



Quality Watch

By Dean Letter

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PortaSCC—Another Tool to Detect Somatic Cells in Milk

MMPA's overall somatic cell average for January was 218,000—this is fantastic! The average is this good despite extremely cold weather and the challenge of chapped teats. Many dairy producers had to be particularly diligent in monitoring their cows for infection to maintain the quality of milk they have become accustomed to shipping.

There is an arsenal of tools dairy producers may use to identify cows and quarters that have elevated somatic cells. Many producers use DHI, CMT (California Mastitis Test), or an on-farm somatic cell counter to check cows on a regular basis. Periodically, some producers submit milk samples to the MMPA lab for culturing and somatic cell counts. Each option has its pros and cons in ease of use and interpretation, cost per test, and turn-around time in getting test results.

A few years ago, a new test came to market called the PortaSCC. This test is geared toward the producer that wants a relatively quick, on-farm test to check cows on a composite or quarter basis. There are several applications for the PortaSCC. Producers can check suspect cows or cows from their DHI "hot sheet" to verify that the cows have an infection and identify the quarter(s) with the infection.

After identifying the high quarter(s), a decision can be made to culture the quarter(s) as well as decide on a treatment/monitoring protocol.

Dairy producers that are proactively monitoring their dry cow program may elect to use this test to check quarters on their cows at dry-off and freshening. With good detailed records, a producer can determine the efficacy of their dry treatment program by the number of quarters that are infected at dry off and that are still infected when the cow freshens. Additionally, cows that freshen with newly infected quarters can be monitored and a treatment decision can be made early on in the infection. A high percentage of cows freshening with infected quarters may signal to the producer a need to re-evaluate the dry cow housing and maternity pen.

PortaSCC is well suited to monitoring quarters. Quarters can be monitored periodically to determine whether treatment is necessary. Once a cow has been treated, periodic monitoring can help determine the appropriate time to return that cow's milk to the bulk tank (after she has cleared the antibiotics). If the somatic cell count does not improve, a decision can be made on treatment or culling. Either way, producers have more control over the quality of the milk they ship.

There are three steps to use this test. The first step consists of placing a drop of fresh milk (less than eight hours old) on the test strip with the provided pipette. Secondly, apply three drops of activator solution to the test strip. The third step is to interpret the results forty-five minutes later.

Interpreting the results consists of comparing the color development on the test strip to the included "Quick Check Color Chart" or slipping the test strip into an optional digital reader. Both the "Quick Check Color Chart" and the digital reader provide the user with an approximate SCC number that can then be used to make management based decisions. MMPA has compared SCC results between PortaSCC, CMT, and laboratory testing (Bentley) and found a strong agreement between all tests on several farms.

The PortaSCC will be demonstrated at the MMPA Milker Training Schools this year. The kits should be available for purchase through MMPA Merchandise within the next few months. If you have additional questions regarding this test, please contact Tom Herremans at 269-967-0890 or Tom Stakenas at 989-289-7310.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dean".