

Effectively evaluate milk testing packages, fees

As the dairy industry has evolved, so have milk testing organizations – both in the products and services they offer – and the methods used to charge dairy producers. Thus, it's sometimes difficult to compare “apples to apples” when reviewing milk testing organizations' fees. Milking testing has become more “a la carte,” with some dairies using a customized program that's unique to that herd.

While the methods, options and fee plans have changed, milk testing still remains a great value. But like any other business expense on your dairy, you must make sure you're effectively using and managing that investment.

Sometimes, a milk testing fee proposal might look like a good deal. Make sure you understand the true costs. **Common charges include:**

- **Stop** fee
- **Processing** fee
- **Mileage** (distance)
- **Testing** program (e.g. owner sampler, a.m./p.m.)
- **Milkings** per day and/or number of milkings tested per day
- **Staff's** hourly rate
- **Number** of cows
- **Number** of samples
- **Milk sample** components analyzed – fat/protein/SCC/MUN
- **Meter** rental

Make sure these costs are clearly stated on the testing fee proposal or billing statement. “Cheap” doesn't necessarily give you all the information you need to effectively manage your dairy herd or meet the requirements outlined by AI organizations to receive young sire incentives. Types of

charges and fee levels vary among milk testing organizations. Look at the total milk testing fee – not just the per cow testing fee – to effectively evaluate proposals.

Fees to access DHIA information can also show up as a “hidden cost.” Do you incur a fee if you receive and/or want access to electronic files? What information is available to your consultants?

Most AI organizations offer attractive incentives if you participate in their young sire progeny testing programs. To qualify for these “rebates,” cattle must be officially identified, milk testing data must be collected from cows, and your herd must maintain a specified level of sire identification so this data can be used in genetic evaluations compiled by the Animal Improvement Programs Laboratory (AIPL).

Make sure the data collected as part of your milk testing plan goes to a Dairy Records Processing Center, so AIPL can accept the genetic evaluation numbers generated on your dairy. If the information is not accepted, you are typically not eligible for AI incentives that may help offset testing fees and/or AI products and services.

Bottom line: milk testing continues to be a great value. Like any other investment on your farm, strive to maximize the return on your milk testing investment. Identify the milk testing services and products you need to effectively manage your herd. Then, compare costs from milk testing organizations in your geographic area. In addition, confirm that the proposals you are comparing come from reputable organizations. Make sure these organizations' field service personnel and equipment, labs and processing centers are certified by Quality Certification Services so AIPL can accept the data generated on your dairy.

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