

**Gerrit Wensink**

Gerrit and Margriet Wensink emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada, where they run Hoenhorst Farms – the largest robot milking operation in Ontario.



Number of dairy cows:	<b>360</b>
Number of young stock:	<b>270</b>
Farm size (hectares):	<b>310</b>
Average 305-day yield (kg):	<b>10,000 4.00 3.30</b>
Number of milking robots:	<b>Six</b>



Gerrit Wensink



Robots occupy an island in the middle of the cow house



Calves are fed by an automated drinking station



The cows enjoy a weekly 'pedicure'



There's a calm atmosphere in the free-stall barn

**Gerrit Wensink: "We've got rid of assembly line work on our farm"**

**It's all in the detail**

Gerrit and Margriet Wensink own 360 head of dairy cows in Canada. For two years now they have been milked using a robotic system. As a result, synchronisation is no longer necessary and stress-related disorders are less common.

text **Florus Pellikaan**

After an extensive tour of Hoenhorst Farms, you get the feeling as a visitor that managing a dairy operation with 360 cows isn't all that difficult. The tranquillity that prevails on this farm – the largest in the Canadian province of Ontario to use a robotic milking system – makes a deep impression. Gerrit and Margriet Wensink have designed and organised the farm in Innerkip down to the very last detail. All the work is carried out according to daily schedules and weekly planning.

**People-friendly robots**

The Wensinks are originally from the Netherlands. They bought a 40-hectare farm in Canada, built a dairy barn and tried every year to milk as many cows and get as large a milk quota as they could. By 2008 they were milking a herd of 280 cows three times a day in a 230-place free stall barn. It was high time for the next step, and so they built a new cow house with 360 stalls and six milking robots on an island in the middle.

"The main reason for choosing the robotic milking system was to save on

labour," says Gerrit. "We were employing five part-time milkers and whenever we looked for a replacement we found that fewer applicants were applying," he explains. "Who in his right mind wants to spend a few hours attaching clusters at four in the morning or ten in the evening?"

"Now, we have completely got rid of the production-line type of work on our unit. And when you do that, you immediately get a different kind of workforce.

"These days our employees are trained in animal husbandry or as vet assistants and they work here because they enjoy being among the cows." According to Gerrit, robotic milking is not only more people friendly, it's more animal friendly too.

"It used to be normal for the cows to stand for more than an hour in the holding pen, packed close together, which they disliked. Now the cows themselves can choose when they want to be milked and we notice that the frequency with which heifers visit the robot system is above average between midnight and four in the morning."

The biggest advantage of milking with robots, he says, is the immensely calm atmosphere in the barn.

"The behaviour of the cows is much more relaxed and we see far fewer stress-related conditions, such as lameness and fertility problems."

Gerrit stopped synchronising the cows when he started milking with robots. "We are now able to inseminate approximately 85% of the cows and nearly 100% of the heifers using the Heatime heat detection system.

"The average number of inseminations before conception is 2.2, the pregnancy rate is 27 and the calving interval is 375 days."

The milking robots have cut the Hoenhorst workforce back from eight to three. All the work is done between six in the morning and half past two in the afternoon.

During the rest of the day, only one person comes in from four to seven in the evening to feed the calves and help cows who need assistance through the robotic system.

**Higher milk constituents**

The average milk production of the cows has not increased as a result of robotic milking. "We have gone from milking exactly three times daily to between 3.2 and 3.4 milkings, but that's spread more or less throughout the day.

Milk yield has fallen slightly, but butterfat and protein are higher." Average yield is 10,000kg of milk with 4.0% fat and 3.3% protein in 305 days.

Gerrit's breeding strategy is simple. He uses a maximum of two bulls – one for the cows and one for the heifers. The bulls must score highly for ease of calving, with hind legs inclined to the right, and the cell count should be better than average.

Out of all the bulls that meet these requirements, Gerrit chooses the bull with most kilogrammes of fat and

protein. "I studied cattle breeding at Wageningen University and what I've learned is that the more factors you look at, the less progress you make. It's no good talking to me about height, for example. You get no benefit from all those bones – they're just stuck behind railings in the pens."

He breeds 95% of heifers within 15 months. "I want to keep inventory costs as low as possible. Two months' extra feed for near-adult animals is very expensive. Our heifers are calving with a body weight of 550kg."

In order to achieve that weight, the

pressure is on right from the start when feeding the calves.

Immediately after birth, four litres of colostrum are poured into the calves, and later on they get a maximum of 14 litres of whole milk per day, fed through an automated calf drinking station.

**Preferred milk price**

During the next few years, Gerrit and Margriet would like to expand a bit more. However, they are faced with the problem that because of the current quota regulations, it is almost impossible to buy extra milk quota.

"We bid every month on the quota-exchange market, but we never get more than a quarter of a cow's milk production. The Canadian quota system has the advantage that we get around 43.5ppl for our milk, but expansion is right out.

"Efficient farms have 45% of the gross milk price available for interest, taxes, repayments and depreciation. Anyone can make money in dairy farming, which means that inefficient operations can survive as well, and that isn't healthy," says Gerrit. "From our point of view, we'd like to see milk prices a bit lower with more opportunities for expansion."

*Robotic milking is not only more people-friendly, it's more animal-friendly too*

