

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

By Ashley Howlett

Return of Handheld Radios

Communication between cows and people has increased through more technology use. With the large variety of technology available, producers are always looking for the most reliable and efficient forms of connecting cows and people. For people to people communication, cell phones have been an easy form of connection. However, some farms have continued to use hand held radios and more farms are considering going back to them. Why? – improved communication, safety and accountability.

Farms on the dairy side of operations most commonly give radios to all employees except the milking crew, who have access to a radio in the office. The immediate call and responses provide a quick way to get to everyone's attention and less time is spent trying to get ahold of coworkers through individual cell phone calls. This can be useful when a part or tool is needed but it's not close by. Being able to ask who's closest can help employees continue their task when someone is available to deliver what is needed.

Radios are also helpful for work in the barn. Employees can ask who's closest to a computer to look up a cow that may be in heat or may need treatment.

Safety also benefits from radio use. Steve Porter of Porterdale Farms in Adams Center, NY says that using radios to direct people and equipment is a major advantage. Most farms use radios during harvesting, where cell phone use is prohibited. Although cell phones allow for connection, its other uses can be distracting. Some farms have started using radios in an effort to ban or limit cell phone use to mitigate the risk of distractions and injuries.

Aside from reducing distractions and accidents caused by cell phone use, radios also make everyone more accountable for what they say. With transparent conversations, coworkers know who is covering a particular task. Communication can be more efficient, effective and positive over a radio versus a cell phone. Being conscious of what's said and who is hearing your conversation can help set an example and build a positive culture within your business.

Some NY farm partners were asked about handheld radio use on their farms. **Jeff True** is from True Farms in Perry, NY. They have used radios for 15 years. **John Mueller** of Willow Bend Farm in Clifton Springs, NY began using radios about 10 years ago but has moved radio use from the barns to mostly for cropping operations. **Diesel Hitt** of Windsong Dairy has been using radios since they began farming seven years ago in Adams Center, NY. **Steve Porter** is with Porterdale Farms in Adams Center, NY and

Handheld radios can improve communication, safety, and accountability on farms.

stresses the safety advantage of using radios instead of cell phones. **Mike McMahon** is with EZ Acres in Homer, NY. Their farm has used radios for 30 years.

How have handheld radios improved communication on your farm?

Jeff True: The biggest benefit of radios is the feeder to barn crew communication. Being able to quickly ask who's close to the computer to answer a question or telling the feeder how many cow movements occurred provides instantaneous communication.

John Mueller: Being able to communicate with everyone all at once is one of the best advantages.

Diesel Hitt: Quickly and easily getting ahold of people to help with a project or task is a big advantage.

Steve Porter: Safety has been a key point with the radios. Being able to help people direct equipment has been really helpful. The radios have helped build comraderie between the employees by tying the whole farm together.

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What challenges came with the radios and do you have any advice for people looking into buying radios?

Jeff True: Buy them from a reputable dealer that will service them. Off-brand radios come and go, so buy from a name brand company with a dealer close by. Multiple channels are helpful to switch between the harvesting/trucking crew channel to the barn crew. If you want to have a more private conversation, it can be held on a channel not regularly used.

Mike McMahon: The biggest challenge with handhelds are getting employees to return them to their charger at the end of the day. Putting a name on each radio with a label maker has helped mitigate this. Having a good technician work with the radios is important and upgrading to lithium batteries for longer life has helped.

The cost of one handheld radio is anywhere from \$200 to

\$500. The initial investment in radios is a tough pill to swallow, but those using the radios on a day to day basis don't regret their investment. Employees at True Farms, Porterdale Farm, and McMahon's EZ Acres are responsible for keeping their own radios charged and cared for. By understanding the costs of the radios, more care and caution is taken by employees using them.

Farms considering buying radios should look further at how the added communication may fit into day to day management and how they could eliminate some unnecessary cell phone use on-farm. Cell phones are a great form of technology and communication but can easily be distracting and dangerous. Improving the communication, safety and accountability of your farm team can provide a positive impact in your dairy business.

"I cannot imagine operating without radios as they have been a critical part of our communication protocols for 30 years," says Mike McMahon. □

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new technologies due to waiting for something better. For example, the next iPhone/plant/cow monitoring system that is released will inevitably be better, but taking that mindset too far could lead to your farm falling behind. However, sometimes it will be worth waiting for a later model to be released. In other cases when obsolescence is quite likely, another strategy is to consider how easily your technology or process can be updated. Partial obsolescence is better than having to adopt something entirely new. For example, some companies promote rotary parlors that can be relatively more easily upgraded as robotics become more cost effective. There are no easy answers for these issues, just different options that must be carefully evaluated.

What is the exit strategy if doesn't work?

All farms take risks, and it is inevitable that not all decisions will be successful, or that some technologies will fail or not work

as intended. Fear of failure can easily prevent farms from making investments that in most situations would increase their bottom line. While it is important to plan to avoid such situations, it may also be prudent to take measured risks where failure is an option, while also planning an exit strategy. Some technologies may be more irreversible than others, and some may have higher "salvage" value than others. Understanding your potential options under failure allows you to develop an exit strategy. The basic approach is that, "Under most scenarios this technology will work well and pay off for our operation, but in case it doesn't, we will..." Potential strategies can range from just going back to what was done before, to selling the technology, to walking away from it for \$0 return and trying something different. □

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