

ARE YOU A TALKER OR A LISTENER WHEN IT COMES TO COWS?

When it comes to cows, Tasmanian dairy farmer John van Adrichem is definitely a listener. He says that one of the most important things he has learnt since installing milking robots is to watch and listen to his cows.

“The robots were easy to get the hang of, but our system really started humming when we learnt to take more notice of cow behaviour,” says John.

He’s absolutely right according to FutureDairy researcher, Tori Scott, who has spent the past three years studying the behaviour of cows in automatic milking systems (AMS).

Most AMS dairy farmers with grazing cows operate with voluntary cow movement – the cows move by themselves from the paddock to the dairy and around the farm without human intervention.

Achieving good voluntary cow movement is a key to reaping the lifestyle benefits of automatic milking. But compared with conventional milking systems, an AMS requires a different way of managing cows, which is based on understanding cow behaviour and social order.

“In a system where we want cows to do things voluntarily, we need to make their milking experience a good one, and we need to make the environment suitable for them,” Tori said.

Mr van Adrichem has learnt to keep a very close eye on how cows respond to each feed allocation.

“If I give them too much, they won’t want to leave the paddock to go up to the dairy – so voluntary cow movement drops off. But if I give them too little, they leave the paddock quickly and we end up with queues at the dairy. I learnt how to get it ‘just right’ by watching the cows’ response.”

Tori’s research has looked at a variety of ways to encourage voluntary cow movement in pasture-based AMS, with a particular focus at the dairy. For example she has investigated the amount and location of supplementary feed and the use of a priority laneway at the dairy for heifers and cows that are new to robotic milking or cows that have been identified as slow voluntary movers.



At present she is particularly interested in the behaviour of the small proportion of cows that consistently have poor voluntary movement in an AMS, and ways to encourage them.

To hear more of Tori’s findings, attend this year’s Dairy Research Foundation Symposium, to be held in the Hunter Valley, NSW 19-20 June.

For more information:

<http://sydney.edu.au/vetscience/foundations/df/symposium>, email esther@estherprice.com.au or phone 1800 177 636.