

Neighbouring producers pioneer heat detection system and see calving intervals drop

Better detection sends CI tumbling

Two Leicestershire-based dairy producers bought Silent Herdsman at the 2010 Dairy Event and Livestock Show. A year on, we pay them a visit to find out if their research and subsequent investments have paid off.

text **Karen Wright**

“Yes,” says Steve Brown from Burton Overy. “I’ve knocked 30 days off my calving interval in nine months and it’s now running at 393 days.” Not that Steve considered his ‘old’ calving interval of 428 days out of line for his high yielding Holstein herd. “But I realised that heats were getting harder to spot and the trend was going the wrong way.

“We were also finding it hard to pick up heats in heifers, even with tail markers, and as a result they were calving between two and a half and three years old. This needed pulling back towards two years.”

A traditional family-owned dairy unit, Steve runs the Highcroft herd with his father and a relief milker. The 100 head of stock includes the milking herd and followers that are managed on a traditional summer grazing/winter housing system, making best use of the 54ha farm. Wheat is grown on 20ha, some of which is used in the cow rations.

Selling milk for Stilton cheese production, through Tuxford and Tebbitt, Steve has opted for a production contract. This means that he is paid a bonus for increasing yields that kicks in if production is higher in the corresponding month of the previous year.

“Average yield is now just under 10,000kg at 4.24% fat and 3.25% protein,” says Steve. “We get this by feeding through out-of-parlour feeders – up to 20kg a cow a day – and making sure forage intakes are maintained.”

Even when cows are out at grass Steve makes sure they have buffer feed and keeps them in the yard for an hour after each of the twice-a-day milkings. This also suits the Silent Herdsman heat detector.

Calving is year round on this farm and as soon as a cow calves Steve puts one of the 30 collars on her, with its robust processor. It takes just two or three days to calibrate to the cow’s normal movement pattern then any changes from her standard routine are picked up and transmitted wirelessly, through the antennae, to the touch-screen PC monitor in the dairy.

10-minute updates

“The antenna relays information from cows to the monitor every 10 minutes, so there’s lots of opportunity for details to be downloaded each day even when the cows are grazing as they’re within range of the antenna for about two hours twice a day,” adds Steve.

“And every time I walk past the PC I touch the screen for an update – it becomes something you do automatically. And to make events even more obvious, the screen flashes in red if the system has picked up a cow on heat.”

Working with vet Wendy Bottrill of Park Vets in Leicester, fertility results are recorded on InterHerd. The trends are encouraging with a significant drop in calving interval and calving to conception rate. in the past 12 months.

Wendy scans cows once a month and there are far fewer negatives. “The

scan is used more for picking up irregularities,” adds Steve. “This year the Silent Herdsman has worked fantastically on the heifers. There have been no false positives and we’ve put plenty of cows and heifers out for the AI technician that we never saw bulling and he said they were all well on heat.”

Robust cows

Just five miles down the road at Great Glen, Bruce Peberdy has an equally successful story to tell about Silent Herdsman.

Also with Park Vets, Bruce’s InterHerd results show that in the 12 months to May 2011 Bruce achieved a calving to conception rate of 105 days and his calving interval is 389 days – down from 406 days in the previous 12 months.

Bruce runs an all-grass farm of 57ha with 30ha of grass keep away from the main farm used for beef crosses and heifers. He runs the herd on his own so his main objective is to breed and manage a herd with minimum hassle.

“Trouble-free cows are a must here,” says Bruce. “I’ve recently introduced



Silent Herdsman collars go on cows post calving

some Swedish Red cows and Montbelliard genetics into the herd as they're robust and suit our system. They should increase herd longevity too."

The herd is currently yielding 8,178kg of milk at 3.95% fat and 3.22% protein on a traditional low-input system. Cows are out at grass from April – the heavy land is generally good for growing grass. Buffer feeding big bale grass silage starts in September with concentrates fed to yield in the parlour at a rate of 0.26kg/cow/day. Brewers' grains, at a rate of 15kg/cow/day, are fed after morning milking year round.

Bruce also sells milk through Milk Link for Stilton manufacture, and he is on a seasonality contract. "To maximise milk price calving starts in September through to spring and I aim to get the heifers calving down from September to November," he adds.

Heifer condition

To achieve this – and to make the most of his investment in the sexed semen that he uses on his heifers – Bruce puts a lot of effort into getting the heifers in the right condition for serving and does



Steve Brown: "Fertility trends are encouraging"

his best to make sure they're served at the right time.

"The Silent Herdsman collars went on later than I'd hoped in November 2010 but they worked really well and soon started picking up heats. From the PD results I am confident that the system does a good job and it gives me a bit more time to make sure the heifers are in tip-top shape."

"I bought 75 collars so had enough to put one on each cow as she calved. I look to serve the cows 55 days post calving. And the system picked up cows easily – it really makes life easier and



Bruce Peberdy: "This fertility system saves time and generates great results"

less time consuming yet it's generating great results."

The layout of Bruce's yards means that one antenna can pick up readings from collars on the heifers too.

"For me the real benefit of Silent Herdsman so far has been with the heifers. You never check heifers like you check cows – maybe twice a day when they're being fed – and even then they just look at you and show no signs of any bulling activity. Now all I do is pop to the PC, touch the screen and 'hey presto', I can see heifers that are bulling and need serving. It couldn't be much easier." |

