"We work our dairy farms to use specific beef sires, along with sexed semen to effectively produce as many of the calves as we need. This process means we can produce beef from 'conception to consumption' that fits within our customers' expectations."
Rob Drysdale, Founder, StraightLine Beef

Embracing Allflex EID Tags Streamlines Beef-Rearing Protocols and Reduces Paperwork for StraightLine Beef

BACKGROUND

Rob Drysdale, a farm veterinarian, set up StraightLine Beef in 2014 to create an ethical and sustainable beef-rearing system, selling high-quality meat that would be affordable to consumers and profitable for the farm.

Since inception, the farm has grown to 4500 cattle spread across StraightLine Beef's own farm and 11 contracted sites, with 300 animals processed each month. At StraightLine Beef, every new calf is allocated to a group of 25, all of a similar age and from the same origin farm when possible. Each group remains together until close to finishing.

CHALLENGES

Charlotte French, the company's Supply Chain Manager, explains that "maintaining these distinct groups enables us to minimize stress and disease, resulting in better growth rates, fewer welfare issues, less medicine use and reduced mortality risk."

Finished animals are sold to several processors, depending on the breed, sex, age and potential carcass quality, and according to the specifications of the different meat processors. With such a detailed and distributed operation, StraightLine Beef needed to capture and access data every step of the way, while minimizing complexity for employees.

AT A GLANCE

Company: StraightLine Beef
Location: Main farm in Shepton Mallet, Somerset, England; 11 contracted sites in South West England and Wales
Herd size: 4500 cattle with 300 animals processed each month

Challenges

- Efficiently manage data across a large farming enterprise

- Improve the company's entire rearing, handling, and record-keeping process

Solution

- Allflex Electronic Identification (EID) ear tags

Benefits

- No risk of human error during record-keeping

- Significantly reduced paperwork

- Faster process for recording daily live weights as the ID tags work as identification tags for computerized calf feeders and sync with herd management software

- Easy, efficient of cattle movements and medicine use

- An extra layer of traceability and transparency in the calf-to-consumer beef-rearing process

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SYSTEM

To help streamline operations, StraightLine Beef decided to work with Allflex Electronic Identification (EID) ear tagging. Today, it's seen as critical to the successful management of the company's entire rearing, handling, and record-keeping process.

"Some, but not all of our calf suppliers already use EID tags as their secondary device," Charlotte explains. "But if an animal arrives without an EID tag, the first thing we'll do is fit one so that we can begin the data capture process for that individual animal's entire life."

BENEFITS

The EID tags provide a number of benefits throughout the rearing process: from acting as identification tags for the company's computerized calf feeders and syncing with herd management software, to logging cattle movements and medicine usage. The tags also speed up the process of recording weights for daily live weight gain analysis.

"We weigh each animal that moves through our system at every opportunity," Charlotte continues. "Whether that's because the animal is being moved from one pen or farm to another for TB testing, or to track the final few weeks of an animal's progress as it approaches its finishing weight. Using EID tags streamlines the entire process and makes weighing and recording far less onerous or time consuming.

"In fact, with the Allflex EID tags and a dedicated handling system we can weigh and process 200 head per hour at the main farm. On other sites, where we're using portable races, it takes a little longer, but the EID tags still significantly speed up the process as we simply wave a stick reader at the tag instead of using a pencil and notebook. And by linking the stick reader to the weigh head via Bluetooth, we know each animal's weight will be recorded 100% accurately."

Charlotte is able to review the data captured at each weighing event via a smartphone app which helps her, and other staff members save time when sorting, treating, and handling livestock. The app can also be used to analyze past medical treatments and health records and to evaluate each animal's performance.

Although the use of EID tags has made a huge difference in the way data is captured and recorded, one of the biggest timesavers is Charlotte's introduction of different colored backs to the EID tags: "We use blue tag backs for bull calves, and pink ones for heifer calves," she explains. "It's a really simple system but one that lets us see at a glance which animals are male and which are female. That makes it quicker to sort animals, for example when we need to segregate bulls for castration. And it makes it easier to distinguish the animal's sex when running stock through the crush or weighing race."

While EID tags have brought significant time savings, and made record-keeping less onerous, Charlotte believes the system could be better: "Although we have the ability to share data with our suppliers and customers, allowing complete transparency and traceability at all stages of the animal's life, we're still bound by the limitations of the BCMS passport system," she explains. "With 350 calves entering the system each month and over 4500 passports to process overall, that's a huge amount of paperwork.

"Reducing some of this burden by making EID mandatory would simplify the process hugely: saving time when notifying cattle movements, removing the potential for human error from passport checks, and improving record-keeping.

"Unfortunately, the beef industry as a whole isn't at this stage yet, but as an independent enterprise, we're doing as much as we can to streamline the process for our own benefit. And by using EID tags to monitor each individual animal's entire lifecycle, from just a few days old to finishing, we can make sure the beef we produce is fully traceable and has been reared responsibly to the highest welfare standards."

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