the Livestock Vantage Identification for the Common Good

Pilot Herd Case Study

Dick Colby started Oakwood Farms in the cow-calf business 30 years ago. His family's involvement in the industry began as a result of what Dick refers to as his daughter's "runaway 4-H project" - a Shorthorn she had shown when she was 10 years old. More animals accumulated when they traded hay for a few more heifers.

Dick was born and raised on Oakwood Farms in Grand Marsh, Wis., which was a dairy farm as he was growing up. In fact, they still use the old stanchion barn to halter-break calves.

Comprised of 550 total acres of which 250 are tillable, Oakwood Farms is owned and operated by Dick, his wife, Marj, and son, Rick. Rick's part of the farm is situated only four miles away and is primarily used as pasture land. The Colby's herd includes 100 cows and 30 calves. They utilize artificial insemination (AI) for their breeding, which Marj performs herself. In the summer, most of the Colby's' herd goes to Rick's farm to rotationally graze the better pasture land available there. The animals are moved three to four times during the course of a year, including their transport back to the main farm for chute work.

Premises Registration

Marj and Dick first learned about premises registration when Terry Quam, representative for the Wisconsin Cattleman's Association on the Wisconsin Livestock Identification Consortium (WLIC) board of directors, presented details at a Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association meeting. They then registered their premises online when the Wisconsin Livestock Premises Registration Act took effect in January 2006. They have placed signs on their livestock trailer that include the premises identification number, so it's always accessible at sales and shows they attend.

Marj and Dick learned more about RFID technology when they visited with Robert Fourdraine from the WLIC at the Corn and Soybean Expo. Later, at a farm show in Arlington, they observed an RFID technology demonstration and gained further understanding of the program and considered opportunities for their farm.

Identification System

The Colbys utilize a Palm reader for herd management and data recording. The data is uploaded to their Excel management spreadsheets on a home computer. They maintain one spread-

"Before RFID tags, we relied on ear tattoos and metal veterinary tags to indentify our cattle. If the tags fell out or the tattoo ink faded, we were left with the challenge of figuring out which cow or calf it was. The RFID tags have proven to be a reliable source of identification and allow us to track our cattle and their individual health records more efficiently."

– Dick Colby,
Oakwood Farms
Owner/Operator

Top 3 advantages of current system

1. **Faster reading of identification numbers for greater efficiency chute-side.**
2. **Current with technological industry progression.**
3. **Ability to tailor the technology to specific operation as it is used more frequently.**

sheet for cows and another for calves. WLIC staff came out to Oakwood Farms to synch the handheld device with the Excel spreadsheets and also set up the system.

The calves are tagged with Allflex 840 RFID tags upon weaning. However, when the Colbys first initiated the RFID technology in 2008, they tagged some of the cows in spring and the rest when they went through the chute for pregnancy checks. The last of the calves were tagged in December of 2008.

Values Gained

• **Accurate Record-Keeping –** The Colbys use RFID technology for every aspect of herd management, including breeding and herd health tasks. Because they typically only work cattle three or four times per year, it is important that they have each animal's health history quickly available - and accurate. Data are more accurately and efficiently recorded chute-side using the Palm reader, rather than relying on pen and paper alone.

• **Complete Identification –** In the past, the Colbys relied on reading ear tattoos and metal veterinary tags to identify their cattle. Oftentimes the tattoo ink faded, leaving the number illegible, and the metal veterinary tags would fall out. They trust the RFID tags to be secure and provide a reliable source of identification.

• **Labor Efficiency –** Since running more than 100 cows and calves through the chute isn't easy, everyone's role is important for successfully completing herd health tasks. The Colbys no longer spend time searching and sorting cows because the Palm reader helps with this effort.

Although the Colby's are experiencing many positive benefits from utilizing the RFID technology at their farm, they thought it also would add value to their calves and help them efficiently run these calves through at the local sale barn. Unfortunately, this sale barn isn't yet set up to accommodate RFID tags, and buyers are yet to show an increased desire for calves including this technology.

Future Outlook

According to the Colbys, implementing RFID technology into their cow-calf operation provided an opportunity to stay in front of what's up and coming in the livestock industry. "If individual animal identification is going to be required, we might as well get started now and get a system running smoothly," said Dick. "We certainly have experienced the benefits of RFID technology on our farm, and we will continue to use it."

Dick notes that there are many livestock producers reluctant to participate in premises registration and individual animal identification. He strongly encourages these producers to at least register their premises. "Even if you don't agree with animal identification, premises registration still is a great opportunity to protect yourself – and your livestock."