Alfalfa Dairy Farm boosts per-cow production, grows its milking herd, with SenseHub™

"Before SenseHub we used to milk 1500 cows. Now we milk 2100 cows."

Natalie Low, Assistant Dairy Farm Manager, Alfalfa Dairy Farm

BACKGROUND

Alfalfa Dairy Farm is located in the Breede River Valley just outside Worcester in the Western Cape. Built on an estate owned by the Van der Merwe family since 1928, the dairy herd was started 1932.

The dairy now has 4250 cows, including 2100 in milk. The milking herd is 60% Jerseys and 40% Holsteins.

The dairy runs on a TMR system, with 220 hectares under irrigation where oats and maize are planted.

CHALLENGES

"Alfalfa is a results-driven farm," says Natalie Low, Alfalfa's Assistant Dairy Farm Manager.

All the heifers born on the farm are raised onsite and additional heifers are bought in from other farms. Alfalfa's goal is to increase the herd size and the milk yield per cow.

This means it needs to raise the pregnancy rate, shorten the inter-carving period, and reduce the mortality rate.

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AT A GLANCE

Company: Alfalfa Dairy Farm
Location: Breede River Valley, South Africa
Livestock: 4250 cows, 2100 of them in milk

Challenges

- Increase the pregnancy rate
- Decrease the mortality rate
- Boost milk production

System

- Allflex SenseHub™ system with monitoring ear tag Flex

Results/Benefits

- Average inter-calving period is 30 days shorter, resulting in more milk and more calves
- Higher conception rate, while using less semen and higher genetic-value semen
- Days to pregnancy dropped from 140 days to 103
- 3.7 liters more milk, per cow, per day, in the tank
- Mortality rate reduced from 18% to between 5% and 7%
- Antibiotic usage has dropped.

SYSTEM

In 2019, Alfalfa installed an Allflex SenseHub cow monitoring system and attached monitoring ear tags Flex to all the farm's milking cows.

According to Natalie, the farm chose Allflex "because they understood our problems and our future goals, and they could also help us to find solutions."

BENEFITS

SenseHub has been instrumental in enabling Alfalfa to increase its milking herd, with 2100 cows in milk now, compared with 1500 before SenseHub was installed, less than two years ago.

"By using SenseHub we were able to get cows pregnant earlier which means there were more calves that were born," says Natalie.

Much of this improvement can be attributed to better timed artificial insemination (AI). As Natalie puts it: "Using the breeding window we are using less semen, but we are using better genetics. Before SenseHub we used to AI twice a day, but now we are AI-ing four times a day. This helped us to AI cows at the correct time, which also helped us to improve our conception rates."

The difference can be felt in particular in February, which Natalie calls "our worst month." This year she says: "The conception rate has improved to 23%. Furthermore, the inter-carving period was 420 days and we are now averaging 390 days, which means there will be more milk and more calves."

Overall, Natalie sees a significant improvement on the farm. "The days to pregnancy average has dropped from 140 days to 103 days which means there will be 3.7 liters of milk per cow, per day, more in the tank." With that, the number of pregnant cows has increased from about 55% to 75%.

In addition, since installing SenseHub, the calf mortality rate on Alfalfa Dairy Farm has significantly decreased from 18% to 5-7%. And by using the suspected abortion list, management can make an earlier decision on rebreeding or selling a cow.

SenseHub has also helped reduce the use of a lot of – what turned out to be – unnecessary antibiotics, and ensure the right cow gets the right medicine.

While Natalie appreciates the convenience of the system's mobile compatibility, because of the sheer size of the herd she chose not to receive notifications on her cell phone. She does, however, use the mobile app to get and enter information while walking amongst the cows, which she finds very useful.

Using SenseHub, Natalie concludes, has had a positive impact on the farm in terms of productivity and the decision-making process. "We were able to achieve the goals we wanted, it made management easier, and we also gained respect from our fellow staff."

About Allflex Livestock Intelligence

Allflex Livestock Intelligence is the world leader in the design, development, manufacturing and delivery of solutions for animal identification, monitoring and traceability. Our data-driven solutions are used by farmers, companies and countries to manage hundreds of millions of animals worldwide. By putting intelligent, actionable management information into farmers' hands, our solutions empower them to act in a timely manner to safeguard their animals' health and wellbeing, while achieving optimal production outcomes for a healthy food supply. Allflex Livestock Intelligence is a livestock portfolio of digital products within MSD Animal Health.

Through its commitment to the Science of Healthier Animals®, MSD Animal Health offers veterinarians, farmers, pet owners and governments one of the widest ranges of veterinary pharmaceuticals, vaccines and health management solutions and services as well as an extensive suite of digitally connected identification, traceability and monitoring products. MSD Animal Health is dedicated to preserving and improving the health, wellbeing and performance of animals and the people who care for them.

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