Weather, economics lead to small somatic cell count increase

Progressive Dairyman Editor Dave Natzke

Although the increase was small, a 2015 summary of Dairy Herd Improvement (DHI) test-day results revealed somatic cell counts (SCC) were up compared to a year earlier. Milk quality specialists and veterinarians contacted by Progressive Dairyman suggest two reasons for the increase: weather and economics.

Nationally, average 2015 test-day herd SCC was 204,000 cells per mL, up 4,000 cells per mL from 2014. It marked the second consecutive year average test-day SCC posted a small increase. Prior to 2014, average test-day herd SCC had declined eight straight years and was down more than 100,000 cells per mL since 1999, according to the Council of Dairy-Cattle Breeding and the USDA’s Annual Improvement Programs Laboratory.

Of reporting states, 21 had lower 2015 average SCC than in 2014; 25 had averages higher. Perhaps surprisingly, several Southwestern states exhibited the largest increases compared to a year earlier, with New Mexico, Texas, California and Arizona among the top five for year-over-year increases.

Climate factors into the mix for higher SCC, a measure of milk quality and udder health. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015 average temperatures and precipitation were above average across the South and extending all the way to the Pacific Northwest. Precipitation was also above average in most of the Midwest and was near average across the Northeast.

Another factor is economics. USDA data shows the U.S. milk herd grew throughout most of 2015; a dairy farmers built on record-high 2014 milk prices, and lower production costs helped maintain income margins for much of the year.

Combined with high dairy replacement costs and labor costs, producers held on to more cows longer, including those with elevated income margins for much of the year.

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204,000

NATIONAL AVERAGE TEST-DAY, SCC (IN CELLS/ML)

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