

ROBOTS LIFT THROUGHPUT ON TASMANIA DAIRY FARMS

In the dairy industry, there's a highly ambitious goal of finding technically and economically viable applications for robotics.

And great strides are being made near Deloraine at the Dornauf family's Gala farm, which is pioneering the world's first commercial robotic rotary dairy.

It's two and a half years since Nick Dornauf started using the De Laval automatic milking system and he says it's freed him up to spend just a couple of days hands-on at the farm.

Now Nick Dornauf is showing scores of other farmers the latest hardware additions and software upgrades for the robotic milkers.

He says 3-D cameras are one of the additions that have increased the speed of milking by 30 per cent since December.

"This is our third lactation so two and a half years down the track we are now," he said.

"We've started to iron a few kinks out make some really good progress so it's quite exciting.

"We've had some software and hardware upgrades that have taken us a monumental leap forward in the systems and capacity's performance.

"The cows have learned how to work themselves through the system a lot better and we've learned how to manage them as well so it's really been a team effort."

Nick Dornauf says he's confident by this autumn he'll hit their target of milking 570 cows a day, with the dairy milking 80 plus cows an hour.

Meanwhile, nearby on Marcus and Zed Crowden's dairy farm near Caveside, another robotic system is proving its worth.

The couple started with two automated milking units in 2012, and added a third robot into their 24/7 herringbone milking shed last year.

Zed Crowden says their robots are creating a whole new future for her brand new baby daughter, Mabelle Jane.

"We've had this run-off block for quite a few years now," Zed said.

"We thought to put another herringbone style dairy up here which would mean we needed to put more labour units on.

"My husband Marcus went to New Zealand looking at robots a few years ago now and really liked the concept of them.

"So that was our next step to look into them to see if it was viable up here and it was, so this is what we've got now.

Future Dairy project leader, associate professor Kendra Kerrisk, has pioneered automatic milking systems in Australia.

She says the dairy industry has lost a whole generation of 'up and coming' farmers because of the daily milking demands, but now that's changing.

"I remember taking my eldest son, he was about five or six years old, and I took him to a dairy and said 'this is where they milk the cows here,'" Dr Kerrisk said.

"And he said 'what's the big hole?' and I said 'that's where the people stand', and he goes, 'but where are the robots?'

"And it occurred to me that, at the age of five or six years old, he's very familiar with robotic milking and how that is done, but had no idea people actually milk cows as well."

Kendra Kerrisk says the systems are now proving it's possible for dairy farmers to utilize robotics and achieve a good relaxed lifestyle and good animal welfare outcomes in a safe food production system.

She says her next challenge is to scale up for big herds of 600 to 800 cows or more, where cow behaviour and the dynamics of bigger herds will influence how the automatic milking systems work.

For full ABC Radio transcript and picture Gallery please follow the below.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-15/robotic-milking-in-tasmania/5201216>