimes' work during the first half of 2026

In his half-year report, Dr Mark Chimes provided insights into the challenges experienced during the first half of 2026. The report highlighted the important role he played in helping to establish sensible governance for foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). Here are some of the highlights:

Ministerial task team: Dr Chimes serves on the Ministerial Task Team (MTT), which was instrumental in developing a risk-based approach to vaccine distribution, setting standards for the required vaccines, and compiling the Section 10 scheme and Section 9 contingency plan for FMD. The MTT is now focusing on post-vaccination monitoring and ensuring that animals receive booster vaccinations when required.

Diagnostic capacity: Dr Chimes is also a member of the MTT Diagnostic Subcommittee. In response to the limited diagnostic capacity at Onderstepoort Veterinary Research (OVR-TAD), the subcommittee identified and assessed six alternative state and private veterinary laboratories across the country. Recommendations have been made to obtain approval for these laboratories to conduct surveillance testing using PCR and/or serology, depending on their respective capabilities. This would alleviate pressure on OVR-TAD and allow it to focus on diagnosing strains and serotyping FMD outbreaks.

Market access: As a member of the MTT Market Access Committee, Dr Chimes' report states that the committee has focused on maintaining and regaining market access in countries to which South Africa exports meat and dairy products. For dairy products, the focus has been on neighbouring countries. Zimbabwe and Zambia imposed bans on exports of all products from cloven-hooved animals, but through the efforts of the subcommittee,

permission to export dairy products was regained. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) imposed a similar ban and has not yet agreed to restore permission for dairy exports. The committee is currently negotiating fixed export standards for specific countries.

Equivalence for dairy products:

Dr Chimes also advocated for the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) principle of 'equivalence' to be applied to all dairy products. In essence, this means any dairy product subjected to processing that is equivalent to or exceeds UHT treatment or double pasteurisation should automatically qualify for export, provided the importing country agrees to the standard.

Vaccination and quarantine

regulations: When former minister of agriculture John Steenhuisen announced widespread vaccination without adjusting the quarantine regulations, Dr Chimes advised him that, under the prevailing regulations, all vaccinated farms would be placed under quarantine. This would have prevented the export of any products from cloven-hooved animals. In addition, all milk would have had to undergo double pasteurisation or UHT treatment, while all animals would have had to be slaughtered only at FMD-approved abattoirs, of which there were very few.

Industry mobilisation: Dr Chimes rallied dairy processors across South Africa to sign a petition that would have been submitted to the minister. Ultimately, this was not necessary, as the director of animal health amended the regulations before the widespread rollout of vaccines.

Regulatory improvements: Two of the most significant improvements to the regulations were the removal of the requirement to separate FMD milk from FMD-free milk before processing, and the provision for equivalence in

milk processing. Provision was also made for dairy producers to move cows due to calve, from dry-cow and heifer farms to the dairy parlour farm. Supplying milk to processors will also become easier, with quarantine being lifted six weeks after day zero.

Western Cape FMD war room:

Dr Chimes was appointed to the Western Cape FMD War Room in March 2026. The War Room successfully contained outbreaks in two regions: the West Coast, just north of Cape Town, and the Garden Route, outside Mossel Bay.

Chris Fourie of DMC deserves recognition for his support in arranging the rapid collection of FMD vaccines from the Onderstepoort Biological Products (OBP) facility and delivering them to the Western Cape. The Western Cape FMD War Room has also been instrumental in fast-tracking approval for the Western Cape State Veterinary Laboratory to conduct FMD testing.

MPO support: The Milk Producers' Organisation (MPO) has played an instrumental role in ensuring vaccine allocation to dairy farms across all provinces. As a result of these efforts, virtually all dairy herds in the country have been vaccinated. By assisting with vaccinations, the MPO has also compiled an accurate map and database of South African dairy farms. This will be of significant value to the animal health and welfare programme in future research and disease-control initiatives.

Milk SA commends Dr Chimes for his selfless efforts, which extend far beyond his contractual responsibilities. Dr Chimes served as programme manager: animal health and welfare at Milk SA until 30 June this year. He currently serves as interim project manager while Prof Dietmar Holm settles into his new role as the new appointee.