

Gippsland kicks off robot group

By JEANETTE SEVERS

A NEW dairy discussion group for people with robotic dairies has begun in Gippsland, with the aim of comparing systems and exchanging knowledge.

Following an initial planning meeting late last year, the group held an on-farm discussion day on Friday, where members compared latest research on cow movement and pasture grazing management methods.

The group expects to meet four times annually and has already set the agenda of discussions for this year, according to group facilitator and dairy extension officer, Maria Rose.

Future topics include cost of production, energy audits, lameness and increasing efficiency.

Gippsland has seven automatic milking systems (AMS) or robotic dairies and is the birthplace of AMS dairies in Australia, with the first one established by Max and Evelyn Warren.

"Automatic milking systems (AMS) have been developed for dairy farms to reduce the labour required for milk harvesting, which is generally more than 50 per cent of the hours spent on farm activities each day," Ms Rose said.

"The challenge for our farmers has been to incorporate AMS into pasture-based production systems, while maintaining production

At a glance

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targets and managing moderate to large herds walking longer distances between paddocks and the dairy."

An AMS extension pilot project in Tasmania last year led to this one starting in Gippsland.

There are expected to be 50 robotic dairies in Australia this year, milking one per cent of the total herd.

"It is the fastest growth area in dairy, with the total number of cows milked on AMS farms expected to double this year – from 7500 to 15,300," Ms Rose said.

"Extensive research through the FutureDairy project has helped develop management practices around automatic milking systems that are useful for farmers considering or working with this technology.

"To enable farmers to access the research findings an AMS discussion group was established in Tasmania in last year's milking season.

"Gippsland farmers using automatic milking systems met late last year and put up their hands for a discussion group too.

"So far, Gippsland has all of the AMS dairy farms in Victoria, which

accounts for 14pc of the Australian total.

"Local herd numbers range between 150 to 280 milking cows, in a range of single and multi-box setups of between two to six robots."

Ms Rose said farmers seriously investigating switching to the new technology were welcome to join the group.

Department of Primary Industries (NSW) has appointed Dr Nicolas Lyons as national coordinator to oversee the development of AMS dairies in Australia.

Dr Lyons said the group discussion days have been initiated to aid the growing number of farmers who are considering their options to change to AMS dairies, as well as those already using them.

"Every dairy region in Australia has farmers who have decided to commission automatic milking systems," Dr Lyons said.

"Automatic milking systems are suited to different herd sizes and farming systems, but most farms will require some physical modifications when making the change from conventional to automatic milking.

"Farmers also need to modify their farming practices – for instance, setting up the system to identify when a cow is ready for joining or needs treatment for mastitis."

■ **Details: Maria Rose, group facilitator, maria.rose@ecodev.vic.gov.au or 5147 0843**



■ Evelyn (left) and Max Warren, pioneers of robotic dairies in Australia after installing the first one, with Gippsland dairy extension officer, Maria Rose, who is facilitator for the new robotic dairy discussion group.

Pioneer welcome new group

MAX Warren, Winnindoo, was the first dairy farmer in Australia to install a robotic dairy, in 2001.

He became interested in automated milking after his interest in computer technology was piqued in 1995, leading him to install automatic drafting gates and feeding systems in the rotary dairy he was using.

Then he heard about robotic dairies and went on an overseas trip organised by Lely in 1999.

In March 2001, Mr Warren started with the four-bay system he still uses, milking 300 cows.

Since installing his system, he has mentored many of the farmers that have followed

in his footsteps, including Australian Dairy Farmer of the Year 2014, Greg Dennis.

Mr Warren remembers being isolated when he and wife Evelyn started using automatic milking systems, or robotic dairies as they are more commonly called.

Mr Warren is a member of the new Gippsland discussion group for farmers that have installed or commissioned automatic milking systems.

He welcomed the new discussion group.

"This discussion group – there hasn't been a forum up until now and there's a lot to be gained from sharing knowledge and frustrations," he said.