CASE STUDY
Wendy and David Harker

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Location: Te Awamutu, Waikato
430 cow dairy farm, farm owners
252 hectares

Challenges

• Wanting to take a step back and spend less time in the shed, but keep an eye on cow health and reproduction information
• Improve conception rates and retain cows wherever possible

Benefits

• Improved breeding window accuracy
• Ability to tighten up the calving pattern
• Valuable health information for cows transitioning from the colostrum herd
• Remove tail paint, scratches and bulls from the operation. Reduce the use of CIDRs
• Lifestyle – manage mating plan remotely
• Monitor cow recovery and effectiveness of treatments

Wendy and David Harker are really enjoying the health and breeding information they get from Allflex collars. It's enabled them to have a decent break between calving and mating, as well improving in-calf rates and cow health.

The breeding side of dairy farming is as much a passion as it is a business process for Te Awamutu dairy farmers Wendy and David Harker. Milking 430 cows on 252 hectares, they are a closed system with three full time staff. All supplements are grown on farm as well as all young stock raised on farm.

The herd is comprised of 370 Holstein Friesian's, 14 Milking Shorthorn cows, 20 Jersey's and one Brown Swiss. They enjoy exhibiting both Milking Shorthorn and Holstein Friesian's at shows, including supporting and developing young people in the breed societies. Their cows, like all farmers are high value in dollar terms, but also in genetics and personal attachment as well.

The Harker's applied Allflex collars to their cows in August 2017 with the goal to improve overall breeding performance, particularly reducing empty rates and the use of CIDRs. "We did recognise that we had some reproductive issues on our farm as many of our cows were on system 2, but we're wanting them to

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produce 400-500 kgs a cow" explained Wendy. With such high value stock they wanted to retain animals and improve their performance, rather than culling, wherever possible.

They admit it took a while for the staff to trust the information coming through from the collars. Cows were showing visible signs of a heat before showing up on the system, however they quickly learnt that the system was pinpointing the most optimal window for artificial breeding (AB) and it gave them the ability to record pre-mating heats and identify non-cyclers. "Our staff love the collars now. There's no tail paint, no scratches and no bulls."

They've used the data from the collars to tighten their calving pattern up and create a proper break before mating starts. They've introduced short gestation semen and implemented a 'Y-wait' program through their vets. "The mating season is intense in those first couple of weeks with the 'Y-Wait' program but at the end of the day we have calves in earlier and we get them weaned earlier, which is wonderful. And it certainly takes the pressure off the heat detection by the staff."

Not only have the collars improved breeding performance, they've become a tool for identifying sick cows and monitoring recovery. The Harker's traditionally followed the standard four-day protocol for transitioning cows from a colostrum herd to the main milking herd. The collars quickly showed that some fresh cows needed longer in the colostrum herd to get their rumination level back up to normal. "We were milking them last, then we were sending them into a large group of animals that had already been grazing that paddock for quite some time,

there wasn't adequate feed, they really were under pressure and it did show up." They've also been critical in measuring the effectiveness of treatments. The collars have monitored cows that have needed to be treated with penicillin and the data has helped the Harker's identify whether the drug has done any good along with showing quick recovery rates.

Having this information at their fingertips has been invaluable to their operation and they admit they would struggle if they now had to operate without the collars. Wendy believes one of the big advantages of the Allflex system is the ongoing support. She really enjoyed the onboarding process, as the information was drip fed slowly over time rather than being overwhelmed with all the bells and whistles. "They didn't try and sit you down, teach you absolutely everything about the collars and then leave you alone. I can't emphasis enough the backup and support we've had from Allflex it has just been huge and it has continued, I've really enjoyed that contact and relationship."

Wendy Harker is also a certified TOP instructor and travels a lot for work. Having the ability to access cow information remotely is another benefit to the Allflex collars. "I can be in Canterbury and I just send David a list of matings that I want for particular cows. For me that's important because I do dating and match individual cows all the way because of the breeds and the pedigrees. So I can do all that remotely and I can see how many cows are cycling."

The Harker's had a herd manager start this year. It's the first time they've had someone in that role and he just loves the extra data that they get out of the collars.