

New Technology

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rent facilities are adequate."

The basic concept of the robotic milker is that the cow can choose when she wants to be milked and enters into the stall when she feels her udder is getting full.

When the cow first approaches the stall, she is recognized by the computer system. The system determines her eligibility to be milked. If a cow was just milked a couple of hours ago, the system will not allow her into the stall.

If she is eligible to be milked, the cow enters the stall and is generally fed in the stall. The machine preps the cow and then attaches the teat cups to the udder using laser-sensing devices.

During the milking, milk flow is monitored and recorded and electrical current of the milk is

recorded. Mastitis would cause a different milk flow and current to occur, alerting the system to the problem.

The milk can be discarded if necessary and the teat cups are removed based on milk flow. Teats can be sprayed with teat dip if necessary. The cow is released, and the system is ready for the next cow. All robotic milking systems currently come with a pager system to alert the farmer when the system malfunctions.

The different robotic systems vary in the following ways: cow capacity, prep procedure, teat cup removal (either individual or all four at once), milk dumping capabilities, and space requirements.

Reed showed the group videos of three separate robotic milking systems, including the Lely Astronaut, Prolion, and Westfalia

Leonardo.

When a farmer installs a robotic milking system, he must make the following considerations. Cows must have free access to the robotic milker. The farmer must bring heifers into the system to teach them how to use it. The access to the feed alley should be through the system. There should be enough bunk space per cow.

The bedding source must be compatible with the type of robotic milker. One of the systems preps the cows' teats inside the teat cup. If a farmer uses sand bedding, the sand can cause abrasions to the teat by being forced around inside the teat cup.

There are also milk quality issues with the robotic milking systems, although most of these issues have been worked out in

Europe. Cases of contagious mastitis outbreaks have occurred in systems where proper flushing between cows did not occur. Although somatic cell counts did not increase with the robotic milkers, higher bacteria counts can occur depending on the frequency of cleaning, the milk cooling process, and the length of the milk lines.

"Regulators will be watching the systems closely to keep these issues from arising," said Reed.

The cost of the two milking systems Reed expects to be introduced in the United States ranges from \$150,000 to \$340,000. The Lely Astronaut is a one-unit system that has a capacity of 65 cows and costs \$150,000. The Universal Prolion

is a four-stall system capable of handling up to 150 cows. The first box and robotic milker cost \$175,000, while the other three stalls cost \$55,000 a piece.

"You want to make sure you have the appropriate number of cows to maximize the system," said Reed. "While 65 cows in the Universal Prolion would be ideal for the first stall, 85 cows would call for an additional stall but not use it to its full capacity."

"As I said before, although the robotic milkers are not for everyone, my predictions are that they will be introduced in the United States this year and will work," said Reed. "They may allow the family farm to increase cow numbers without hiring additional labor."

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