



Popular: A cow patiently waits her turn while another is milked by a robot.

robot milking to expand thinking

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Visitors to the National Fieldays will experience all the realism of a working dairy farm with a new attraction this year of live robotic milking.

It is a first for Fieldays although a similar purpose-built robotic milking shed was set up at the Southern Field Days earlier this year and proved a popular attraction.

Technipharm chief executive Harmen Heesen says the display proved you could milk cows anywhere and gave the companies involved in the National Fieldays display some lessons on how to improve on the concept.

"It's a new attraction that demonstrates innovation in farming and that's what Fieldays is all about," he says. "We're basically building a miniature dairy farm for 10 dairy cows. It's the old story, if you've got one cow or a thousand cows you need the same kind of facilities.

"At Fieldays we want to take that to the next level whereby we do a little bit more about exploring what an alternative dairy model looks like," he says.

The companies are planning a linear display that allows visitors to walk through a cowhouse and see cows milked robotically. They will also have a stage set up for about 100 people to watch presentations explaining the whole system every couple of hours.

"It's an expensive exercise but we feel it's beneficial to visitors to Fieldays because it's all about expanding people's thinking and showing them there is more than one model available to milk cows."

He said New Zealand's traditional pasture-based grazing system was a great model, but there were other options for dairy farmers to extract more production and address some of the industry's environmental concerns.

"It includes robotic milking, but it also includes a level of housing and feeding so it will give people a first-hand opportunity to see what it looks like and talk to builders, consultants and robotics people who are all experts in their fields."

Partners in the display are the robotic milking machine manufacturers Lely New Zealand, the Timaru-based Cowhouse Construction, Technipharm and Heesen's Cowhouse consulting business and The Dairy House.

Most of the interest in automating milking is coming from privately-owned dairy farms, but there is also new interest from non-traditional dairying regions.

For example, some specialist cropping farmers were looking for more vertical integration in their business by setting up dairy units on their farms to convert

feed to milk through robotic milk processing units. Heesen said there were some very good cropping farmers thinking about converting to dairying and robotics offered them an opportunity, to set up a dairy farm without being tied to milking cows twice a day.



Technipharm chief Harmen Heesen.

Each of the partners delivers a different component of the whole package.

"We're not just about putting a structure in place and walking away," Heesen says. "Our whole objective is to be involved in the transition from one farming system into another and to support and guide that whole process for a number of years."

The concept of housing cows indoors had its critics a few years ago but Heesen says the discussion has turned around as the industry has accepted the system is working successfully here.

He says there is a groundswell of genuine interest in alternative dairy systems that is not driven by the high payout this year.

"It's driven by farmers trying to strategically think about where they need to be in the next couple of years.

"There's more people thinking outside the square and seeing that there are other ways of milking a cow that can be very profitable and sustainable, especially in terms of restricting nitrogen leaching and new water plans.

"With these models of housed cows and robotic milking, we can easily get leaching down to below 20kgs/ha. That's very easy to achieve," he says.