

Alerts pre-empt cow health, production and welfare problems

Healthy options

Collars on cows have progressed from being purely for heat detection. Those using the latest cow monitoring system SenseTime, that has replaced Heatime, are picking up additional valuable data that can be quickly and easily translated into health, calving and lameness alerts. And it's proving its worth.

text **Karen Wright**

Being able to pick up information from cows and young stock out grazing and in sheds attracted Devon-based producer Nicola Lockyer to SenseTime in June 2018. "This is really why I moved from Heatime to SenseTime," she says. "I wanted to take advantage of SenseTime's aerial and Wi-Fi system that would pick up activity from collars worn on cattle around the farm – not just when they were leaving the parlour."

The 115-cow Curscombe Holstein herd, based at Feniton near Honiton, calves all year round and grazes for half the year with concentrate feeding to yield in the parlour and a TMR fed during winter and to supplement grazed grass. Yields are a respectable 9,700kg.

Nicola bought enough collars to use on heifers from a year old and for her dry cows. She takes them off cows once they're in calf and well into their

lactation. "I don't find this a hassle," she adds. "And once cows are at this stage they are at less risk of any issues."

And any extra work is out-weighed by the value of the alerts that she and her team now get. "It really showed its colours early on. I got an alert of a distressed cow – the system had picked up low activity and irregular rumination. "I checked her and I could see she was calving, but there weren't any obvious signs of distress to me." But having been alerted, Nicola examined her. "As soon as I investigated I detected a torsion. The vet carried out a caesarean and delivered a healthy calf, and the cow was fine. Without the alert it could have been a very different story. This case alone made an early inroad into our investment."

Phone alert

Nicola gets alerts of calving distress, reduced intakes and rumination,

Caroline and Reuben Sales say that changes in rumination and activity from the cow's norm are worth investigating





Nicola Lockyer: "SenseTime showed its colours early on with valuable health alerts"



Eric Weston: "System gives me notifications about 48 hours ahead of any visual problems"

increased heat-related activity, and lameness through an app on her phone. "I can pick them up on my laptop too, but it's far handier to get the alerts on my mobile phone when it comes to day-to-day herd management."

She is then able to send a list of cows for AI to whoever is milking so that they are picked out.

"I can select who gets what information and it goes to their mobile phone by text. This happens even if I'm away from the farm. It's 'business as usual'."

Staffordshire-based Reuben and Caroline Sales, who farm near Leek, have now fitted all but 10 collars to their 120-cow Holstein herd. "We're really looking for help picking up heats," says Reuben, admitting that this job is getting more difficult with the modern Holstein.

Intake dip

But, in just a short time, he is seeing the value of the extra information and health alerts. A dip in intake and rumination indicates a potential problem that needs investigating and the system's 'intelligence' uses this data to give users a very reliable alert and straight forward report on a mobile device or PC.

"If both of these are falling away from the cow's norm, I get a 'health' alert on the tablet," says Reuben. "When this happened the first time I didn't quite realise the significance and ignored the warning. We had to get the vet out

a couple of days later to sort out a displaced abomasum. I now know that a health alert like this in a newly calved cow could mean a DA and I take the precaution of giving her fluids straight away."

Reuben admits that you need to learn how to use the more detailed information on the SenseTime graphs on his laptop. "You can see dips in rumination and feed intake and variations against the cow's norm, and you need to know when to intervene," he says, adding that he is keen to keep his all-year-round calving herd that averages 8,500kg and has a calving interval of 390 days, on track.

"But you also have to know what's going on. If it's a hot day and cows are outdoors and full of grass, activity will fall. The phone app might 'ping' but there's no cause for alarm. Having said this, he admits that he doesn't ignore the alerts. "It's a warning; a call to action if needs be."

Derbyshire-based producer Eric Weston, from Roston near Ashbourne, also follows feeding and rumination activity through SenseTime – a system he installed in May 2018 with the help of the small grant scheme.

"I like it," he says, "It's an extra pair of eyes and it doesn't sleep, but works 24/7 as long as we have internet connection, which is pretty good here."

Eric manages the 100-cow pedigree Ayrshire and Holstein herd with help from his brother. He was persuaded to

look at SenseTime by his daughter Kate Weston, who works for NMR. "I weighed up a few alternatives first but then took her advice," he says. "I could see that it would help with picking up useful information from the cows."

Less stress

Eric has a collar on each cow and extras for heifers so he can pick up heats while they're out grazing.

The health benefits on his new system soon showed their worth. "Soon after it was installed I picked up a dip in feed intake with one cow," adds Eric. "She'd aborted, unfortunately, but knowing this very soon after it happened meant I could get her on antibiotics and back in calf with as little stress as possible."

He values this early-warning aspect in his herd, which averages 9,000kg of milk on a mainly TMR system and with a calving interval of 384 days

"If I'm alerted about a cow that isn't eating I can see if she's under the weather – perhaps with a sub-clinical infection or if she's slightly lame," adds Eric. "Otherwise problems may not get picked up until they become more obvious, by which time there's more of a problem and intakes may have dropped. And it's likely that production is affected too. I'll normally get notifications 48 hours ahead of any visual health problems. This has to be good for the cow, for us and for the business." |

SenseTime 'makes sense'

NMR has teamed up with Allflex to promote real-time health and fertility monitoring.

Each cow's activity and rumination are recorded 24/7 and monitored against its

norm. The information and any alerts are then recorded and relayed in useable formats to mobile devices or PC.

Alerts on calving distress, lameness, falls in rumination and intakes are a call to

action. SenseTime information is also relayed to herd management systems including Uniform for more strategic herd management.