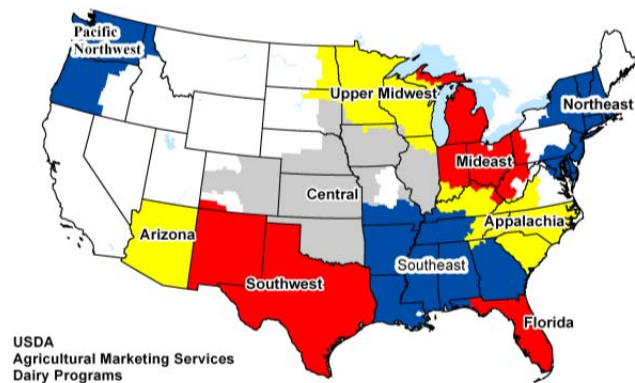


## Determining U.S. Milk Quality Using Bulk-Tank Somatic Cell Counts, 2013

The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Center for Epidemiology and Animal Health, in conjunction with USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the National Mastitis Council's Milk Quality Monitoring Committee, monitor U.S. milk quality using data from bulk-tank somatic cell counts (BTSCCs) provided by 4 of the Nation's 10 Federal Milk Marketing Orders (FMOs\*) [figure 1]. Four FMOs provided data: Upper Midwest, Central, Mideast, and Southwest. The remaining six FMOs did not collect BTSCC data.

**Figure 1. Federal Milk Marketing Order Areas**



BTSCCs are the number of white blood cells (primarily macrophages and leukocytes), secretory cells, and squamous cells per milliliter of raw milk.<sup>1</sup> BTSCCs are used as measures of milk quality and as indicators of overall udder health. There is an inverse relationship between BTSCCs and cheese yield and the quality/shelf-life of pasteurized fluid milk.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Numerous studies have also shown that operations with increased BTSCCs are more likely to have milk that violates antibiotic residue standards.<sup>5,6,7</sup> The most frequently cited reason for antibiotic residues in milk is placing

cows treated with antibiotics in the milking string before the recommended withdrawal period.<sup>6</sup>

To ensure high-quality dairy products, BTSCCs are monitored in milk shipments using standards outlined in the U.S. Pasteurized Milk Ordinance (PMO).<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the legal maximum BTSCC for Grade A milk shipments is 750,000 cells/mL. If a producer has two out of four shipments that test above the maximum (usually tested 30 to 45 days apart) a written notice is issued and an additional sample is tested within 21 days. If three of the last five counts exceed the maximum, regulatory action is required, which includes:

- 1) suspending the producer's permit, or
- 2) foregoing permit suspension, provided the milk in violation is not sold as Grade A, or
- 3) imposing monetary penalty in lieu of permit suspension, provided the milk in violation is not sold or offered for sale as Grade A.

Maximum BTSCC levels for other countries include 400,000 cells/mL in the European Union (EU),<sup>9</sup> Australia, New Zealand,<sup>10</sup> and Canada.<sup>11</sup> The maximum BTSCC level in Brazil is 1,000,000 cells/mL.<sup>12</sup>

Although support for lowering maximum BTSCCs for Grade A milk in the United States to 400,000 cells/mL has increased in the last few years, changes to the PMO have yet to be made. In May 2013, the National Conference on Interstate Milk Shipments did not lower the U.S. limit, even though in January 2012 the EU implemented regulations that require milk products exported to the EU have a maximum BTSCC of 400,000 cells/mL.<sup>13,14</sup> A few States, however, have reduced or are in the process of reducing the BTSCC limit for producers in their States. These States include California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.<sup>15</sup>

U.S. producers that have four consecutive rolling 3-month BTSCC means greater than the 400,000-cells/mL limit cannot export milk to the EU unless derogation\*\* is requested and approved. If derogation is not approved, the milk supplier must suspend, segregate, or discontinue certification.<sup>13</sup>

\* FMOs are administrative units made up of groups of States and were established under the authority of the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937, as amended. Their purpose is to stabilize markets by placing requirements on the handling of milk; data are collected to provide accurate information on milk supplies, utilization, and sales. Monitored orders were Central, Mideast, Southwest, and Upper Midwest.

