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## Dairy

# More dairy farms consider automation

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

A tight labor force and higher labor costs have more dairy farmers thinking about automation, but there's a lot to consider.

There are three main items that have to come together and operate in harmony — people, cows and computers, said Richard Franta, capital sales specialist with dairy equipment manufacturer DeLaval.

On the people side, it's thinking about who's going to manage the new operation and how the farmer or employee works with the equipment.

Another thing to consider is whether the automated equipment helps lower the labor amount or causes the farmer to invest more in training and development, he said.

"In cows, a lot of it is the basics," he said during the latest "Dairy Stream" podcast.

That means is the herd healthy and productive, are the stalls comfortable and well maintained, are the cows breeding back on time and



Capital Press File

**The economics of milking cows need to be considered in determining the best system, experts say.**

do they have good hoof health, he said.

"It's important to remember that milking systems harvest milk, the management of your cows is what produces it," he said.

The computer component is what farmers forget about in the equation when they start investigating automation, he said.

"They can be excellent caretakers of cows and manage employees well, but they haven't considered much about how this highly automated system runs and how they're going to have to work with that," he says.

He wants to ensure each farm has plans to train employees how to use the automation and computers

correctly and how to interpret the data the system produces, he said.

"We also need to plan for success by placing the robots or rotary in attractive, well-ventilated and -lit areas so that cows feel comfortable expressing their milk there," he said.

As for skill level, he's had farmers who have never owned a cell phone transition to automation. A person just needs to be able to adapt and learn. DeLaval can work with its computer system and herd-management platform to best identify what the farmer wants to measure and report that data in an easy-to-read format, he said.

"So I don't think you have to be super computer savvy. We definitely have those that are and those that aren't, and both can be successful in automation in dairy farming," he said.

As for maintaining equipment, a clean machine is a happy machine, he said.

"Keeping items free of dirt and debris helps keep them in good shape," he said.

"I also think it's really important to have a good relationship with your equipment dealer. Many farmers can take over maintenance of their equipment, but they need to buy parts and cleaning chemicals. Other farmers want to have the dealership do all the service and maintenance work," he said.

Both are viable, but it's important for a farmer to understand how much he'll be expecting to pay for parts, service and chemicals when he invests in a new piece of equipment, he said.

"Most people start out having the dealership do 100% of the maintenance, and then they learn and pick pieces along the way that they can invest their time in," he said.

DeLaval has training classes and online support to help farmers learn how to maintain equipment, he said.

"There's a lot of support in helping make sure the farmer has the tools, resources and information they need to be successful with their new automation system," he said.

# ROI, herd size will determine investment in robotics

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

Installing automation on a dairy can be a big investment, and the most important thing farmers want to know is the expected return on that investment, or ROI.

The best automation when it comes to ROI is specific to each dairy, "so we do take a lot of time to evaluate that," said Richard Franta, a capital sales specialist with DeLaval.

"You have to look at your dairy and see what your current gaps are and be able to understand how big of an investment you're looking to make in automation and what sort of money payback you're going to get from it over time," he said.

DeLaval has an ROI cal-

culator that uses information from a dairy's current system, production levels and other data to compare ROI of different automation systems, he said during the latest "Dairy Stream" podcast.

"That system generates data on what we'd expect your performance to be in a rotary or in robots," he said.

The size of the herd will also help dictate what a farmer is willing to spend and how he's trying to change his labor force, he said.

"If you're a medium-size herd, you could look at getting robots and be very efficient. But perhaps you could also look at getting a small rotary that can be operated by a single person," he said.

Investigating both of those options will help



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

**A cow is milked by a robot from DeLaval Dairy Service at the Abiqua Acres Dairy near Silverton, Ore.**

a farmer understand the change in his labor force, he said.

For a large herd, a farmer should dive deep into how

those items, you can better decide which direction we're heading," he said.

In addition to ROI and labor goals, there are other factors to consider when transitioning to automation from either a tie-stall stanchion barn or a parlor, he said.

First off for a stanchion barn is whether tie-stall cows are used to moving at all for their feed and water or have those been brought to them their entire life, he said.

"We don't simply unlock cows one day and expect them to start using a robot," he said.

Hoof health is another thing to consider. Cows will have to be able to comfortably move throughout the barn on a healthy set of

hooves and legs," he said.

"Having a plan for cow flow to the robot will be an important step in making the transition into robotics automation," he said.

Those cows could also benefit from milk meters if the farmer wants to stay with his pipeline in the tie-stall herd. If he's looking to expand, he could consider a small rotary, he said.

For a parlor herd, those free-stall cows are used to moving throughout the barn for feed, water and milking, he said.

But it takes good planning of how a new rotary or robot will be placed, whether the milk house is big enough and up to date or whether they have to add on to the facility, he said.



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