



FIRST PERSON

In Kosovo, USAID Pioneers Delivery of Raw Milk Test Results Via SMS

Cell phones deliver lab results on milk quality and cow health



Photo by: USAID New Opportunities for Agriculture (NOA) project

Dukagjin Dedaj, dairy farmer displays a message reporting fat, protein, sugar and other parameters. Dedaj's 52 cows consistently produce "extra class" raw milk, allowing him to charge premium prices.

"It's a miracle. I'm sitting at home and a message shows up telling me about the health of my cows."

Dukagjin Dedaj a dairy farmer for more than a decade started with a herd of 15 cows that grew into 52. Dedaj's always known his cows produce excellent quality milk. Today, thanks to USAID, the proof is in his pocket.

Pulling out his cell phone, Dedaj showed off a message recently received from a state laboratory. It concisely detailed how his raw milk measures against eight standardized parameters, including fat, protein and sugar percentages.

The message also grades Dedaj's milk as "extra class." That classification allows Dedaj to command premium prices from the dairy processor that purchases the 720 liters of milk his cows produce daily. It also earns him a government grant designed to increase the domestic supply of the highest grades of raw milk.

USAID, in partnership with local partners, established Kosovo's national raw milk-sampling laboratory in the mid-2000s. Samples are collected at farms biweekly. The samples are blinded - the experts doing the testing do not know the samples' origins - to eliminate bias.

Initially, field officers shared the results with farmers. USAID then created a password-protected website. More recently, in fall 2012, as part of USAID's New Opportunities for Agriculture (NOA) a local IT company developed a software to disseminate testing results by SMS. Now, roughly 1,700 Kosovo dairy farmers receive their test results on their phones twice monthly.

"This is the biggest thing USAID has done for dairy farmers, who understand its importance," Dedaj said.

Dedaj receives testing results just days after his milk has been sampled. Purchasing dairies access the same information, which sellers and buyers then use to set a wholesale price for the raw milk.

"We no longer argue about quality—that's a third party's job to determine now. All we talk about is price," Dedaj said.

The results are also allowing farmers to intervene more quickly should testing reveal any deficiencies in their raw milk. For example, any decrease in the butterfat content in the milk cows produce prompts the farmer to adjust their feed regimen, perhaps by mixing in more soybean meal. Dedaj

recently received a message indicating his milk had slipped a grade, to first class. Testing revealed one of his cows had a single teat with mastitis. While the infection leads to inflammation, it wouldn't have been apparent at such an early stage had Dedaj not been alerted to something wrong.

"It's a miracle. I am sitting at home and a message shows up and tells me about the health of my cows," Dedaj said.

The New Opportunities for Agriculture project runs from January 2011 to January 2015 and focuses on creating market linkages, increasing and diversifying agricultural products, improving food quality and safety, increasing affordable and accessible credit. In addition, the activity supports the sector through small grants to farmers, agricultural enterprises and associations.