DAIRY FARMER STORIES

WIEGEL RIVERSIDE DAIRY

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

Wiegel Riverside Dairy, owned by Jason Wiegel, was purchased from his dad and uncle in 2022, and they work the farm together. The farm also employs a full-time herdsman, Brian, and part-time help for custom field work. They own 650 acres and milk 315 cows. Jason enjoyed milking cows but found the monotony of it tiresome for himself and employees, so in 2008, they replaced their double twelve parlor with four milking robots in their sand-bedded freestall shed. After nearly one million milkings, they upgraded in 2020 to a new setup with six robots, a four-row freestall shed, perimeter feeding, and recycled manure solids for bedding.

Key Points and Takeaways

- **Increased Efficiency:** Automation led to higher milk production per cow.
- **Stable Health Metrics:** Cow health remained stable, with a slight increase in somatic cell count due to bedding changes.
- **Employee Skills:** Employees with a higher skill level are valuable.
- **Cost Considerations:** Automation did not result in cost savings; operational costs increased.
- **Timely Upgrades:** Early upgrades are beneficial as costs tend to rise over time.
- **Routine Maintenance:** Regular maintenance of robots is crucial for longevity and cost savings.
- **Flexibility:** Automation provides more flexibility in managing farm tasks and affords more time for personal commitments.

What They Learned

- **On-call requirements:** Someone must always be on call, which can be stressful, but the reduction in physical labor is appreciated.
- **Newer systems run smoother:** The newer model of robotic milkers requires less maintenance and has fewer errors.
- **Upgrade as soon as you can:** Upgrades should be made sooner rather than later, as costs don't decrease over time.
- **Tech skills needed:** Everyone needs to interact with the computer system so a willingness to learn and access to quality training and support makes a difference.
- **Relationships are key:** Routine, timely service and maintenance are required along with skilled employees and advice from trusted, knowledgeable individuals.

"It doesn't get easier if you wait [to upgrade]."

Advice for Others

- Obtain realistic feedback from farmers who have implemented automation.
- Get accurate prices from reputable sources rather than relying on estimates.
- Visit farms that have adopted automation to gather firsthand information.
- Find good support for training and from service providers who know how to work with automated systems.

Strategy Moving Forward

- Perform routine service and maintenance on current robots to extend their lifespan. The farm's experience with robotic milkers allows them to fix most issues without calling the dealer, saving on service costs.
- Seek employees with a dairy or breeding background, technological skills, and a knack for troubleshooting.

Main Benefit

Robotic milking provides more flexibility, allowing more time for other tasks and eliminating the need to be home at specific times for milking.

Biggest Drawback

No cost savings were found with robotic milking; costs for feed, pellets, and electricity increased. Initial uncertainty about operating costs was a challenge.

Summary

Wiegel Riverside Dairy transitioned to automation in 2008 and upgraded in 2020, resulting in increased milk production and stable cow health metrics. The farm experienced labor savings and improved flexibility but faced higher operational costs. The transition required significant adjustments, and ongoing support and education are crucial for success.

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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Learn more about Automatic Milking Systems:
https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/technology