



Robotics on Dairy Farms are Increasing in Popularity

by Matt Lippert, Regional Dairy Educator

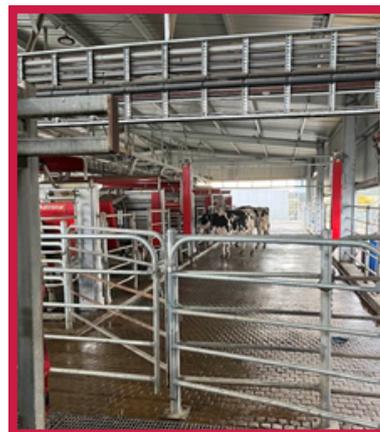
Dairy farming is a high labor industry, instead of having one concentrated harvest season, milk must be harvested multiple times a day, year around. In addition to milking there is feeding, handling manure, and general supervision of animal welfare. As farms become larger and fewer, the need for non-family labor has dramatically increased. Even on small farms where all or most of the labor is family labor there is a call for tools that provide some flexibility to the work day.

Robotics answer this need. It can be more than milking, which many people are aware of. There are robots to push up feed in the manger, robots to mix precise rations for the cows, even manure collecting robots that operate similar to self-operating vacuum cleaners in the home.

As these systems replace labor for technology and capital, they can be high maintenance, high investment and not for everyone. Extension has moved beyond hosting open-farm events at the farms of early adapters of robotic (or AMS, automated milking system) technology. We now host users groups where producers discuss topics important to them. Some of these topics include, pellet cost and pellet quality, a tradeoff at the milking station. Differing cow-stall, density recommendations for robotic farms vs. conventional farms. Hoof care, skipping using feed in the robot completely, how cows move through the pens- guided flow vs. non-directed, how to encourage or discourage visits to the robot station depending on how many visits cows are making. There are many questions users find value in sharing experiences with other robot users of the same or different brands, not necessarily under the guidance of their dealer.

Robots have a niche for extremely large dairies and also for smaller dairies, but for each there are different considerations.

Extension will be hosting a robotic field day at two dairies in Central Wisconsin on March 17 at the Peissig dairy in Dorchester and Heeg Brothers, Colby. This follows many different user group discussions and open houses held throughout the area over the last several years.



From Ideas to Action: The Power of Facilitation & Strategic Planning

by Kayla Rombalski, Community Development Educator



“Facilitative behaviors and skills are essential for anyone who wants to work collaboratively in groups and organizations. Facilitative skills honor, enhance, and focus the wisdom and knowledge that lay dormant in most groups.”

- Foreword to The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making

Facilitation has quietly become one of the most important skills in my toolbox as an Extension educator. Whether I am helping an organization clarify its direction, guiding coalitions through strategic decisions, or supporting teams in difficult conversations, I've seen how the right process and a neutral guide can transform group work.

Today's organizations operate in complex environments with limited resources and high expectations for collaboration. They need spaces where people feel heard and where ideas can be organized into actionable direction. This is where facilitation comes in. A good facilitator helps the group see the big picture, stay focused, and work through trouble spots that arise.

I am currently working with the Wood County Health Department to update its Strategic Plan for the next two years. This project includes:

- Collecting data on current programs, performance, and community needs
- Gathering staff and stakeholder input
- Analyzing trends and organizational capacity
- Identifying actionable strategic priorities
- Supporting staff in crafting meaningful objectives and measures

Although the process relies on data and analysis, it is equally grounded in relationships. Strategic planning is not only about choosing what to do, but also about building alignment, trust, and shared ownership so the plan is implemented with energy and commitment. Outside of the Health Department, I've done similar work with FOCUS and the Stevens Point Fire Department and was recently brought in as an external facilitator for the Wisconsin DNR's Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.

“Facilitators act a lot like referees who bring structure and order without interfering with the action.”

- Facilitation at a Glance! by Ingrid Bens

The Power of Facilitation & Strategic Planning - Continued

Facilitation also shows up in everyday work, especially in meetings. I recently presented at Marathon County's Imagine Day, a professional development program for county employees held on MLK Day. The session, titled "I Have an Agenda, Now What," focused on helping staff to lead better meetings, navigate group dynamics, and build consensus.

Even in a short 45-minute session, we worked through real-life examples, troubleshoot challenging situations, and explored tools that make meetings more efficient and human-centered. The presentation was a special request from staff who felt they needed to strengthen these skills. It's no surprise: more than 62 million meetings take place each day in the United States. No wonder effective meeting facilitation is a skill in high demand.

Extension educators are valuable third-party facilitators for strategic planning and meetings, and I feel fortunate to do this work to build the capacity of organizations in Wood County and Central Wisconsin. Facilitation gives teams the structure and support they need to do their best thinking. When we create space for purposeful collaboration, we strengthen decisions, relationships, and ultimately, our communities.



Grant Writing Basics - Upcoming Virtual Workshops

Extension's free **Grant Writing Basics Virtual Workshops** will again be offered in 2026. These sessions provide essential training to help participants navigate grant applications with greater confidence and clarity. In just two hours, attendees walk away with practical tools, step-by-step guidance, and a better understanding of how to develop compelling, fundable proposals.

The spring workshops will be held **Monday, April 27, 2026** from 6-8 pm and **Tuesday, April 28, 2026**, from 12-2pm. Each workshop is a standalone two-hour session. The workshops are free, and registration is required. To register go to: <https://go.wisc.edu/grantwriting> or call Extension at (715) 421-8445.

Additional workshops will be held this fall on Monday, September 21, from Noon to 2pm and on Tuesday, September 22 from 6-8 pm. Registration for all dates can be done at the website; <https://go.wisc.edu/grantwriting>

Investing time in learning grant-writing fundamentals can open doors to new opportunities, expand programs, and strengthen community development initiatives. Whether you're brand new to grants or looking to refresh your skills, this workshop provides a supportive and accessible place to begin.