Honey, the robot's on the phone

By Alicia Dill
Iowa Farmer Today

MONONA — It's mid-morning on the Ehrhardt dairy farm located just off the River Bluffs Scenic Byway here, and a phone is ringing.

After glancing at the caller ID, Mark Ehrhardt is out the door without a word. Sandra, his wife, crosses the room after her husband and answers it.

"Mark, you don't ignore the robot calling," she says, when her husband comes back in to confirm what the robot had to say. "That's technology, you are sitting here and that thing calls you."

This time, the end-for-use buckets are full and need to be emptied. Otherwise, the caller, a Lely robotic milking system the Ehrhardts named "Harold," is going to dump the milk down the drain.

There are many more calls like this from Harold in the Ehrhardt's future after their recent upgrades to a robotic milking system.

Although the Northeast Iowa couple is looking forward to a more ergonomically friendly workload, it wasn't easy switching to robotics.

"I did some reading that every 10 years, everybody upgrades or does some sort of remodel, and honestly, we have not done anything in the parlor since 1981," Sandra says.

"You've got 29 years of working in that same facility. It was time, it needed to be renovated. "The cows stood 28 inches off the ground, and you constantly stoop to put the milkers on."

When the Ehrhardts moved to their home once farmed by Sandra's father, the original Harold (not the robot), the couple bought a computerized-feeding system, the latest in technology at the time.

"It was so cutting edge at the time and so new I don't think it was quite ready to be released," she says.

"The company went under and when no one purchased the company, you couldn't get tags, you couldn't get serviced. It became obsolete."

For the past three decades, the Ehrhardts were cautious when it came to any other big purchases for the operation.

"Our tractors are 30 years old," Sandra says. "We are not the kind of people that have to have new equipment to make ourselves more efficient time wise."

But, after seeing the robotics in action at a Wisconsin farm show, the Ehrhardts became interested in the idea of continuing their operation with a Lely.

"I am going to be 50, and he's over that. It's not something we want to do for another 15 years is milk cows," Sandra says. "It will keep us in the industry, and hopefully, we can transition it to the next generation in time."

The idea came to fruition after an energy audit with their local co-op, Allamakee-Clayton Electric REC in Postville.

John Molumby, a co-op rep
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EPA taking closer look at feedlots

Feedlot

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Trowbridge, who manages the feedlots in Fremont and Mills counties since 2006, Trowbridge says. "The solids settle in the basin, and the liquid is drained off into the vegetative area." The feedlot has used the system since 2006. Trowbridge says it was part of a pilot project through Iowa State University that ended last April. He says he is applying for a five-year permit to continue to use the system.

Gregory Feedlots includes a 5,500-head lot in Fremont County and a 2,000-head feedlot in Mills County. The grass in the vegetative treatment area is harvested and used as hay in the cattle-feeding operation. Trowbridge says the grass must be harvested as part of the program.

Water flow into the vegetative area is controlled through a gate system, he says. "That makes sure the water flows out evenly," Trowbridge says. "Water cannot get out of the vegetative treatment area unless we release it.

A berm system is in place to keep it in there, and if we have a 25-year rain, such as a 5-inch rain, we can legally discharge." When feedlots are scraped, he says manure is stockpiled in soybean fields and applied in the fall to ground that will grow corn the following year.

The system must be constantly monitored, Trowbridge adds. "We have test wells in the vegetative treatment area, we do soil samples, things like that to make sure we are in compliance," he says. "It takes a lot of time, but it needs to be done.

Cattle feedlots with a one-time capacity of at least 1,000 head have had to comply with EPA regulations for several years as part of the Clean Water Act, says Eldon McAfee, a Des Moines attorney who works with producers and livestock groups.

But, he says smaller feedlots are learning they might not be exempt from EPA regulations.

"The EPA has the authority under the Clean Water Act. In the 1970s, much of that was designated to the DNR (Department of Natural Resources), but EPA can still come in and do inspections of feedlots," McAfee says.

"But, in the early 2000s, the Iowa plan was devised that gave open feedlots until 2006 to comply with regulations. "Since then, the EPA has come into the state and started inspecting open feedlots and combination confinement and open feedlots to make sure they are in compliance," McAfee says.

McAfee says a feedlot is not required to have a permit if manure is not discharged.

"The EPA came in last winter and talked to us a few and said they are discharging," he says. "The feedlots believed they were not discharging, and when that happened, the EPA brought action against them.

In many cases, producers were hoping for the grant money but were not counting on it.

They also applied for and received $2,000 from the Farm Energy Working Group, which was a different proposal. This is the first robotic milking grant the USDA has ever wanted to do, Mark says.

"The cows have gone up in production, in their consistency, in their electrical savings, Sandra says. "It's a better load on the power lines, it's a nice even load," Mark says.

And, just as the 60 dairy cows are training on the new equipment, the Ehrhardts are finding new ways to spend their free time.