



# Pilot Herd Case Study

For Amanda and Aaron Nicholson, farming runs deep. Both were raised on farms and each had grandparents who owned dairy farms, as well. Although both of their parents left the industry to pursue other careers, Amanda and Aaron's experiences growing up ignited their passion to start up an operation of their own. Together, with their two young children, Amanda and Aaron own and operate Alder Creek Dairy in Sheldon, Wis.

In November 2001, they purchased an existing 50-cow tie-stall barn, where they currently milk 60 cows twice-a-day with a herd average of 18,000 pounds of milk. They also own 60 head of young stock, from calves to bred heifers, which are housed at a farm approximately two miles south of the main farm.

Along with the cattle, the Nicholsons own 230 acres of land, which includes the dairy and 140 tillable acres. They also rent 90 acres of tillable cropland.



## Premises Registration

Amanda says she first read about premises registration in agricultural publications. She recalls receiving information from the Wisconsin Livestock Identification Consortium (WLIC) regarding the Wisconsin Livestock Premises Registration Act. She registered their premises prior to the act taking effect in January 2006. Both Aaron and Amanda agree with the concept of mandatory premises registration because they believe it is a measure to protect the future of their dairy.

In addition to premises registration, the Nicholsons were introduced to individual animal identification and RFID technology through WLIC's voluntary animal identification program and began implementing it in their dairy herd.

Starting in June 2008, they began tagging their cows with RFID ear tags, along with visible management tags and learned how to use an RFID reader during the milk testing data collection process. Soon after, they researched additional opportunities for using RFID technology in their herd management practices, and proceeded to tag the calves with RFID ear tags, as well.

## Identification System

The Nicholsons use an Allflex reader linked to their handheld computer with PocketDairy and integrated with the PCDart system for their herd management and data recording.

*“The benefits of using RFID technology certainly justify the cost. I no longer have to spend hours at the computer updating herd health and lactation records and worrying about the accuracy of the information.”*

*— Amanda Nicholson,  
Alder Creek Dairy  
Farm Owner*

“Our DHIA technician, Doug Brooks, as well as Robert Fourdraine of WLIC initially helped us implement the new technology. Doug came out to the farm and helped get the PC Dart software installed on our computer and set up the PDA with PocketDairy and Robert helped get the wand and reader to sync with the PDA,” says Amanda.

The Nicholsons first used the reader to check each cow’s RFID tag during milk testing and saw improvements in the time it took for milk collection, as well as accuracy of the data. Besides using RFID technology during milk testing, they’ve also discovered opportunities for the equipment to be utilized for herd management tasks, including breeding, administering health treatments and record keeping.

With the RFID reader working in synch with PCDart and PocketDairy, the Nicholsons better utilize their time with their veterinarian and feed nutritionist. While working with the vet to conduct herd health checks, they can be more efficient finding cows and heifers. They can simply scan the RFID tag with the reader, and their handheld computer will pull that cow’s generated list of herd health tasks that need to be completed. They also share their cows’ up-to-date health information with their nutritionist to review and make recommendations about their feed program or troubleshoot any feed issues.

“The technology all works well together and helps us manage our herd with timeliness and efficiency,” Amanda says. “All of the data we record via the reader and handheld computer automatically synchs with our home computer so we don’t need to spend as much time hand-typing in results from the herd health checks.”

### Values Gained

The Nicholsons’ investment for implementing the RFID technology and PCDart into their herd management practices was minimal. “We decided to purchase a new home computer and high-speed Internet so we could efficiently record the data coming in,” says Amanda. “Overall, we are pleased with the accuracy, efficiency and time management benefits that RFID technology brings to our dairy.”

• **Accuracy of Dairy Records** – The Nicholsons utilize the RFID equipment for every aspect of dairy management, including body condition scoring, milk testing, breeding and nutrition. Data is more accurately and efficiently recorded during these tasks than it was relying on pen and paper alone.

• **Labor Efficiency** – RFID helps the Nicholsons maximize the services of their veterinarian and nutritionist. Amanda says that instead of paying their veterinarian for the time it takes to sort out the cows they need for pregnancy checking, the reader helps sort the cows, so the veterinarian can focus on important herd health tasks.

• **Simplified Record-Keeping** – Although the Nicholsons still make notes during herd checks, the RFID equipment-working in synch with PCDart and PocketDairy on the handheld computer - are used to record specific cow data.

### Future Outlook

Although Amanda believes that individual animal ID offers great opportunities for all livestock producers, she recommends leaving that decision up to the producers themselves. “Give livestock producers the opportunity to see the benefits of RFID for themselves, and they will likely be more receptive to the technology,” she says.

Since the Nicholsons have implemented RFID technology, Amanda says she has received questions from neighbors about how and why they’re using it. She sees these inquiries as an opportunity to educate other producers on how they can take advantage of the technology and equipment. It also allows her to educate consumers about all of the measures farmers are taking to care for their animals and provide safe, wholesome food.

