

'Collaring' cows: catching cows in heat is easy with the monitoring system in place



Tool offers solution to heat detection in a 'quiet' herd

Turning up the heat

Missing too many heats was the catalyst for investing in automated detection for one Lancashire-based producer. We spoke to him to find out more about the benefits of installing a simple, but effective, heat detection system.

text **Rachael Porter**

High yields and a hectic working day were just two contributory factors to 'weak' signs of heat and poor heat detection rates, in Liam Baxter's 120-cow pedigree Holstein herd. "The only quiet time – when cows were most likely to show any signs of bulling – were evenings. And, by our own admission,

we were missing heats. This was compounded by the fact that any signs that they did show were not particularly strong," says Liam. "We got the vet to check they were cycling, but we just missed them. And, as a result, the herd's calving interval was slipping more than we were comfortable with."

Liam farms in partnership with his father Clive and they run the pedigree Wickster herd, close to Morecambe in Lancashire. The herd calves all year round, but with a large autumn block.

Detection tool

"We didn't realise just how 'quiet' some of our cows' heats were, until we had a cystic heifer, who was constantly bulling, in the herd. She was a brilliant detection tool – she picked up a lot of heats that we just didn't, and with hindsight probably couldn't, see. We kept her for a few months and when we finally sold her it brought it home to us that we really needed to do something to improve our heat detection rate," explains Liam.

He adds that during the past couple of years, heats have become 'quieter' and difficult to spot. "We've been looking, but there's just not been a lot of activity. It could be that much of it was going on at night – once the cows had finished feeding after their evening milking and all was calm in the cow shed. We knew that the cows were cycling – the vet confirmed that.

"Our vet, Andrew Rutherford, checked anything that we'd not seen bulling 60 days post calving. So we knew that the problem wasn't with the cows – fertility was good. We just weren't seeing any outward physical signs of heat."

Andrew and Clive decided to look at heat detection systems and that's when CRV's Ovalert caught their eye. "We looked at quite a few systems, but most of them had other functions as well as heat detection. We didn't want that – we wanted something simple. Something that would do what we wanted it to do and do it well," explains Liam.

"The other systems we looked at were overly complicated, in our opinion. We wanted something that would alert us, via mobile phone or tablet, when a cow is in heat."

The price of the system stacked up too. "We felt that it offered the best value for money and we weren't paying for a lot of 'add ons' that we didn't want."

Calving interval

Although Liam only wanted help with heat detection, the system can also offer health monitoring, by recording standing, lying and rumination activity. They bought 60 collars, with transponders, for the herd and the system has already paid for itself, according to Liam, even though they only began using it in November 2016. "Our calving interval has already dropped by several days – from 415 to 410 – so we've already seen a return on our investment and it's still early days." He adds that they're also detecting far more cows in heat and serving a larger proportion of the herd by 60 days post calving. "We've seen a huge difference already and, due to that, we really trust the system.

"We still walk around the cow at night, just before bed, out of habit, more than anything. But we don't need to. The system has typically picked up bulling cows before we actually see any signs ourselves."

Smart system: Ovalert tells Liam which cows to separate, to check and AI, via his phone

Before installing the Ovalert system, the herd's rolling 12-month average for days to conception was around 139 and just 7% of the herd was back in calf, 60 days post calving. "But now we are running at an average of 115 days to conception and the herd's 60-day pregnancy rate is 19%. That's a huge improvement in just six months."

There have still been a few cows and heifers that the vet has needed to check, but they've been the higher yielders in the herd and haven't been bulling strongly. "At 60 or 70 days in milk, they're producing 50 litres a day. With yields like that we can let them slide a little. They're cycling – but they're not showing heat."

The herd's average yield is high – around 10,000 litres at 4.33% butterfat and 3.2% protein. "And high yields can impact on fertility, in the sense that the cows don't, in our experience, show such strong signs of heat. So, in that respect, moving to a heat detection system like Ovalert was inevitable," adds Liam.

"It was either that or someone would have to be watching the cows 24/7. But then, in effect, that's what the system is doing."

Liam, who is in charge of running and managing the system, says that simplicity is key to its success. "I wanted something that would help us to work 'smarter' and help us to improve the efficiency of our herd."

And so far, he's extremely pleased with the system. "It takes readings from the cows throughout the day – every five minutes – and sends them back to the



Liam Baxter: "We're pleased with how the system – and our cows – are performing"

computerised control panel. If there are any sudden fluctuations, which could indicate heat, I'm alerted by a message on my phone. Then I can assess the cow and decide if I should AI her."

Sire recommendations

The system is also connected to CRV SireMatch and sire recommendations are suggested with each alert.

"It allows me determine, prior to milking, which cows I need to separate for AI. Other systems on the market rely on readers in the parlour.

"But it's good to know before milking which cows need to be separated," he explains.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing what our 100-day in-calf rate is by this coming November – 12 months after installing the system. And it will be interesting to see what our calving interval is. I think we'll be close to 400 days, if not lower." |

