

WORKING '9 TO 5', EVEN ON A DAIRY FARM

FutureDairy's milking staff Shannon Bennett and Terry Osborne quite like milking in a conventional dairy, but after 18 months working in the automatic milking system (AMS) at Camden, they both say 'you couldn't pay me enough to go back to the old system!'

"It's because not having to get up to that alarm clock is just too good," said Shannon.

His colleague, Terry agrees. "Working in the AMS, means I can have breakfast with the kids and get them off to school, and I wouldn't give that up for quids," said Terry.

FutureDairy's team recently completed a series of labour audits and social research interviews on the DeLaval AMS at Camden and at Evelyn and Max Warren's commercial automatic dairy in Gippsland.

The study identified labour-related benefits associated with an AMS including:

- fewer, and more flexible hours spent on milking-related tasks.
- potential occupational health and safety benefits.
- Less tedious tasks.

On the flip side, an AMS operates 24-hours a day so a staff-member needs to be on-call over night. However, in reality, this is a minor inconvenience in an AMS that is running smoothly. Staff all reported they'd prefer to be on-call at night than have to get up early each morning to milk in a conventional dairy.

At Camden and at the Warrens, the working day is much shorter than in a conventional dairy. In fact, it's close to normal business hours, starting in the order of 7:30am to 8:30am and finishing around 4:00pm to 5:00 pm.

FutureDairy's Dr Kendra Davis reports that on average, about 2½ hours were spent on milking-related tasks. Weekends are a little less at 2 hours a day and week days up to 2 hours 40 minutes.

"The flexibility of the working day in an AMS is one of its most appealing features because it offers so many lifestyle benefits for milking staff," said Dr Davis.

The labour audit defined milking-related tasks as all activities normally carried out on commercial farms in relation to milking, from fetching cows to cleaning up after milking and closing cows back in the paddock (see list at end of article for full set of tasks).

Paddock work, such as setting up temporary electric fences was a major component of the milking related tasks, taking on average 40 minutes a day. Heifer training averaged 20 minutes a day.

At Camden, office-related tasks average about 15 minutes a day. This includes monitoring reports and adjusting computer settings for the milking units.

"While it doesn't involve a large amount of time, this more technical task provides a change from the physical, out-door duties plus the opportunity for staff to develop new skills. For some, it has the potential to evolve into a new career path," said Dr Davis.

An automated milking system involves less physical contact with cows. This brings potential occupational

health and safety benefits, such as reduced risk of injury and illness.

Call outs

An AMS uses a system of alarms and callouts to alert staff to problems. 'Stop alarms' are those that require attention from staff before a particular machine can continue to milk cows.

The Camden 2-unit AMS averages about 4½ stop alarms a week. Of these about 3½ occur after hours, and the rest during working hours.

More than half the alarms can be dealt with from home by dialling up the robot computer and carrying out a self-test prior to restating the machine.

"We take turns to be on call after hours and most stop alarms are relatively simple to deal with. It's much less intrusive on family life than getting up very early to milk in a conventional dairy," said Shannon.

Only about 2% of alarms have required the callout of a service technician.

Dr Davis says that the stop alarm rate is likely to be a worst case scenario. "Commercial farms would expect lower rates due to a better support network and greater pool of spares, both essential developments prior to adoption of this type of technology on farm," she said.

Dr Davis' conclusion from the labour audit is that AMS has the potential to create a much more sustainable working environment in terms of labour and lifestyle. "This will also assist in the recruitment and retention of staff on farms," she said.

FutureDairy is a national research project for the Australian dairy industry, aimed at addressing the challenges likely to occur in the next 20 years. FutureDairy's major sponsors are Dairy Australia, the Department of Primary Industries (NSW), DeLaval and the University of Sydney. Other supporters include, Melbourne University, the Dairy Research Foundation and DIDCO.

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MILKING RELATED TASKS

- fetching any cows that didn't voluntarily move out of a pasture break
- setting up temporary fences for new pasture breaks
- training new animals (cows and/or heifers) to the dairy
- hosing yards
- changing filter socks
- monitoring reports for animal alerts, system performance and machine performance alerts
- detecting and treating mastitis cows
- changing computer settings for cows (e.g. which cows should be auto-drafted)
- attending any cows with any milking associated problems – e.g. poor cup attachment
- refilling teat spray and chemical drums for auto-washing systems
- herd testing
- attending any alarms.