



## CASE STUDY

# Nigel Hicks

Nigel Hicks

Location: Waikite Valley, Bay of Plenty

540 cow farm, 50:50 sharemilking

### Challenges

- Understanding the software
- Improving heat detection accuracy
- Reducing debt and reliability on the herd
- Using the scales on the wagon and observation to monitor nutrition and ration changes

### Benefits

- Monitor rumination routine for individual cows and the herd
- Move bulls from mating
- Less time and money spent drafting and putting KAMARs on heifers
- Easier to identify ketosis and sub clinical concerns

**“Improving cow health should lead to higher pregnancy rates, increased production, more efficient feed utilisation and essentially, more money dropping out the bottom.”**

**After having the system in place for 12 months, Nigel sees the real value of the system in overall cow health monitoring.**

When Nigel Hicks purchased the Heatime Pro+ monitoring system by Allflex, he was looking to improve his heat detection accuracy. After having the system in place for 12 months, Nigel sees the real value of the system in overall cow health monitoring. “To see the health information of an individual cow and overall herd monitoring – that’s what drives everything else. So if you can get that right, mating is just a by-product of that, he explains.

Nigel is 50:50 sharemilking on his parents dairy farm in the Waikite Valley in the Bay of Plenty. He currently milks 540 cows and is focused on reducing debt and the liability on the herd. His strategy is simple; improving cow health should lead to higher pregnancy rates, increased production, more efficient feed utilisation and essentially, more money dropping out the bottom. “Healthy cows drive everything, so we should see most things increase”.



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Nigel admits that understanding the technology itself was pretty simple, but the software side of the system is pretty complex. "I've had a number of trainings with Meg (Centre for Dairy Excellence) and she is only a phone call away. It will do everything MINDA can do and more as far as groups go, it's just a matter of getting your head around it," he explains.

The main emphasis at the moment is transition feeding going into calving. It's the big driver for Nigel this season and Heatime Pro+ allows him to monitor rumination routines for individual cows and as a complete herd. "We are trying to start different feed groups," he explains. "A bit of maize will be going in and we can tell if it's going in too fast. We used to go from nothing to about 6kg in a week and think 'that'll be right' but it's not even close. Now we wait up to three weeks before going to full maize feeding. It'll be a benefit to the cow and for us in the long run".

Before the system was in place, Nigel used the scales on the wagon and observation to monitor nutrition and ration changes. He quickly established that this is essentially a 'guess in the dark' compared to Heatime Pro+ data, and half a kilo of maize either way can make a lot of difference to their rumination graph.

Mating was the main focus in year one with the collars. Nigel had the best submission percentage he'd ever had with 97 per cent. However, he soon realised how valuable the Heatime Pro+ system was when his empty rate was also very high. "The technology and collars did their job, they provided me with the insight to understand why the empty rate was so bad and combined with my knowledge of the feed rates and seasonal challenges, I could see from the dates that a feed pinch and weather conditions caused a number of losses mid-pregnancy". Nigel admits he couldn't have done such detailed analysis before the system was in place, and it has also enabled him to remove bulls from mating this year.

He has made the move to full AI and got true conception rates with PD dates. "We've nailed it a bit better, we are getting better data out of the whole PD side of things". He hasn't run the numbers on the straws yet as the full move to AI would bring these costs up anyway, but without the need for a bull, Nigel believes he's in a more cost-effective position.

The farm's previous mating process consisted of two rounds of KAMAR heat detectors and a final follow up of tail paint if required. Now, the system provides a daily heat graph and the whole process is run by data from each individual cow. "The time we used to spend drafting cows and putting new KAMARS on is gone. It has made mating a non-event. We just milk and they turn up in the pen for us, it's not an issue. I used to get sick of picking cows after 10 days and by week five you'd just had a complete gutsful of it. But this year we did nine and a half weeks of mating and it felt like nothing".

This simplicity is also the case for cow wellness and disease. It was originally a pure observation process, if cows started to show signs of illness then there would be intervention. With Heatime Pro+ Nigel is able to identify issues much earlier and monitor whether the treatment is actually working, based on data provided on rumination graphs. "We had a bit of ketosis and sub-clinical stuff last season, the collars made it easier to identify and sort out quickly. "We've also put the theory up this year around colostrum cows; they need to be back up to 80 per cent rumination pre-calving to enter the main herd. "It'll be interesting to see the difference from the standard four-day rule".

When doing his initial research, Nigel looked at competitor systems as well. He found that Heatime Pro+ was going to give him the most information out of the collars themselves and work in with his Protrack automatic gates. "For me cow health is where the real value is. It makes decisions easier and it's black and white – there is no grey. For example, during mating it was 'she could be on, could be not' now it is a straight heat or not, easy as that".

The collars also allow Thomas to have some much-needed time off with his family, during peak periods such as mating. He also loves that he can access the data from his phone anywhere, anytime - even when he is on holiday at Mount Maunganui with his family. Farmers don't believe him when he says there is only one man in the shed during mating. "I just tell them the collars do all the hard work, and pretty much run themselves".



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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