

Mark Benns

Adding SenseHub with SenseHub collars in March 2022 has transformed herd management for Waikato sharemilker Mark Benns.

LOCATION

Morrinsville, Waikato

FARM SIZE

65ha (effective)

HERD SIZE

230 cows

BENEFITS

- Low-stress heat detection
- Early intervention for animal health issues
- Reduced pressure on single labour unit farms
- No need for back-up bulls

Mark and his wife Louise are 50-50 sharemilking on her parent's 65ha (effective) property just outside Morrinsville, managing a milking herd of 230 Jersey and Jersey-cross cows plus 60 heifer calves reared and grazed on farm.

They are in their seventh season on the property which supplies local dairy company Tatura.

"I don't know how I could farm without collars now, especially being a one-man unit," Mark says.

Within two months of installing them, Mark knew it was a great decision when six cows showed up with alerts to say they were empty.

"We got our vet in to check them, and five out of the six had lost their calves. That's huge for me to know the data from the collars picked up something was wrong before we could see it, and we could get in early to investigate it."





“It was a massive win for us to be able to deal with those empties straight away, rather than not realising they’d lost their calves until much later,” Mark says.

When he started investigating cow collar options, his primary motivation was saving time identifying cows on heat during the entire mating period and maintaining consistent reproduction results when a labour unit is eventually employed in the future.

After installing SenseHub collars, Mark found that heat detection accuracy was maintained compared to traditional methods but the real benefit came from removing the stress and pressure that builds up during the mating period.

“The conversations I used to have with myself about cows on heat were pretty intense. I’d be constantly thinking ‘is this cow actually on heat, what’s her tail paint like, who is she next to on the row, is she in the right row and the right place in the row’, stuff like that.”

Mark’s mating plan used to involve a full five-week pre-mating programme, maintaining tail paint twice a week, followed by six weeks of artificial insemination with LIC nominated semen, then three more weeks of mating using Jersey bulls.



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“By the end of the five week pre-mating and six weeks of nominated AB, I was always really exhausted. But now, with the SenseHub technology creating a list of cows on heat each day, all the pressure has come off,” he says.

Last season, he decided to go to a full artificial breeding system for the first time because of the consistent heat detection accuracy from the collars.

“That period leading into mating and the first six weeks of AB was a heap easier last spring. I’d never go back to life without the collars on my cows,” he says.

The tags of cows selected by SenseHub as being ready for mating are still manually entered by Mark for drafting off through his Protrack auto-drafting gate.

“With the drafting accuracy of our Protrack system running at damn-near 100%, I still prefer to just punch each tag number in manually so I know it will be drafted off.”

“That’s just me being a control freak, but when Protrack is drafting cows like it is, I’m not prepared to sacrifice that level of accuracy for the slight convenience of auto-drafting.”

Mark says it is not hard to justify the investment in the collars when you put a realistic value on your own time.



“When I’m not here, the system is still running 24/7, so I’m still in touch with it from the SenseHub app.”

“Time is money in my world, especially as I run this as a one-man operation,” he says.

“When I’m not here, the system is still running 24/7, so I’m still in touch with it from the SenseHub app on my mobile phone. If there’s a distress alert for a cow or something untoward happens to the herd, then I know about it straight away and it’s only a phone call to the relief milker to get them to check what’s happened.”

Installation of the readers and fitting of the collars was straightforward, and Mark says the training and back-up has been excellent.

The long, narrow shape of the property meant he chose to install a second aerial away from the base unit at the dairy shed to get close to full farm coverage.

“There’s about six paddocks at the back of the farm that I don’t get complete coverage in, but that’s not really an issue because the cows are at the shed twice a day except when they have been dried off.”

“As soon as they reach the point where the coverage kicks in on their way to the shed, the data is pinged off to the base unit anyway, so it’s not causing me any problems at all.”

The initial training and back-up service since the collars were installed has been excellent, he says.

“My local rep, Shaun Killalea, has been great to work with. He’s always available which is really reassuring especially in those first few months when you’re still learning.”





