

“Give us our daily results” – producers rely on daily milk quality results

# ‘Milking’ the sample keeps herds ahead

A further tightening of milk contracts with more emphasis on milk quality and constituents is keeping producers on their toes. But not all are getting hot under the collar. Some producers are using daily quality results to identify any ‘blips’. And through quick action they are safe-guarding their monthly milk cheque.

text **Karen Wright**

Most producers are seeing a sample of milk from the bulk tank leave at every collection – daily or every other day. One of these will be used for weekly milk payment testing purposes. Under the arrangement with the NML testing lab the other samples are kept for statutory testing and necessary rechecks or for disease testing. But an increasing number of producers are opting for the popular Milkcheck additional testing.

“Some producers are encouraged, initially, by their milk buyers, perhaps if there’s been a quality problem, to use Milkcheck and get more regular Bactoscan, cell count and constituent quality tests carried out,” says NML manager Bec Bell.

“There’s no extra hassle for them, but they will get results from these additional tests back within 24 hours to their mobile phone, email or via the website. And once producers start using the service, many get ‘hooked’ and see that the cost of extra tests is minimal compared with the possible penalties they could incur from dropping into a lower payment band. It’s a very cheap insurance premium really.”

## Milkcheck tests

As an example, a 150-cow herd with a geometric mean SCC above 300,000 cells/ml is likely to incur a deduction of around 1ppl from the milk cheque. If monthly production for this herd is 90,000 litres, assuming 20 litres per cow per day, then the deduction would be £900 per month. On most contracts a

further £900 is likely to be lost if the farm has a two month rolling Bactoscan of more than 100.

“Additional milk testing typically costs between £2 and £5 per test, depending on volume,” adds Bec. “Given the potential penalties at stake, it is easy to see why producers rely on Milkcheck tests. For a relatively small cost they have great peace of mind.”

And peace of mind is just what Shropshire producer Andrew Titterton, from Blythe Bridge near Stoke on Trent, enjoys.

## Bacto blip

A blip in Bactoscan readings first directed Andrew to additional testing via his milk buyer Meadow Foods.

“There was no extra sampling but it did mean that we started getting a Bactoscan and average cell count result on a daily

basis,” says Andrew, who runs the 180-cow Holstein herd. “We can also monitor our butterfats and if they drop suddenly – which they can at turnout for example – we can adjust the ration and get the butterfat back up. We’re on the case quickly.

“Results are back by email or text within 24 hours. If there’s a problem with Bactoscans we run through a check list with the plant and cleaning process and within days we can be back on target. Cell count blips take a bit longer but we don’t delay action. If we relied on weekly test results it could be two or three weeks before we got back to normal and by this time it could have affected our milk cheque.”

Andrew admits that he now relies on additional testing and he can easily justify the cost. “Just recently the bactoscan reading jumped up to 400. But I knew I had calved in six heifers, so I withheld their milk and added it one by one until I found the culprit.

“After a few problems last year, we’ve now got Bactoscans down below 50 and I am sure additional testing has played a large part in us keeping head of the game.”

Shropshire producer Jim Franklin, from Aqualate in Newport, is equally keen to keep his 100-cow Holstein herd on track and he does this by taking a very

Andrew Titterton: “Any ‘blips’ in milk quality, and we’re on the case immediately”



Jim Franklin: “Milkcheck additional tests – good for our milk buyer, cows and milk cheque”

proactive approach to milk quality and cell counts.

He sells around 90,000 litres of milk a month to Muller and has to keep his geometric mean SCC under 250,000 cells/ml to avoid penalties.

“We manage the herd on a very traditional system,” says Jim. “But we achieve ‘modern’ yields currently averaging 10,200kg a cow. And we want to make sure we combine this with good quality, clean milk production. Using services like Milkcheck additional testing helps us to keep on top of this.”

Jim first started using additional testing through his milk buyer. “We had a blip in quality so we got more regular tests for a while. We were soon back on target but we carried on with the daily tests.”

## On guard

The Franklin’s farm is first on the tanker round so their milk – and the sample – leaves at 7.30am and by mid afternoon Jim usually has a text and email with the

results. “We follow careful health and hygiene procedures, but Mother Nature can always throw up a few surprises,” adds Jim. “So we’re on guard ready to take any action if we need to.”

Jim likes to keep Bactoscans under 10 and cell counts at or below the current herd average of 180,000cells/ml. “We calve all year round and to make sure we’re not jeopardising our cell count average with high counts from newly calved cows we also send in individual cow milk samples for testing three or four days after calving. Once her cell count is around the herd average or below we let her milk in to the tank.” Although Jim pays for the additional bulk Milkcheck tests and the individual cow tests he considers that it’s money well spent and it enables him to maintain or improve the herd’s milk quality.

“It’s a system that works well for us and it keeps our milk buyer – Muller – happy. And it’s good for our milk cheque too.”

## Additional bulk milk tests

- Samples collected by the milk purchaser that are not required for the weekly payment test can be used for additional Milkcheck testing.
- Results provide regular milk quality results – fat, protein, cell counts and bactoscan.
- Results – within 24 hours of the sample arriving at the lab – are sent by text, email, and through Milk Quality Monitor on the NMR Herd Companion website – or fax.
- Testing can be ordered through the milk buyer or the NML office.
- Milkcheck additional testing can be ‘continuous’ or ad hoc and used when a problem arises from the weekly results or during calving periods.
- Prices range from between £2 and £5, depending on the volume of tests ordered.