

Improving welfare for cows...and farmers

Lone Andersen is an organic dairy farmer from the west of Denmark. Along with her husband, she has been working with robotic technology since 2009 and she says "it has not only improved welfare for the cows, but also for us as farmers!" We spoke to her about it:

Would you like to introduce yourself and your farm

My husband and I have been running our dairy farm in Lyne in the west of Denmark since the early 80s. In 2009 we decided to convert to organic farming. We built a new barn for our cows which has a lot of robotic equipment: a feeding machine, milking machine and a cleaning and a brushing machine. The cows are allowed to roam freely, they are no longer tethered indoors as they were previously.



My husband was approaching 60 years old; he wanted to continue farming but thought it would be a good idea to reduce some of the labour. At the same time, we wanted to convert our farm to organic, meaning that the cows are outside during the summer months, and this usually increases the hard work. We also wanted to improve our cows' welfare. The dairy farm robot technology that we adopted allowed us to achieve all of these objectives.

How do these new approaches to farming improve welfare for both the farmer and the farm animals?

Each cow wears a connected bracelet and our smartphone works as our 'headquarters', from which we can control everything. We can easily track their movements, feeding habits and milk production.

There are now no ropes, the smartphone application allows us to move cows around. This means that once a cow has gone to feed, if I want her to go into another room (to see a vet for instance), I simply press a button on my smart phone, and a different gate opens and so the cow just follows the path.



The cows decide when they want to give milk. If a cow has a lot of milk, it can go to the milking robot and be milked, this relieves her of the pain she would have felt if she would have had to wait until the next routine milking. It is also great for us, no more 5am milking! Of course we are still around in the stables and field, but we are not restricted.

Furthermore, the cows can go and eat whenever they want to do so, and as the feed machine can identify each cow, we can adapt the amount of concentrate we give to every individual.

How has it changed the way you farm?

We do have some challenges in the summer: we have a system of smart gates outside to bring the cows in for milking and feeding, but sometimes have to give them some encouragement when the sun is shining and the clover is rich!

The robot technology we use doesn't replace the farmer, but you can use the hours in the day in another way. For instance by spending time in the field. Your relationship with the cows is different. The way we keep an eye on them is no longer during milking, it's when we change the straw in the resting area. We prepare the beds and at the same time we observe the cows, their behaviour, their ailments, their mood.

The way we now farm also allows me to do more and I am now involved in many other organisations, also working on farm policy. I work a lot on the issue of generational change in farms in my capacity as chairman for family farmers in Denmark. When I explain the technology we use, the combination of smartphone apps and a less restrictive lifestyle is very attractive to young farmers.

When I'm travelling I can manage the machines from a distance from my smartphone! My husband is of course still there to replace the straw in the stables, and keep an eye on the cows and the machines. He also, naturally, still looks after the calves and the young cattle as well as the fields.



What advice would you give other farmers wishing to bring innovative approaches into their farms?

Many farmers in Europe now have this integrated system. You have to like telephones and technology. You have to keep your phone with you day and night, you cannot switch it off! You also have to like data to a certain extent, without being an expert.

My husband didn't even know how to switch on a PC before we got this technology! But he agreed to learn it. And now he's a pro with this software.

We also have a good technological service. You have to be sure that you have someone who can help/support you in repairing the machines/fixing software bugs.

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Photos

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