

Advice on buying used robots

Savings can be made buying second-hand automated milking systems, but farmers should be aware of the potential drawbacks. **Shirley Macmillan** reports



PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK, GARETH JONES

Buying a second-hand robotic milker can help reduce start-up costs or add capacity to an existing setup. However, buyers must be aware that parts can become obsolete, new models may not be compatible with previous versions and having the local dealership onside is essential for installation, servicing and call-outs.

Growing interest

This advice is from independent robotic milking consultant Gareth Jones, based in Carmarthenshire, who is seeing a growing interest among farmers looking to buy used machines. Some units are on the market because dairy farmers are exiting milk production, others

because they are returning to conventional parlours.

Gareth says that second-hand automated milking machines slot into different scenarios: from gaining extra capacity in a grazing system (batch milking cows twice a day), to farms seeking a model of the brand they already use that will integrate with their existing setup. Adding a cost-effective robot to a system means the machines do not have to work so hard, he explains.

"The harder you work these machines,



Gareth Jones

the more issues you will have, from any brand. If a farm has 120 cows on two machines, averaging 35 litres, those robots will be working flat out. If they can buy three machines second-hand, it takes the pressure off – there will be 50 cows maximum for a single box – and makes the economics stack up better. They could go up to 150 cows as they are not driving the machines so hard," he says.

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Adding a robot to an automated setup eases the workload on the system

Do the sums

But as with buying a used car, Gareth points out the importance of getting the machine checked over before purchase – then do the sums thoroughly. “You need an idea of its history – go and look at it to make an assessment, and do your homework,” he advises.

An eight- to 10-year-old robot may be priced for sale at about £25,000, which compares favourably with a new starting price of £100,000. However, while they might be easier to relocate than a milking parlour because

they are modular, removal, installation and any software upgrade must be factored into the overall cost. Robots need to be installed on the new farm, which means full integration with the farm’s software and all data fed into the same computer. “This might result in a £45,000 cost by the time it is up and running on its new farm,” he adds.

Some companies keep second-hand robots in-house to refurbish and sell them to existing customers who want an additional box. Depending on the manufacturer, Gareth says they may insist on a service contract, even for a second-hand model, or will charge full price for any breakdowns. Other companies are more flexible and might provide parts if farm labour does the work and they are happy to train farmers.

Can parts be sourced?

“Make sure you can source parts,” he warns. “People buying second-hand who are mechanically minded can do the servicing themselves. However, most will need a service contract through an approved dealership that is a member of the Milking Equipment Association. Conventional parlours are serviced about once a year, whereas a robot is serviced three or four times because it is running 24 hours a day for 365 days.”

Cooling equipment is another cost-effective purchase second-hand. Bulk tanks are quite easy to source, says Gareth, and can be adapted to make them robot-ready. A buffer tank is another good option as just one is required for a robot system.

Size will vary depending on the number of robots on the farm, he says, as they are used to carry on milking while the main bulk tank is being emptied and cleaned. “This can take up to an hour-and-a-half, so if you have every-day collection, then you could be losing up to 10 milkings a robot each day without a buffer tank,” he explains. ■



Second-hand tanks are cost effective

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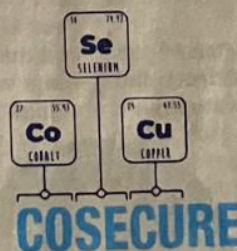
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