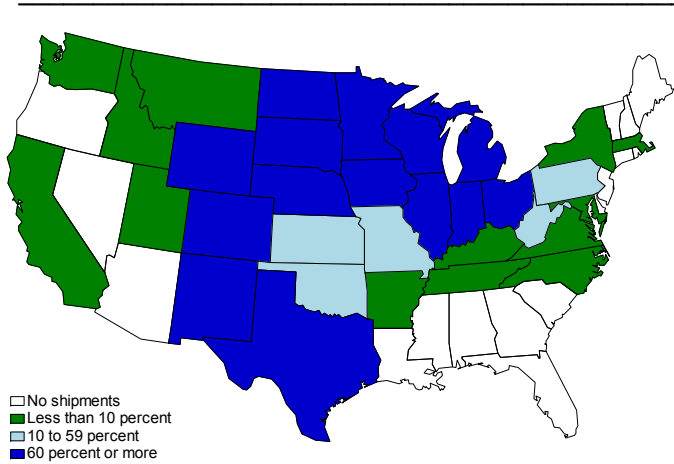
\*\*A derogation is a provision in an EU legislative measure that allows for all or part of the legal measure to be applied differently, or not at all, to individuals, groups, or organizations

The EU also regulates bacterial standard plate counts. For these regulations, a 2-month geometric mean is used based on a minimum of two standard plate counts performed per month. The bacterial limit for the EU is 100,000 cells/mL, which is also the limit for Grade A milk in the United States; however, the United States and the EU calculate compliance differently.<sup>13</sup>

### Monitored FMOs

In 2013, four FMOs were monitored: Upper Midwest, Central, Mideast, and Southwest. These FMOs monitored milk from 26,853 producers located in 32 States and accounted for 96.0 billion pounds (47.7 percent) of the 201.2 billion pounds of milk produced in the United States in 2013.<sup>16</sup> Producers in each of the 32 States marketed at least 1 shipment through the 4 monitored FMOs during 2013 (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Percentage of total milk production shipped through monitored FMOs in 2013, by State**



In 2013, 295,790 milk shipments were monitored (table 1). The Upper Midwest FMO accounted for 45.8 percent of milk monitored in the four FMOs and 21.9 percent of all milk produced in the United States. The Upper Midwest and Mideast FMOs had a higher percentage of shipments relative to the amount of monitored milk. Conversely, the Central and Southwest FMOs, in which 12.4 and 2.4 percent of shipments accounted for 17.0 and 18.0 percent of the monitored milk, respectively, reflecting the larger herd sizes in these two FMOs.

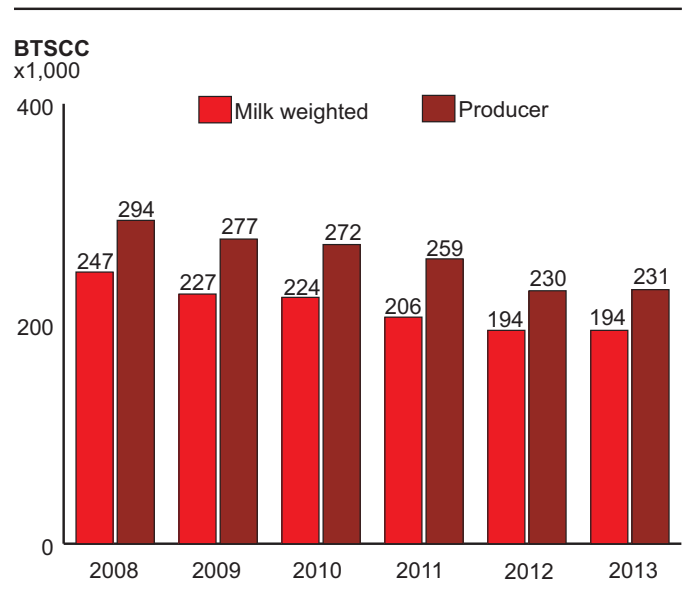
**Table 1. Percentage of milk and shipments marketed through monitored FMOs during 2013**

FMO	Billion pounds	Milk		Shipments	
		Pct. monitored	Pct. of U.S. production	Number (x1,000)	Pct.
Upper Midwest	44.0	45.8	21.9	178.1	60.2
Central	16.3	17.0	8.1	36.8	12.4
Mideast	18.4	19.2	9.1	73.8	25.0
Southwest	17.3	18.0	8.6	7.1	2.4
Total	96.0	100.0	47.7	295.8	100.0

### 2013 BTSCC trends

The milk-weighted geometric BTSCC mean in 2013 was 194,000 cells/mL, which was unchanged from 2012 (figure 3.). Milk-weighted BTSCCs take into account the amount of milk shipped by a producer, resulting in an overall BTSCC mean of monitored milk. The producer shipment BTSCC—which is a geometric, nonmilk-weighted mean of all shipments—was 231,000 cells/mL, similar to 230,000 cells/mL in 2012.

**Figure 3. Milk-weighted and producer BTSCCs, 2008–13**



## Evaluating BTSCC levels

Over 99 percent of milk and shipments monitored met the current PMO limit of 750,000 cells/mL (table 2). Of the 26,853 producers, 96.1 percent (all but 1,047) shipped milk with BTSCCs below 750,000 cells/mL during all months monitored.

