



Terry Kavenagh's move to automatic milking involved significant planning, preparation and practice. Despite some challenges along the way, he's delighted with the results.

Automatic milking takes practice

PLANNING, preparation and practice – these are the keys to adapting to an automatic milking system (AMS), based on the experience of Western Victorian dairy farmers Terry and Danila Kavenagh who installed a robotic dairy last year.

“It took a few weeks to get the hang of the robotic system but Lely was very supportive. However, real success relies on adapting your farming system to ensure cows move voluntarily to be milked and onto fresh feed. We’ve gotten better at that as we’ve built up experience,” said Mr Kavenagh.

When the Kavenaghs bought their farm at Larpent near Colac in 2007 they knew the 10-aside double-up dairy would need replacing to accommodate their plans to expand the herd to milk an average of 370 cows year round by 2012. They currently milk about 330 cows, with 200 calving between April and July.

Before deciding on the automatic path in mid 2008 the Kavenaghs considered a

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variety of options for a new dairy. “One of the main attractions of AMS to us was the ability to continue to run the farm as a family operation,” he said.

The Kavenaghs signed up with Lely in September 2008 with early work beginning in November. Before construction work on the dairy began the following January, the Kavenaghs adapted the farm layout, building an additional laneway and modifying fencing to allow for three-way grazing.

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Installation of the Kavenagh’s milking units began in January 2009, in an existing shed which was ideally suited converting to AMS. The layout includes a feed pad in the pre-milking area. ▶

◀ The commissioning period was relatively straightforward, with the first cows being milked on May 18, 2009. The Kavenagh's expected to take some time to get used to the system.

"Those first few weeks were quite stressful while we got used to the automatic milking units. But Lely was very supportive and it wasn't long before the units were running smoothly. It's easy to say that now looking back!"

What the Kavenaghs hadn't counted on was the combination of drought, followed by a very wet winter and a big drop in milk price.

"The cows were trained to use the robots within a few days but it took a bit longer to get them used to moving around the farm voluntarily and to achieve good pasture utilisation. The drought and wet winter made that more challenging than expected," he said.

In a grazing-based AMS, feed is the main tool used to motivate cows to move around the farm.

"The key is to fully feed the cows but in several small parcels during a 24-hour period, rather than one or two paddocks a day in a conventional system."

That's where practice comes in. The feeding system on an AMS is obviously affected by weather and seasonal conditions.

Mr Kavenagh believes it takes a year to build up the experience and confidence

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with adjusting management practices to variations in conditions.

"We make small adjustments to the system every few days. We really have to be on the ball with pasture allocation. If we allocate it in too big a parcel the cows won't be motivated to move out of the paddock, so milking frequency and production drops. If we make too little available we'll end up with queues in the dairy."

Guidelines make it easier

Mr Kavenagh regularly refers to FutureDairy's Management Guidelines for Pasture-based AMS Farms.

"There's plenty of information from overseas experience with robotic milking where cows are housed and fed indoors. Australians are among the first to use robotic milking with a grazing system, so the FutureDairy guidelines are really helpful."

When planning his AMS, Mr Kavenagh went through the guidelines in detail but still goes back to them to fine-tune his system.

"Each time I go back to the guidelines, I pick up something new. Some details are more relevant now that I've got experience."

Despite the initial challenges, the Kavenaghs are delighted with their AMS.

"I love the flexibility of the system. I work a little less hours but the big difference is that I'm not rushing all the time. I'm no longer completely exhausted at the end of each day," said Mr Kavenagh.

FutureDairy's Dr Kendra Kerrisk agrees with this.

"The robots don't replace people – the system still needs to be managed, but the timing is less critical," said Dr Kerrisk.

The FutureDairy Management Guidelines for Pasture-based AMS farms were launched in February 2010 and are available on www.futuredairy.com.au or www.dairyaustralia.com.au.

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Contact Dr Kendra Kerrisk email kendra.kerrisk@sydney.edu.au or ph (02) 4636-6327. FutureDairy's major sponsors are Dairy Australia, Industry and Innovation (formerly DPI NSW), DeLaval and the University of Sydney.



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