



All of Johan Stael's cows wear a neckband with a tag to monitor activity and eating behaviour

## PROGRESS FURTHER WITH OVALERT

In cooperation with his advisors, Johan Stael is working towards boosting the fertility of his herd. As the intended progress was slow, and illness kept Johan away from the barn, he decided to buy Ovalert.

'A few years ago the average calving interval in my herd started to drift towards 500 days. Extreme peaks in calving interval are not a problem if they are occasional, but it mustn't turn into a structural issue with too many animals', says Johan Stael from Hank in the province of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands. 'I really want to be milking 30 kg per cow per day, but with growing numbers of animals with longer lactation times, that's difficult to achieve', he explains. 'So my first reaction was to get around the table with my vet, feed supplier and my CRV herd consultant.' Herd consultant Kees Pols immediately suggested using the Ovalert fertility management program, but the high investment costs put Johan off. 'I initially opted for farm support provided by the vet in line with the Danish system.' This entails a two-

weekly visit from the vet to screen and score the health traits of potential risk animals, such as fresh cows, cows at the lactation peak and cows ready for dry off. 'This approach did help guide us in the right direction', Johan thinks. However, all that was to change when Johan became ill.

### Banished from the barn

'I was diagnosed with lymph node cancer', Johan candidly informs us. 'My prognosis for recovery was encouraging, but I was banished from entering the barn for six months while I was undergoing chemotherapy. From the moment you get on the treadmill of examinations and treatments, it's difficult enough to do your work on the farm properly any longer. But if you are not even allowed in the barn because your immune system is im-

paired, the results really start to suffer.' Johan explains: 'For all the day-to-day things I had plenty of help I could rely on, such as family members, external workers (AB Brabant), former interns and colleagues, but that final inspection in the barn in the evening before you go to bed vanished. Everyone else goes home at half past eight.' Cameras helped Johan check on the animals in the calving barn. But he had no tools to help with heat detection. So that was when the Ovalert option appeared on the horizon again. 'I thought straight away, it's actually an investment that can help me once I get better again too', continues Johan. 'We were already missing some signs of heat with cows and maiden heifers. And that number rose too high from November last year when I had to start running my farm from behind my computer. The only thing I could do was make action lists on the computer and use them to try and guide the stockmen in the barn as well as possible.' Johan quickly saw the first results of heat detection once he started using the system in mid-January this year. 'As we noticed



### FARM PROFILE JOHAN STAEL, HANK

**Herd:** 81 dairy cattle, 50 young stock  
**Rolling annual average:** 5.04 years  
 8551 kg milk, 4.41% fat, 3.67% protein  
**Land:** 30 hectares  
**Expected calving interval:** 455 days  
**Expected age at first calving:** 27.6 months

A calving interval that was getting longer was reason for Johan Stael to invest in Ovalert

plenty of cows in heat that were unnoticed before in the first six weeks, a lot of extra cows were inseminated during that period. That means that I have a higher than average number of dry cows at the moment.' Johan doesn't rely blindly on Ovalert. 'I always use my own observations in combination with the figures generated by Ovalert. Ovalert gives me a much better insight into the ideal moment for insemination. And I can make more informed decisions about which cow to select for which insemination round.'

### Eating behaviour monitoring

In the Ovalert system, Johan went for the neckbands with tags offering eating behaviour monitoring. This means he can also keep a close eye on the health of his cows via his display. 'I have much more useful data at my disposal. But it's still up to me how to interpret and apply that knowledge', he believes. 'Now if I get an alert that a certain cow is not eating as much, I go and take a look at once. Without the system you would probably only

notice a day later that something was wrong with a cow and her eating behaviour. This gives me a chance to intervene at an earlier stage.' The processor that processes the data from the tags hangs in the office in the barn. Johan can produce various overviews on his display using data generated by the processor. 'I can also view the data on my PC at home, but if you are already in the barn it's handy to access the information there. Reading the display there was also really useful for the staff sent by AB Brabant while I was ill.' Johan made a conscious decision to fit all the cows with a neck tag with the responder that measures activity and eating behaviour. 'You can strap a neck tag to just thirty cows and switch from animal to animal once heat has been detected. But I'd rather not have all the extra work involved.' And, with that approach, the general health status of the herd is not monitored as closely. Fifteen of Johan's maiden heifers also wear a neckband with responder. This has already resulted in the expected age at first calving of the current maiden heifers reaching 27.6

months. In illustration, in January 2016, just before Ovalert was used, this figure was still 29.5 months. The average age at which the maiden heifers are inseminated for the first time is now also lower: currently 16.6 months compared with 17.1 months in January.

### On the right track

The fertility results are not yet clearly reflected in the index figures for the dairy cattle. 'Except that I have a lot of dry cows', concludes Johan. 'It takes a while before the better results filter into a figure such as calving interval. But, we are certainly making progress.' Johan has now finished his treatment and is allowed back into the barn. The check-ups are encouraging, but he still has to recover his old immunity and energy levels. 'I do the milking and feeding on my own again, but two old interns still help me at weekends. I am not yet back to my former self, the road to recovery will still take some time. Just like improving the index figures. But we are on the right track.'

The display on the processor in the barn shows Johan which animals need his attention at a glance

