

## Tilla-Bay Farms celebrates five years as a robotic dairy with open house

By Denise Porter for the Headlight-Herald | Dec 1, 2016

In 2010, dairy farmers Bart and Kurt Mizée had reached a point where they needed to carve more flexibility into their working day. Their answer was to install the first robotic dairy milking system in the Western U.S. the following year.

To date, the farm's three robots have milked the farmers' 180 cows nearly 1 million times. On average each cow visits a robot 2.8 times per day.

"Five years ago (other dairymen) thought we were crazy and now they realize it will work," said Kurt Mizée, the farm's fourth-generation owner. "We changed perceptions."

Tillamook County now has five robotic dairies, he said.

Six years ago, the Mizées were at a crossroads. Their herd had outgrown the double eight herringbone-style milking parlor. Both men said they felt the need to balance work and personal life and began discussing a newer, faster milking parlor.

Then, after watching a simulated robotics demonstration given by a dairy sales company in Tillamook, the partners agreed to research robotic milking units. They were drawn to the idea that with a robotic system, the milking parlor was available to each cow whenever she wanted to be milked, rather than on a specific schedule set by humans.

Integrating such a new technology on their farm wasn't a far stretch for this five-generation dairy farm family. Rudy Fenk, 90, is the farm's second-generation owner. "I was one of the first guys to go with the technology," recalled Fenk. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the new ideas."

Kurt Mizée traveled to Tulare, Calif. for the World Ag Expo, February, 2011 to see further robotic demonstrations and to speak with sales representatives.

While Kurt was at the expo his wife, Wendy, and daughter, Shelby, 8, died in an automobile accident. Kurt was faced with the reality of raising his son, Ryan, 5, as a single parent. Fewer hours at the farm became a necessity, rather than a hoped-for dream.

"For us, (this decision became a) quality of life issue," explained Kurt Mizée.

The farm's first two robots went to work December, 2011. They later added a third robot.

The first two months proved challenging, said Bart Mizée. Initially, "Kurt was more familiar with the technology and I was familiar with the traditional animal care. Once things smoothed out a little, I got more proficient in the technology stuff."

An exciting new challenge was learning about each cow in a digital way. Every cow has a transponder on her neck collar that digitally connects with the robot each time she's milked. The robot then tells the main computer how much milk she produces, how many steps she takes in the day, how much she eats while being milked and other information.

They can also detect if a cow is getting sick long before she shows physical symptoms by knowing if she moves less and eats less during the day. This information, Kurt Mizée said, means they can better give preventative care to each cow.

"How could you know that you were going to know every cow again in the way that your grandfather used to?" asked Kurt Mizée. "The method of getting the information is different, but it allows us to give each cow custom care."

"I still think it was the right move for us to head this direction," said Bart Mizée. "Pioneering it from a couple of different viewpoints has had its challenges."

One of the greatest challenges the family discovered was finding knowledgeable staff to service the units and walk farmers through the first few weeks as they transition from a conventional milking parlor to a robotic one.

Kurt solved this issue last year by launching his own business, "Priority Robotics of Tillamook." This new company focuses on the sales, installation and service of Lely Robotic Milking Systems. When Bart and Kurt launched their robotic dairy five years ago they said they didn't feel locally supported, yet through perseverance were able to succeed and now flourish.

Two years ago, Kurt remarried. His wife, also named Wendy, brought two daughters to the family and is a partner in the new business.

"Without the robots, we'd all be fine," Wendy Stevens-Mizée said. But having the robots has, "allowed him to be a dad. He can take the kids to school. On Christmas, we have a fire and open presents and those robots make that happen."

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