

Data on the Hoof – Collecting Herd Management Data amongst the Cows

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Introduction

Cattle Information Services (CIS) is farmer-owned, farmer-controlling and provides services to all leading UK cattle organisations, with the objective of improving standards of service, accuracy and value throughout dairy herd management information practices. CIS owns its own laboratory and provides milk composition, pregnancy and health testing from milk and tissue samples. CIS is a wholly owned subsidiary of Holstein UK, Europe's largest independent bovine breed society.

Data Collection

We collect data from our farmers in a number of ways; on farm by technician, through the Holstein UK call centre, the CIS 'Your Herd' website, importing data from independent farm software and, most recently, through our iPhone app.

It is important when collecting data to ensure that the information is collected in a timely, accurate, and standard manner, otherwise when reporting the data or presenting statistics based upon the data it will be inaccurate and therefore useless and, at worst, dangerous.

Why have we developed the iPhone App – Mobile Herd?

Two years ago many of our farmers began to ask for a way of viewing and sending data into our systems whilst they were walking through their cows. CIS already had an award winning herd management web site 'Your Herd', which over 75% of our farmers utilize to view and upload data, so the first thought was to create a mobile version of the website. Unfortunately creating a mobile web site was not possible as one essential requirement was that herd data must be accessible off line. The decision was made to develop the mobile platform initially as an iPhone App.

What is 'Mobile Herd'?

The 'Mobile Herd' iPhone App can be downloaded free by anyone in the UK. Our customers enter a unique login and password to gain access to their data; those who are not our customers can view the functionality using a specially created demo herd.

It is important that the farmer can take the data to the cows so the App was designed to only require a Wi-Fi connection for downloading and uploading data. It can then be used offline to view an animal's ancestry, latest test details, and to add individual animal's service, fertility, dry off and movement data.

Cows can be calved, creating a lactation, sending data to the government for a passport and calf details to the breed society for a pedigree registration. A true One Stop Shop!

A diary shows lists of animals that are bulling, due to calve, due to be served and due to dry off. Events can be diarised from 'Mobile Herd' directly to the customer's phone calendar. All uploaded data updates the CIS databases real time, enhancing the benefit and usability of our web management tools and outputs.

Steps

1. Download the herd onto the iPhone. Options are to download the whole herd, including young stock, or just the milking herd. For this a stage a WIFI connection is required.
2. Each animal can be drilled down to show details of the latest milk test day results, sire and dam details, lactation details
3. Events can be assigned to animals, such as services, fertility events, etc
4. Cows can be calved, requesting a pedigree and government passport for the calf,
5. Lists can be used to show those animals which are due to dry off, etc
6. Once an event has been assigned to an animal, it is stored on the iPhone until the user decides to send it back to the main server. For this a stage a WIFI connection is required.

Roll out

Rolling out any farmer facing application needs careful planning and consideration. A focus group of farmers was created. These farmers trialed the App, feeding back their suggestions and comments. CIS devised a marketing leaflet that was the same size and shape as an iPhone which folded out to show a selection of the screens in the App.

CIS do not charge our customers for 'Mobile Herd' – we get no income from the App. A cost / benefit analysis was completed and showed us that giving the App FOC (free of cost), would encourage more farmers to use the Mobile Herd thus benefiting CIS by increasing the accuracy and speed of receiving data. The cost of the initial development was in the region of £20K. We did get quotes for out sourcing, but as these quotes were considerably more than the internal quote, it was decided to complete all programming in-house.

We currently have over 450 farmers using Mobile Herd to view and update data about their cows. 816 people have downloaded and viewed the demo herd.

What next?

Our farmers continue to give us feedback and ideas to enhance and improve the Mobile Herd App. We have had a lot of farmers asking for Mobile Herd on Android so we are planning to launch a version of the App on Android later this year.

In conclusion

Data collected whilst walking the cows will be more accurate and so long as it is uploaded frequently, will be timely for managing the herd. Both farmers and veterinarians can have cow data at their fingertips, which is essential, and especially useful when managing large herds.