DAIRY FARMER STORIES

JENLAR HOLSTEINS AND BROWN SWISS

SERIES OVERVIEW

The UW-Madison Division of Extension Farm Management and Dairy Programs interviewed farmers who have installed robotic milking units on their farms and asked them to share their reasons, results, lessons learned, and advice for others thinking of making the change.

Their experiences can help better prepare others considering investing in automation and technology on the farm.

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What Drove Them to Change

Jenlar Holsteins and Brown Swiss is a family-owned dairy farm run by Larry and Jennifer Meyer, with help from Larry's parents and one full-time employee. The farm covers 450 acres and milks 130 cows, mostly Holsteins. Larry and Jennifer balanced full-time jobs and raising three children while transitioning into the farm business. To manage their busy schedules and improve their milking facility, they added two robotic milking units in 2017, along with a new milkhouse and office.

Key Points and Takeaways

- **Nature of Farm Work:** Automation changes farm work to focus more on maintenance and monitoring.
- **Animal Care:** Robotic systems provide valuable data for targeted animal care and treatment.
- **Research and Planning:** Thorough research and planning are essential before investing in automation, including understanding maintenance costs and potential challenges.
- **Community Support:** Community and support networks are invaluable for troubleshooting and advice.
- **Employee Satisfaction:** Automation can enhance employee gratification, leading to a more prideful workforce.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Continuous improvement is critical for the successful integration of automation in dairy farming.

What They Learned

- **Shifted time management:** Automation shifted their work to maintenance, calibration, and monitoring instead of freeing up extra time.
- **Improved animal care:** The robotic system accurately flags animals based on their activity, enhancing care.
- **Increased production:** Milk production rose from 2 to 2.8 milkings per day, with cows experiencing less competition and following natural behaviors, though milk fat content decreased.
- **Valuable operational insights:** The system provided valuable herd data, aiding in targeted treatments and reducing fertility treatments.
- **Higher employee satisfaction:** Job satisfaction and responsibility increased for their employee.
- **Enhanced efficiency:** Larry became skilled at maintaining the robots, which reduced expenses.
- **Anytime access:** The team can monitor herd metrics from anywhere.

> *"While the cost of operating the robots are significantly higher than we expected, for us robots were the right choice, providing more flexibility throughout the day. We are glad the cows are milked in this system."*

Advice for Others

- **Research:** Conduct thorough research and farm visits without dealers to ask critical questions.
- **Backups:** Use more than one robot per pen to keep things running if one breaks down.
- **Maintenance Costs:** Be aware of maintenance costs, which can be higher than initial estimates.

Strategy Moving Forward

- **Boost Employee Engagement:** Use automation to increase employees' responsibility and job fulfillment.
- **Focus on Improvement:** Capture efficiencies and learn from failures, working with dealers to improve support.
- **Enable Remote Monitoring:** Use technology to monitor herd information from anywhere.

Main Benefit

The ability to balance their off-farm jobs and family activities more effectively, reducing the need for constant manual labor and providing more time for other important tasks and personal commitments.

Biggest Drawback

Initial cash flow estimates were inaccurate, and they faced higher than expected costs for plumbing, electrical work, and upkeep.

Summary

Jenlar Holsteins and Brown Swiss transitioned to automation in 2017, which provided increased flexibility and improved time management, allowing the Meyers to balance off-farm jobs and family activities more effectively. However, they faced significant drawbacks with high maintenance costs and unexpected expenses, highlighting the importance of thorough planning and realistic cash flow estimates.

Be prepared for key challenges when investing in technology. Explore our self-assessment tool, designed with insights from real farm interviews, and take your next step with confidence. Visit farms.extension.wisc.edu/technology to get started today!

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