

When the cows come home

Cows and people are voluntarily walking into the new dairy at Bannister Downs, near Northcliffe in Western Australia. Two hours south of Bunbury, the revolutionary robotic dairy allows the 1900 lactating cows on the property to walk in for milking at almost any time of the day, where they can receive massages from rollers, and a decent feed while robots clean their udders and milk them. On Thursdays and Fridays, humans are welcome to watch the whole process, with a dedicated viewing gallery and cafe that serves the processed milk.

“We’re really happy to share what we’re doing and the technology is state-of-the-art,” says managing director of the dairy, Suzanne Daubney. “It’s mainly for a local audience at this stage, so we can work on improving things. All the feedback so far has been really positive.”

Although the tourism side of the new \$20 million dairy may eventually make a small profit, Suzanne says the key driver for building the viewing area and cafe was to counter some of the negativity expressed in the wider community about dairy production. “It’s more about raising the profile of agriculture and the professionalism of agriculture and the technology of agriculture, and demonstrating how well we look after our animals,” she says. “There’s massage brushes, there’s no stress at all, they’re chewing their cud while milking. It gives the consumer real satisfaction to see how happy the cows are.”



PETER BENNETTS

The robotic, voluntary milking system dairy on Bannister Downs.

The dairy is the fourth in Australia and the first in Western Australia to use robotic milking and a voluntary milking system. The milk is also processed on site. When the cows feel like being milked, they approach the dairy. Their individual tag is read and a series of gates directs them either into the dairy, to a feeding area, or if they are not ready to be milked again yet, perhaps to a different paddock. The cows may approach the dairy because of the pressure in their udders, or for feed or a massage. “My husband likens it to positive parenting – you need to make it a good experience for the cows so it’s worth their time coming up,” Suzanne says. If a cow has just calved, it can come in up to four times a day, but as its

milk production drops and it gets closer to being given a rest from milking, it will be restricted to once every 12 hours or so. “You don’t want to encourage them to come too often, because you don’t want them doing all that walking back to the dairy,” she says.

The robotic milker records milk productivity and flow from each teat, providing a very helpful early warning if there are any signs of a problem such as mastitis. “There are all sorts of things you can do if you catch it early enough,” Suzanne says.

She says they are still working out the best time to close the dairy for two hours a day to wash the machines. In hot weather, very few cows come in during the middle of the day, and few also come in between 11pm and 1am.

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