In 2013, during all months monitored, BTSCCs in 95.6 percent of milk produced were below 400,000 cells/mL; 64.4 percent of producers shipped milk below this limit for the entire year.

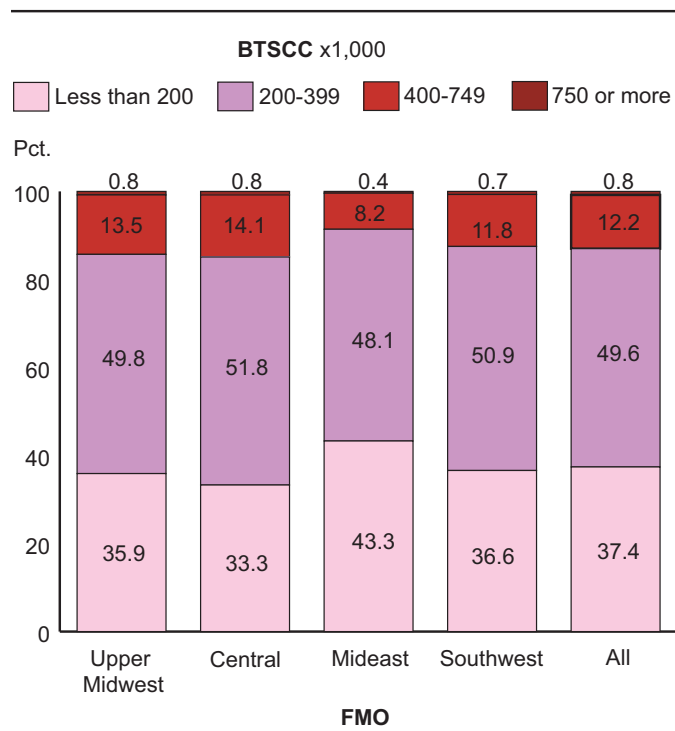
**Table 2. Percentage of milk, shipments, and producers, by BTSCC level during 2013**

BTSCC (x1,000 cells/mL)	Milk (96.0 billion lb)	Percent	
		Shipments (295,790)	Producers*
Less than 100	5.2	5.2	0.8
Less than 200	53.2	37.4	14.8
Less than 400	95.6	87.0	64.4
Less than 650	99.6	98.4	92.9
Less than 750	99.9	99.3	96.1

\*All shipments for the entire year met criteria.

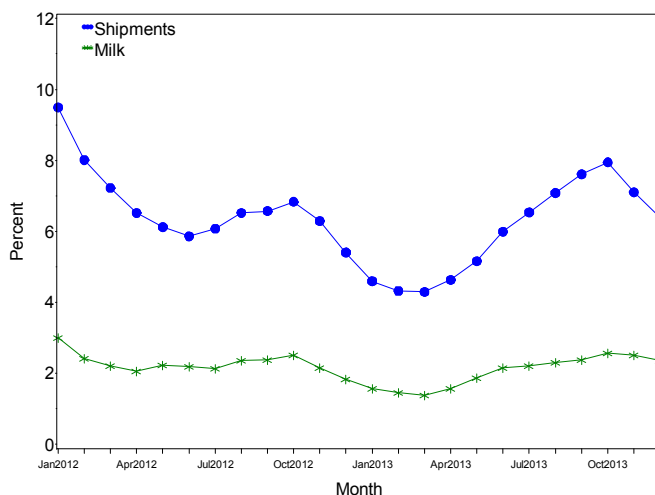
In 2013, about 50 percent of shipments in all monitored FMOs had BTSCCs between 200,000 and 399,000 cells/mL. The four FMOs had a similar percentage of shipments in each of the four BTSCC levels, although a higher percentage of shipments in the Mideast region were below 400,000 cells/mL (figure 4).

**Figure 4. Percentage of shipments, by FMO and by BTSCC level, 2013**



Based on criteria for the EU Health Certification Program from USDA-AMS, which requires a 3-month geometric mean BTSCC below 400,000 cells/mL, 4 to 8 percent of U.S. shipments would have been noncompliant during 2013 (figure 5). These shipments represented less than 3 percent of milk shipped during the monitored months.

