



CASE STUDY

Michael and De-anne Smith

At a glance

Hawera – West Plains, 20 years

111ha (effective)

350 milking cows, system: 4/5

Moved from split calving five years ago to full autumn calving herd

Benefits

- Improved 3 week in calf rate.
- Reduced a labour unit.
- AI for full 12 weeks.
- No bulls on property.
- Seamless integration with Protrack Draft Gate and herd management software.
- One company to deal with for all our Monitoring and Automation needs.

More accurate heat detection and a significantly lower empty rate are immediate benefits from installing Allflex Sensehub monitoring solution on an autumn-calving South Taranaki dairy herd.

Farm owners Michael and De-anne Smith already had a Protrack system operating in their dairy shed but last November (2020) they put Allflex monitoring collars on their 350 cows.

The Allflex collars offered full integration with their Protrack auto-drafting system and linked directly with the Protrack system on their desktop computer at the dairy office and home. The Sensehub app on their mobiles helps keep them in constant touch with the herd.

The Smiths have farmed in the area for 30 years and bought the current property from their neighbour 20 years ago.

After taking over, they built their herd up from 260 cows to between 380 and 400 cows on a split calving system. But five seasons ago, the entire herd was moved to autumn calving and cow numbers reduced to 350 head.

The addition of the Allflex collars fits with their belief of keeping their system as simple as possible.

“We want a quiet shed with minimal interactions and the less people the better,” Michael says.



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The herd is currently artificially inseminated for 12 weeks and the Smiths are aiming to reduce it to 10-11 weeks over the next few years, with much more accurate heat detection from the Allflex collars.

When the collars were added last November, tail painting was dropped along with a labour unit in the dairy shed over mating.

"We just went straight into trusting the collars. I was nervous about trusting the collars, believing that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but then I thought I have to trust this technology and save money on top of that," he says.

The introduction of the collars also signalled an end to having bulls on the property. This eliminated the challenge of dealing with lameness in cows after being ridden by bulls while they are eating supplement on the feed pad.

They completed their first mating since installing the collars in mid-November, and the impact on empty rate was immediate.

The herd is showing an empty rate of about 9.5%, significantly lower than the 12-18% range typical of autumn calving farms in South Taranaki.

They were still considering whether to include a pregnancy diagnosis check at their first herd test in late October.

"We are not sure whether to bother. That's how much confidence we have in the collars.

We are having these conversations now," says Michael.

The other benefit from having extra data from the collars has been in picking up early, silent heats which has improved their herd's three-week in calf rate.

It's a far cry from their first year of mating cows for full autumn calving when they faced a sharp rise in empty rate.

"When we first went to full autumn calving, we had a really disastrous mating with about 24% empties."

"It was shattering, but then it went down to 17% the following year, then 12% last year. So, if we can get 10% or below I will be really, really happy."

Michael admits heat detection was a challenge with the move to full autumn calving with shorter days and less activity.

"The first three-week cycle is easy, second three weeks not so bad, but then the next lots of three week cycles you get a lot of half rubs. With the collars it gives you just really assurance that each cow is actually cycling."

The Smiths say the saving in time and labour to select and draft out cycling cows for mating is huge.

"We start by going on the computer at home and looking at the list of the cows that are cycling so they are automatically drafted out during milking. It's that easy now."

Apart from the help with more accurate heat detection and one less labour unit required in the shed during mating time, the Smiths have also begun using sexed semen across their higher performing cows.

With the help of their Allflex monitoring trainer, Melinda Little, they used a 'traffic light' system to create three groups of cows – green, amber and red – plus a tail-end group of about 10% which are mated to beef semen.

The best five in the green group each day were inseminated with sexed semen for herd replacements.

The Smiths installed their first Protrack Gate system 15 years ago and currently have a G3 Protrack Gate system in their shed yard. This was upgraded last year to link it to MINDA Live.

"It's a new interface so it took a bit of learning to get used to where everything was, but we've got there, and it works really well now."

The Allflex collars fully integrate with Protrack gate and that all links to their herd management software in a complete, end-to-end system integration.

Michael says the support provided by the Allflex team has been excellent. He's delighted support for both the Allflex collars and Protrack systems is now handled by one company following the purchase of LIC's Automation business by Allflex in mid- 2021.

"We can now just deal with one company, and we know we have full 24/7 service."

He's pleased Allflex is also investing heavily into the data technology space, a vision Allflex shares with its parent company, MSD Animal Health to focus on the science of healthier animals.

It has been a challenging spring on the farm in 2021, with wind and heavy rain lashing the region for several weeks.

Milk production has eased but the Smiths are aiming for about 200,000kg MS for the season at a little under 600kg/cow.

The cows' pasture diet is topped up with supplement fed on a feed pad or through an in- shed feeding system.

In early-October, the cows were getting between 5-6kg of grass and maize silage on the feed pad and another 600g at both the morning and afternoon milkings through the in- shed feeding system.

Allflex Livestock Intelligence, part of MSD Animal Health, is the world leader in the design, development, manufacturing and delivery of solutions for animal identification, monitoring and traceability. Our solutions empower farmers to act in a timely manner, to safeguard their animals' health, while achieving optimal production outcomes for a healthy food supply.

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