

Putting figures on intangible returns: what are the actual benefits of milk recording?

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Increasing the uptake and frequency of milk recording is an agreed key target for the Irish dairy industry to help ensure milk quality and reduce herd SCCs. At a farm level, milk recording has multiple benefits. It is key in preventing the spread of contagious mastitis, detecting new infections quickly, identifying the most efficient cows for breeding and when milk recording is completed within the first 60 days of calving, it can be used to evaluate the dry period. This month we focus on recent research into the economic benefits of milk recording.

Despite the benefits associated with milk recording, many are still choosing not to do so. It is sometimes regarded as being expensive (about €12 per cow per year) and can disrupt the milking routine when time and labour may be in short supply. So, what are the real benefits of milk recording?

Research carried out by Teagasc in conjunction with Animal Health Ireland highlights the economic benefits of milk recording using yearly information from the Teagasc National Farm Survey, from a representative sample of 516 dairy farmers spanning from 2008 to 2019. The analysis shows that the economic benefits of milk recording outweigh the costs, notably by helping farmers to breed and manage healthier and more productive cows. On average, when farm performance was compared for those farmers who milk record (about 45% of the sample) and those who do not (55%):

- Gross margin per cow was €39 larger.
- Milk yield per cow was 178 L higher.
- Milk solids per cow were 29 kg higher.
- Herd somatic cell count (SCC) per mL of milk was 13,000 cells lower.

The comparison between herds that milk record and non-milk recording herds was performed having accounted for the effect of other farm and farmer characteristics. These include herd size, stocking rate, dairy specialisation, the completion of formal agricultural education, discussion group participation, reliance on hired labour, farmer household size and age, regional location, weather, and price volatility.

As we move towards planning for this year's drying off and in the context of the move towards selective dry cow therapy (SDCT), implementing milk recording is becoming increasingly important for routine mastitis monitoring, as well as to identify cows that require antibiotic treatment at drying off. Your prescribing veterinary practitioner needs to use cow- and herd-level infection to guide their decision-making, so that antibiotics at drying-off are only administered to those animals with diagnostic evidence of infection. It is important to commence whole herd milk recording as soon as possible as it is the best way to gather this cow and herd level information.