**Figure 5. Percentage of milk and shipments in 2012 and 2013 that would not have met the EU Health Certification Program's BTSCC criteria, by month**

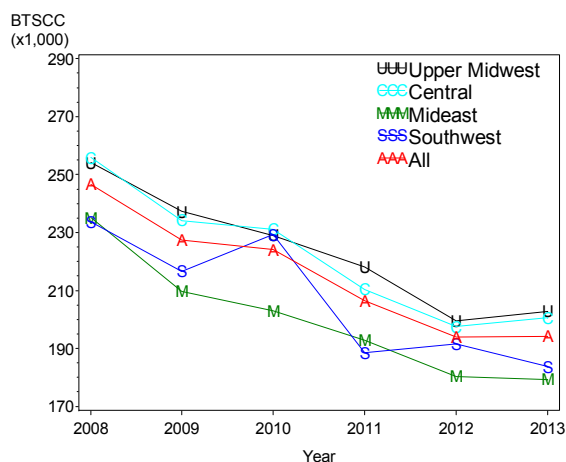


## FMO and State BTSCC trends

Overall, BTSCCs have decreased or remained the same every year since 2008 (figure 6). The Upper Midwest and Central FMOs had the highest BTSCCs during 2013 at 203,000 and 201,000 cells/mL, respectively, while the Mideast FMO had the lowest at 179,000 cells/mL. BTSCCs in the Southwest FMO have shown the most variation from 2008 to 2013.

**Figure 6. Milk-weighted BTSCCs, by FMO and by year**

Figure 6. Milk-weighted BTSCCs, by FMO and by year



Fourteen States marketed 60 percent or more of the milk produced in their States through the monitored FMOs and accounted for 94.6 percent of the monitored milk in the four FMOs (table 3). Wisconsin, Texas, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico accounted for 70.0 percent of all FMO-monitored milk. Compared with 2012, 5 of the 14 States had decreased BTSCCs in 2013 and 9 States had increased counts.

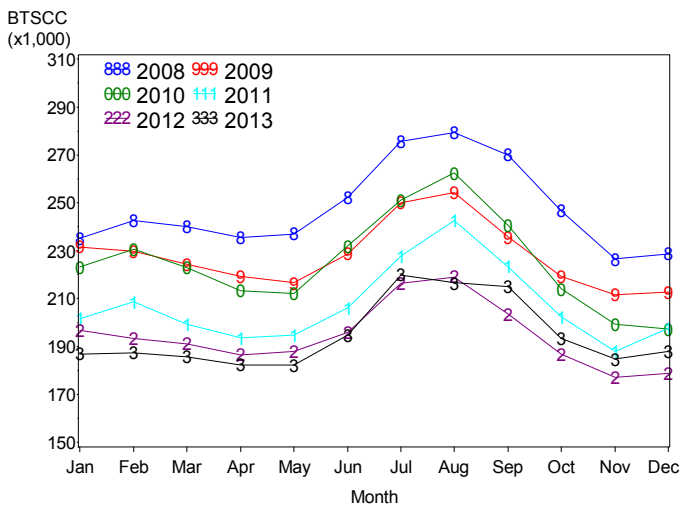
**Table 3. Milk-weighted BTSCCs for States shipping 60 percent or more of their total milk production through monitored FMOs**

State	BTSCC (x1,000) by Year						
	Percent total monitored milk— 2013	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
CO	3.4	208	200	196	186	168	184↑
IL	1.7	262	260	258	241	214	215↑
IN	2.9	261	237	225	204	197	198↑
IA	7.2	281	252	241	228	206	211↑
MI	10.2	211	183	174	167	156	158↑
MN	9.8	266	249	236	227	205	210↑
NE	1.5	266	194	184	182	182	177↓
NM	9.7	216	196	207	167	175	166↓
ND	0.3	269	269	271	276	243	237↓
OH	4.9	253	225	226	220	202	198↓
SD	2.6	275	262	248	247	220	226↑
TX	11.2	254	239	253	208	207	199↓
WI	29.1	247	233	230	218	199	202↑
WY	0.1	356	196	139	127	124	143↑
14 States	94.6	246	227	223	206	193	193↔

## Seasonal BTSCC trends

Monthly monitoring continues to show that BTSCCs peak during the summer (July through September) when higher temperatures and humidity increase stress on cows and provide conditions more favorable for bacterial growth (figure 7). In 2013, monthly milk-weighted BTSCCs were highest during July (220,000 cells/mL) and lowest in April and May (182,000 cells/mL). BTSCCs were lower in the first 6 months of 2013 and higher in 5 of the last 6 months of 2013, compared with 2012.

**Figure 7. Milk-weighted BTSCCs, by year and by month, 2008–13**



## Summary

BTSCCs from monitored FMOs are indicative of the quality of the Nation's milk supply. The milk-weighted mean BTSCC from the four monitored FMOs remained at 194,000 cells/mL in 2013 the same as in 2012. Prior to 2013, BTSCCs decreased every year since 2008. The BTSCCs for two of the four FMOs decreased between 2012 and 2013. Five of the 14 States shipping 60 percent or more of their milk through the four FMOs had lower BTSCCs in 2013 than in 2012. In addition to improvements in management practices, the current EU import regulations may be partially responsible for the decrease in BTSCCs and the corresponding improvement in milk quality since 2008.

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