What should be the legal limit for somatic cell counts (SCC) in milk produced on U.S. dairy farms? For the last several years the value has been 750,000 cells/ml of milk. Many people within the dairy industry think the value should be lower. This opinion, however, is not shared by most of the regulatory people who are charged with making sure that milk and milk products do not contain any human health risks. The regulators have not been persuaded by the available scientific research evidence that a lower SCC legal limit value would make dairy products safer. Still, the discussions continue about lowering the SCC value.

Arguments have been put forth that the SCC value should be lowered for reasons other than human health risk. International trade competitiveness is one such reason. Other countries of the world that are major exporters of dairy products have SCC limits of 400,000 or less. So, some contend that for the U.S. dairy industry to be able to compete in the world trade market our SCC limit should be lowered to that of other countries. This argument, however, has not been a very strong one since the U.S. exports only a small amount of dairy products (usually less than 5% of total annual production). Additionally, companies that are exporting dairy products are already using milk that complies with the SCC requirements of the country they are exporting to.

Public perception of the quality of dairy products is another argument sometimes raised. Some people contend that a lower SCC value would imply higher quality dairy products. While there have been incidences of dairy products causing some human health problems, those cases have not been caused by high SCC milk. Bacterial contamination after pasteurization, or the consumption of milk or dairy products that were not pasteurized have been the causes of those health problems. So, a lower SCC limit would not prevent such health problems. Consumers already believe from their experiences that dairy products are of high quality, so lowering the SCC limit would probably have little or no impact on public opinion or sales of dairy products.

A third argument sometimes offered for lowering the SCC limit is that higher SCC milk has a higher incidence of antibiotic contamination. Since there is a small percentage of the human population that is very sensitive to antibiotics, this argument is definitely one that regulators might be sensitive to. The dairy industry does an excellent job of testing milk for antibiotic residues to prevent contamination of processed products. The very small amount of milk that is found to contain residues is disposed of, so antibiotic contaminated milk almost never reaches the market place. Also, various dairy professionals are continually working with producers to educate them and their employees about the importance of using antibiotics correctly so no residues occur in milk. So, would a lower SCC limit reduce the already very low incidence of antibiotic residue contamination? Probably not.
The average SCC level of milk produced in the U.S. is already well below the legal limit. This is because most producers realize the economic benefit of producing low SCC milk, and some processors require the milk they buy to be below a certain SCC value. Processors want milk with a low SCC value in order to produce higher quality dairy products that have a longer shelf-life. So, if the dairy industry is already striving to produce milk and dairy products with a low SCC count, why do the discussions continue? Why the debate over what the legal limit should be?

I think the main reason is that education and payment incentives for low SCC milk have not convinced all producers that they should be producing lower SCC milk. Thus, changing the legal limit is the last resort. If producers can “get by” producing high SCC milk that is within the legal limit, then some will do so. They may think they are saving money, or they may just not care about the quality of product they produce as long as they can sell it, or there may be some other reason. But whatever the reason, they are not going to produce lower SCC milk because they don’t have to. In order to get those producers to produce lower SCC milk, or sell out, many believe the legal limit for SCC must be lowered.

At the recent annual meeting of the NMC (National Mastitis Council) a symposium was held at which the speakers addressed different aspects of the topic “Does High SCC in Milk Constitute a Human Health Risk?”. After all the presentations and discussions, the conclusion reached was that high SCC milk (up to the 750,000 legal limit) does not pose any direct, specific health risks to humans. Thus, I would suspect that when the regulatory officials meet later this year, they will again not be receptive to the proposal of lowering the legal SCC limit.

I believe that the processors and the milk handlers hold the key to getting all producers to lower the SCC of milk they produce. If the position was taken that producer milk would not be marketed by a handler or accepted by a processor that was over a realistic, attainable SCC value (value determined jointly by the handlers and processors in the region or market), all producers would comply very quickly with the requirement in order to sell their milk. If they didn't, they would go out of business or find another use for their milk. Don’t spend time trying to change the legal limit, let the market place dictate what producers must do, is my suggestion. Some may not agree with my approach, but then aren’t solutions usually more acceptable when they are determined by consensus rather than through a legal process?