

## **Ten Questions on Precision Dairy Management with Jack Rodenburg**

Two years ago in March 2010, in Toronto, we held the First North American Conference on Precision Dairy Management. Jack Rodenburg was a driving force behind this highly successful conference.

Jack has spoken on dairy management and design of dairy cattle housing at many scientific and technical conferences around the world. Through his consulting business, Dairylogix, in Woodstock, Ontario, Canada, he has designed many new and renovated robotic milking barns. At a recent dairy housing design course for dairy farmers, Jack took a few minutes away from teaching to answer **10 questions on precision dairy management.**

### **1. Jack, in 2010, you said that Ontario was leading North America in the adoption of robotic milking and precision dairy management technology. Is Ontario still the leader in adoption of precision management in North America?**

Yes. Much of what is happening in precision technology in general is linked to robotic milking, and that is driven by labour costs and lifestyle on family run dairies. Industrial Ontario has high labour costs and dairies are the ideal size for robotics. Ontario is still leading but other areas are catching up. For example, pedometry has become a standard technology across Canada, and the USA is starting to go that way now as well.

### **2. What has changed in the technology in the last 2 years?**

Most of the technologies are getting better, and the best ones are developing a stronger connection to mainstream dairy equipment and service suppliers. That makes them more accessible and acceptable to farmers. Since development of new technology is all in private hands, it is impossible to know what is coming, but I have a sense that adoption is catching up with development.

### **3. What forces are at play in dairying that are leading dairy farmers to buy into precision management**

Higher labour costs is the main one, but other things come into play as well. For example in pedometry an aversion to needling and hormones is a factor, and interest in having better management information drives things like rumination monitoring and in line milk analysis for health and reproductive parameters.

In the US better economic returns are making it possible for farms to look at new technology investment again.

### **4. Is milk quota limiting adoption of technology?**

Stability in the market helps because there is reliable cash flow. A lot is happening quicker in markets where there are limits on increasing herd size, because farms in these areas can only improve income by increasing efficiency and productivity. In places where it is not practical to build a 3000 cow dairy, we need efficient family run operations and robotic milking is a great tool for them. Many other precision technologies are equally valuable on large farms, but when the alternative is to increase cash flow through more economy of scale using traditional tools there are more choices for new investment.

### **5. Robotic milking has been viewed as not economical in larger herds. Is that changing?**

If "larger" means 300 to 600 cows, herds in that size range are experiencing good results and good returns from investment in robotic milking. These herds especially appreciate the labour saving and the reduced demands on management to deal with employees. But if "large means herds over 1000 cows the uptake there is slower, although I think it is just a matter of time before that changes as well.

## **6. What is coming in the next 2-3 years?**

More commercial players in robotic milking, and more options to choose from in a more competitive marketplace. I also expect better integration of sensor data and better diagnostic capabilities made possible by bringing together information from different sources. For example, in diagnosing mastitis the standard today is to give the herdowner a set of really good data. What is coming is integration of all that data into one predictive value the farmer can use to make decisions. This will help us especially in the cow health area.

## **7. Is the field becoming more competitive or more consolidated?**

Both. There is consolidation of technologies within the bigger companies which provide market access, service and support, but as these companies put together their "packages" of precision technologies, this will lead to more competition in the marketplace.

**You spend your time consulting with producers who are changing over to robotic milking –**

## **8. Is there a certain type of farmer suited to changing to robotic milking?**

Yes. You need someone who is highly aware and a good manager, but willing to stand back and let the technology work. This is not always the same type of person who was a good manager with traditional technology.

## **9. What are their biggest needs?**

Willingness to change feeding practices, a good barn design, and perhaps a good technical understanding of what they are working with, and of course the industry support to give them this expertise.

## **10. What is the most exciting aspect of precision dairy management?**

To me, it is our ability to refocus on the individual cow. Grandpa was a good dairyman if he understood and responded to the individual cow, but without a lot of tools to work with he could only do this for 25 or 30 cows. Dad was driven by economic forces to learn to manage groups of cows in large herds and he lost the focus on the individual animals. Precision management technology allows us to focus back on the individual cow, and I am confident we can make her healthier, happier, more productive and more profitable as a result.

**Jack practices dairy barn design specializing in robotic milking under the name Dairylogix. His website is [www.dairylogix.com](http://www.dairylogix.com)**

-PDM Web editor

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