



Media Release
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Robotic dairy farm's year of success

One year on from opening, New Zealand's first commercial robotic dairy farm has exceeded expectations in a multitude of areas.

Despite a difficult year for many dairy farmers, the cows in this herd have produced above average milk production and some cows are now milking themselves three times a day, farm managers report.

Stradbrook Farm, the 80 ha robotic dairy operation set up by Winslow Ltd and launched last year, was the first of its kind in New Zealand. Until its opening, robotic milking (or automatic milking) in this country was limited to research farms.

Winslow was the first to set up a fully commercial entity with four Lely A3 Astronaut automatic milking machines, a series of automatic gates actioned by chips on the cows' collars, and many innovative comforts like special cushioned matting and automatic back massagers. Its cows wear collars that determine feed and milk regimes by sending electronic codes to automatic gates.

Farmers are catching on to the production, information and time-management benefits. Twenty Lely robotic milkers have been sold in the South Island so far, 16 of these through Winslow's Lely Center Ashburton and four through JJ's Lely Center Invercargill.

Winslow managing director Craig Carr said the farm was going from strength to strength. Stradbrook's herd had achieved above average production and was now on track to improve that by another 25% this season.

Lely Center Ashburton technical manager Paul Berdell has overseen the establishment, running and monitoring of the robotic farm through to the end of its first year.

He notes several key changes in the original farming plan which have influenced production positively:

- Redesigning the races to improve cow traffic and flexibility in pasture management
- Improving automatic cow traffic with optimised drafting and separation gates
- Shortening break times to encourage the cows to move around the farm more effectively.

Cows were voluntarily milking themselves up to three times a day as they crisscrossed the shed area more frequently, Berdell said.

"Of biggest note is the fact that we have had no major breakdowns in the whole year. We have had a couple of minor repairs but they are maintenance related due to the increased use of the machines by the cows.

“We have not needed any emergency servicing. With the Lely Astronaut machines averaging one regular and preventive service every two months, the technology really has been trouble free.

“In our first year we reached about 400kg milk solids per cow. Expectations were a bit higher but poor weather, low grass growth and the time taken for cows to train caused a lower production than we expected. However the cows still exceeded the New Zealand average of 307kg milk solids per season, and also the Ashburton average of 381kg milk solids per season.”

Other highlights of the year included low levels of mastitis, non-existent lameness and being able to sleep in to 7.30am most mornings.

Berdell says favourable spring conditions this year, an improved feed plan that includes Alkalage and having most of the herd already trained means the 500kg ms per cow this current season is well within reach.

After 12 months of automatic milking, Berdell has noticed a strong trend in cow’s preferences.

“Between 11pm and 1am in the morning is the most popular time for cows coming through to milk themselves. Now that wouldn’t suit a regular farmer.”

Looking forward, Winslow has recently employed one of the world’s top Lely robotic milking technicians – Thomas Matthews from New York State in America – to expand technical competence through technician training and farmer education. A total of five Lely technicians are now trained, two now based in Ashburton and three in Oamaru, compared with just one technician 12 months ago.

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Company profile of Winslow Ltd

Since purchasing Winslow Feeds feed mill in 2000, the Carr Agricultural Group has re-engineered the small mill and grown the Winslow Ltd company to become a leading developer of innovative farm feed and service solutions. Winslow Ltd has a ruminant feeds and nutrition division, a contracting division, seed division (including recently acquired Canterbury Seed) and a farm technology systems division. The Carr Agricultural Group has had a long history in servicing the farming sector started by Greg and Glenys Carr in the late 1970’s as baling contractors and farmers. Winslow Ltd featured in Deloitte’s Fast 50 last year and was also a finalist in the NBR Bayer Innovator Awards. See www.winslowltd.co.nz for more information.