

Do your meters measure up?

Think 'value' not 'price' when installing milk meters

If it's reliability and non bias that you want from your milk meter then official 'approval', as well as regular maintenance and testing, are key according to two leading industry experts. Although they may cost a bit more than the non-approved milk 'monitors', they give an assurance that represents good value for money.

All milk meters are not the same – that's a fact that all producers should bear in mind when upgrading or installing new parlour equipment, according to milk recording specialist Frank Armitage.

"The key is to ensure that your milk meters are approved by the International Committee of Animal Recording (ICAR) if you want to be sure of reliable readings and, therefore, quality data with which to manage your herd," he says.

"So many day-to-day management decisions are based on how much milk each cow is producing in the parlour, so it's vital that the data is as reliable as possible.

"If it's not, then management will be inaccurate and herd productivity – and profitability – can suffer."

He says that if a meter is not approved then that means it hasn't been tested: "And wild fluctuations in readings can be the result, which then means that

management decisions are based on meaningless data."

Strict tests

ICAR is the organisation that approves milk meters across the world. And its procedure is very thorough, starting with lab tests, checking the meters at different heights, depths and angles. "Only after a type of meter passes these strict tests does it qualify for field testing," adds Mr Armitage. "The meter must act within defined tolerances – and these are well published and strictly adhered to."

And the protocols don't stop here as far as ICAR approved milk meters are concerned. The organisation

seeks agreed maintenance procedures from the manufacturer that the manufacturer must be prepared to stand behind these. "It's no different from buying a car – the service intervals are well defined and the service tests are specified. If you adhere to these then you can expect the car to perform to its specification. Milk meters with ICAR approval are no different."

All approved ICAR meters now have the ICAR logo on them, a move supported by manufacturers in the light of their investment in getting their meters ICAR approved.

Unapproved meters are generally cheaper than those that are approved and although this might make them 'attractive' to UK producers, Mr Armitage says there are obvious risks. "Some may work – but there's no guarantee and no come back if they don't – it's a bit of a lottery.

"Cheaper meters really can be a false economy. Meters are one of the few pieces of kit that a producer uses for 365 days of the year and most, if not all, management decisions on many units are based on their readings. So their reliability really is paramount."

Reliable information

Uffe Lauritsen, vice president of ICAR and chairman of the Recording Devices Subcommittee, agrees that there's no room to cut corners when it comes to information. "Information has to be reliable to be valuable – the more reliable it is the more valuable it is. And what could be more important to the success of a dairy business than precise and reliable day-to-day management information?"

Mr Lauritsen says that he's seen many instances where producers have been focused on the price of something, rather than its value. "And I don't blame them for cutting costs, but their advisors should be pointing out that buying cheaper unapproved milk meters doesn't represent good value for money.

"It's like buying a car that will only take you half way to where you want to go before you have to change the tyres – it's a false economy and it causes a lot of problems."

When it comes to upgrading and installing milking parlours and equipment, producer focus has to shift from 'price' to 'value' and, particularly where milk meters are concerned, to reliability and ICAR approval. "It's a tough business to be in, in some



instances herd size has grown 10-fold in the UK and the pressure on producers has been and continues to be huge. These larger herds rely upon more staff for their success and staff, in turn, rely on good data. So when it comes to information and information systems on farm, there's no room for cutting costs." Mr Lauritsen says that an unaddressed problem in the meter, for example, could reduce a reading by two litres and if a 10% deviation in the reading of an unapproved and/or irregularly calibrated and maintained meter is also added to that reduced reading then a yield reading could be as much as four litres out.

Another point to consider is the Interbull requirement that records obtained by non-approved devices should not be allowed into genetic evaluations.

Buyer beware

Whatever the producer chooses, Mr Armitage urges them to ask the right questions and seek transparency from the company selling the milk meters. 'Buyer beware' are his final words. "Ask if those cheaper meters are ICAR approved and if they're not, then I say don't buy them. "Yes, you'd save a few quid in the short term, but it won't be a lot when you consider the total cost of a new parlour or an upgrade. The former can be in the region of £250,000.

"And remember that the meter is the 'business end' of the parlour – it's where you get so much of the production efficiency information on which your herd's success and your business depends. So it's vital that that information is reliable. I would say that installing ICAR-approved meters is the first step to achieving that reliability and assurance. The next step is to make sure that those meters are regularly checked and serviced on at least an annual basis."

A full list of approved meters is on the ICAR web site, www.icar.org, along with the guidelines on how to test and maintain them on a regular basis. "Have a look at this and ask the suppliers the right questions. It will be time well spent and it could save you a lot of trouble – and expense."

Rachael Porter



Frank Armitage:
'Cheaper milk meters can be a false economy'



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