

Defining milk quality and meeting customer and consumer demands

Milk quality is an ever more complicated subject as the more we know about it, the more we appreciate that there is even more to find out.

This view holds true for many things in life, but for milk quality it probably depends on who is defining milk quality!

For small retailers and customers who are manufacturers of dairy products, such as ice cream and cheeses, defining quality is probably finite. This might not be the case for major supermarkets who often see quality as an evolving catch-all definition that increases each time a new issue surfaces and effectively protects your customer against everything and anything!

Is this fair and reasonable?

Irrespective of which (or perhaps both) apply to us we need to keep quality to the fore of our thinking. In simple terms we can define quality as what should be present in our milk and what should not.

Know your product

The former necessitates defining our milk in specific terms. Basically this means the butterfat and protein content, but our definition of quality can go on to consider different fat types, mineral content and the level of vitamins and enzymes.

It should be remembered that in our definition of quality we need to be able to mea-

sure it, so we can prove compliance with our definition.

Thus, as our definition of quality becomes more complex, so does the testing requirements and once we move away from simple basic parameters, such as butterfat and protein, our testing requirements increase and their cost tends to increase exponentially.

In other words, testing for vitamins and fat types is much more expensive per test than testing for butterfat or protein.

The other facet of quality is the confirmation that undesirable components are not present.

These include a whole variety of things, some of which are easy to measure and some of which are somewhat subjective in nature, such as undesirable tastes and odours.

Undesirable additions

Undesirable additions can be added by the cow, for example from the feed she eats or medicines administered by the farmer, who then ignores the withdrawal time, added on the farm or added to the milk once it has left the farm.

Additions can be accidental or intentional. The latter often involve the consumer who is seeking to extort compensation from the supplier of the product he is alleging is contaminated. In these cases it is often the consumer who contaminates the product!

If we end up in a dispute over a contaminated product the first thing the complainant has to do is to prove the product really came from your milk.

Obviously, this is not easy if there has been a bulking up of milk from several or more farms.

The good news in most countries is that the legal dispute is with the seller of the milk and not the original producer – but there may well be a subsequent secondary action by the seller of the milk against his supplier!

This might be legal or just contract termination assuming the seller of the milk can pin point which farm(s) supplied the suspect milk in question.

Legally, for such a complaint to stand up, the complainant needs to demonstrate 'con-

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tinuity of evidence' to prove that the milk that is in question really did come from the dairy in question and ultimately that it did really come from your herd.

Also, in this context you need to be able to demonstrate that the sample tested really was the one that came from your cows!

This can be very important if the results favour your defence – you do not want the court to ignore these results on the basis of lack of continuity of evidence!

One of the problems with quality is it is different things to different people, so it is important that you and your customer have defined what quality is for the purposes of your contract of supply.

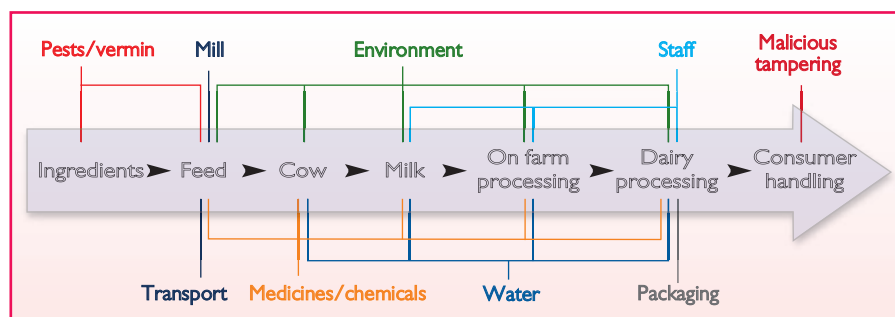


Fig. 1. Some sources of contamination.

In this context try to avoid agreeing to catch-all phrases that many customers like, such as 'the product shall not contain any

substance that is potentially deleterious to human health'.

Such phrases are used by dominant partners in negotiations and should be resisted as they can leave you wide open for come-back.

Just think, a year or so ago nobody knew about the dangers of melamine. Had you signed a contract with a catch-all clause and had inadvertently used a melamine contaminated product you would be now be regretting that catch-all clause.

When it comes to quality milk production the old computer phrase of GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) holds true. So, when it comes to the production of quality milk the farmer must ensure that no 'garbage' is going into his production system.

This includes contaminants in feed and water, use of antibiotics inside their recommended withdrawal period and any chemical that the cows could come across in their environment.

In the old days this included lead paint – nowadays other chemicals can get into your cows' environment and it is your job to see that they do not.

For example, be careful how you dispose of old engine oil, old animal dips, paints and cleaning solvents.

Documented policy

Ideally, you should have a documented policy on how you will minimise risk factors that could adversely affect milk quality and this will include a section on handling agricultural chemicals and waste material derived there from.

If you have customers who are putting heavy demands on you in relation to milk quality do not be afraid to pass these on to your key suppliers as a requirement of trading with you. It is reasonable to require your feed supplier to meet certain standards in this context.

You should also have strict policies on the use of medicines, especially antibiotics on the farm.

At the end of the day your approach to quality will often be dictated by your customer's stance on the subject. Be careful to ensure that the requests he makes of you are fair and reasonable and that it is possible for you to comply with what he is asking you to do. ■