

# Debate looming on housing cows – West

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**NEW ZEALAND** is warming to the idea of housing cows but a debate looms on the issue, says the outgoing chairman of HerdHomes, Dr Andy West.

West, vice-chancellor of Lincoln University, resigned last month from HerdHomes board after four years.

He says farmers and scientists are becoming more ready to accept the need for cow shelters. The debate will be whether or not cows should be housed 365 days yearly, 24 hours daily.

"The public has wanted chickens out of cages and pigs out of crates, though of course often both of those species remain permanently housed," he told *Dairy News*.

"Will the NZ public want cows to spend at least some time of a day or a season on grass, and if so how much? That is a yet-

to-be-answered question.

"Cows are permanently housed in some parts of the world and goats are often permanently housed in New Zealand.

"It will be interesting to see if 24 hour/365 day housing of cows will ultimately be acceptable in New Zealand. We often like to market our food as produced from animals that thrive out in pastures and imply this is natural, thus so too by implication is our food."

West says he cannot say whether the public and the Government will allow the country to move away from that market positioning.

HerdHomes founder Tom Pow believes cow shelters accessible to animals most of the year will be common; full-time housing or full pasture-grazing will also be practised.

Pow says cow shelters will allow flexibility: cows can be inside 24/7 for short periods or just stroll back from the paddock for shade and a feed top-up.

"Also for managing environmental caps it is easy; don't drop stocking rates or production limits, just de-stock at pressure times. "That could be two-hour, twice-a-day grazing to reduce nitrogen from urine or a similar time on paddocks during high rainfall. Even the collected effluent can be used as off-farm fertiliser applied to a neighbour's farm to keep under controlled levels of N and P."

Critics of housing cows say it is a step closer to 'factory farming' and a move away from pasture-based farming, the cornerstone of dairying in New Zealand. But West points out the "total package" of cow shelters.

"In the case of HerdHomes this partial housing system of farming was invented by a New Zealand dairy farmer to protect soils from compaction and pastures from overgrazing.

"Other benefits were then developed such as using the HerdHomes shelters to protect cows from conditions too hot or too cold, for calving, feeding, effluent capture and, later, sophisticated environmental management. So there is no obligation to use a shelter or barn for what is still rather quaintly termed supplementary feeding."

West says he thinks shelters are the future of dairy and aspects of beef farming.



Debate on whether cows should be housed is coming, says Dr Andy West.

Cows don't have to be on a pasture for 24 hours a day to eat enough, he adds. "So having them off pas-

tures and in barns for part of the day – and at times in winter maybe all day – provides significant benefit.

"If you give cows a choice they will often choose shelter. Moreover, barns that efficiently cap-

ture effluent [are important for managing] within increasingly precise environmental regulations."

## WEST VACATES THE CHAIR

LINCOLN UNIVERSITY vice-chancellor Dr Andy West has stepped down as chairman of HerdHomes.

West says he has enjoyed four years of chairing an agribusiness developed using New Zealand science.

"Demand for HerdHomes is high and growing rapidly, so I am satisfied with my contribution to this impressive, 100% New Zealand agribusiness," he told *Dairy News*.

West says changing commitments in his personal life and ongoing commitments in professional life led to his decision.

HerdHomes founder Tom Pow says West has been a great leader, but "due to his



Andy West

commitments to the wider agri-business sector and the strong position of HerdHomes this was the right time for him to step down."

Pow says West's science

background and drive to better New Zealand's agriculture section has been impressive.

"Blend his science with the inventive nature of our clients, many of whom lead sections of our industry, then success and new inventions flowed.

"It is this combination of inventions and then science that has always lead major change in industry.

"Behind all successful inventors are successful investors; we now have strong working relationship with banks since they have identified our clients' many successes. Our working relationship with AgResearch scientists grows as we try to understand new outcomes from our inventions."

## COWS SAVE ENERGY

ANDY WEST says cow shelters help cows save energy.

HerdHomes shelters protect cows from extreme cold and hot weather, he points out.

"One reason farmers can record up to 25% increase in profitability after about three years of effectively using a HerdHomes farming system is that cows put less energy into staying warm or cool and more energy into producing milk."



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