

## HAPPY COWS MAKE A HAPPY MARRIAGE

Gerard Lloyd says the low cost changes he made after attending CowTime's Shed Shake-up have saved time and reduced the frustration of milking. His wife, Robyn describes it more dramatically. "We save a lot of time and I don't argue with my husband as often in the shed anymore. It's improved our relationship!"

Dairying near Heywood in Victoria's western district, the couple expect it to take about 2½ hours to milk at the peak of the season. Originally built as a walkthrough in the mid-sixties, the dairy has been modified twice to its current set up as an 11-aside double-up herringbone. The only other change in almost 40 years has been an expansion of the circular yard.

But the autumn calving herd has expanded considerably in recent years, from 123 in 1998, when Gerard and Robyn began share farming for Robyn's father, to 187 last season and 220 this season. Plans for much-needed major renovations are on hold until milk prices improve.

Gerard said that the time taken milking was an issue, but the frustration was probably the biggest problem. The shed requires two milkers so Gerard does most milkings, assisted by either Robyn or apprentice Sarah Hall.

"Milking has been a very frustrating experience, largely due to poor cow flow. The cows didn't want to be there, and by the end of each milking, we didn't want to be there either," he said.

The theme of the Shed Shake-up was cow flow, with the emphasis on low cost changes that could make a big difference.

Gerard and Robyn put some of the suggestions into practice and are delighted with the results. They spent about \$300 changing the lighting at the dairy entry and exit and installing a backing gate switch in the pit. They agreed to avoid using the polypipe as much as possible, and changed the way they break in heifers.

Cow flow has improved dramatically, despite their 'less than ideal' set up. "It's amazing what a difference the light at the dairy exit makes. If we turn it off, the cows refuse to leave," said Gerard.

Gerard also adjusted a light that shines on the track leading up to the yard entrance, using a lower wattage globe and changing the angle so that it didn't shine directly in the cows eyes as they walked along.



Gerard and Robyn Lloyd

"Now the cows walk into the shed ready for milking, whereas before they'd wait on the track and it would take about 15 minutes to get them into the yard," he said.

The Lloyds simplified the way they handle heifers at the beginning of the season, allowing them a familiarisation visit to the dairy before calving. When the heifers join the milking herd, they are allowed to enter the dairy in whatever order they like, rather than intervening to ensure each heifer was between cows.

"We have never had such a settled batch of heifers so early in the season - it's been a dream," said Gerard. Improved cow flow means the milkers stay in the pit instead of going out in the yard and waving the polypipe to chase the next row of cows in. "It's only the last third of the herd - the stubborn old cows - that need a bit more encouragement to come in," said Gerard.

It means that the Lloyds are currently milking 203 cows in the same time it took to milk 187 last season and in a much more relaxed atmosphere. That equates to a 9% increase in cow throughput every day, from an investment of less than \$300. "Sometimes I even sing in the dairy these days! That's a welcome change from arguing with the cows and Robyn," said Gerard.

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