

Dairy man is hands-on in China

Kiwis' efforts to export agri-tech to the world resonate with tales of entrepreneurs jamming equipment into suitcases, booking a flight and heading off to sell it. It is no small task to jam a rotary cowshed into your luggage but passionate engineer and businessman David Morris has been doing for over 30 years, putting NZ dairy technology into some of the world's most remote spots. He showed **Richard Rennie** what he's up to in China.

WHEN David Morris talks to his dairy farmer customers on some

windblown steppe in Russia or a wide, dry plain in China as they survey their next dairy farm site they soon realise they are not talking to someone who simply works for an agri-tech company.

In Morris they get a man who has spent the better part of his life perfecting the rotary milking platform, a New Zealand creation he has taken to some extreme farming regions throughout continental Asia and Russia.

Several years ago, just after selling the first rotary platform to China from his Matamata company, Rotary Platforms, he sold the firm to Waikato Milking Systems, where he remains today.

The business had just come out of the halcyon growth period in NZ where expansion, largely in Canterbury and Southland, had pushed construction up to a rate of 100 platforms a year.

However, Morris could see the potential that also lay in China's moves to tighten up its dairy production system in the aftermath of the San Lu melamine scandal.

Chinese authorities intended to shorten the gap between milk and mouths while rigorously enforcing quality standards. To do so included seeking out the best in global technology to help industrialise and scale up the sector.

The one platform in China has become 40 and 10 in Russia with the order book looking healthy well into this year and beyond.

It is evidence that despite working for rather than owning the company for the past seven years Morris's passion for the product and who he sells it to has by no means diminished.

"The Chinese particularly like doing business with us. They appreciate the human touch we bring to the projects, listening to what it is they want and making sure they are not simply getting an off-the-shelf, out-of-the-box product when it comes to assembly time."

Ever humble, he also credits much of the recent success to the strong support offered back home from Waikato's base in Hamilton



DOING IT: Waikato Milking Systems China country manager David Morris is taking New Zealand agri-tech to China.

and the loyal crew he has on the ground in China, including his young service/product manager, translator and occasional driver Michael Liu Jianmin.

After a lifetime's self-employment Morris has also retained the prudent approach to travel abroad one takes when they are paying the bill themselves.

He eschews business class for a premium economy seat overnight from Auckland, travelling in a low-cost rental and bunking down with construction staff at the local hotel if possible.

But it was that move that twice added to his list of road stories about his travels.

"I decided to stay in the local budget three-star hotel with the construction crew on a project only to be woken after midnight by constant banging on my door, which I initially decided to ignore."

When the banging failed to stop he cracked it open to find a

policeman demanding in Chinese that he get up and out of the place.

“*I spent a fair few freezing kilometres literally pushing the four-wheel-drive to get us through the snow drifts, all the while worried about how dangerous it was going to be coming down the other side.*

David Morris
Waikato Milking Systems

"As a foreigner you are required to only stay in hotels registered for foreigners, usually 4-5 star hotels and that is not where I was."

After much negotiation and

translation he was required to bundle up his gear and follow the flashing lights for 30km in the work truck to an officially sanctioned hotel.

Morris's experiences building a beachhead for kiwi agri-tech in China have a gritty reality to them that mirror those of Kiwis who established new technology in NZ's own early agricultural history.

On one early project in China's northern mountain country he and his travelling companion risked being marooned in a snowstorm.

"I spent a fair few freezing kilometres literally pushing the four-wheel-drive to get us through the snow drifts all the while worried about how dangerous it was going to be coming down the other side."

Another project high in the hills was pushed for time as cows calved but freezing conditions meant the local plant stopped making concrete for delivery.

"We ended up sorting out a few mixers for the site, taking everything indoors under cover and doing it ourselves, just mixing and pouring manually by hand until the job was done."

Despite being in his 60s there is no sign Morris is slowing and the ex-motor racing grandfather will typically cover all points on the compass in a trip over China's vast countryside, visiting existing, new and potential clients.

He remains excited about the potential China still offers the company, with expansion of milk production poised to include goats and sheep alongside dairy cows.

"Waikato Milking Systems make a big effort to bring staff down to NZ for training and development, at no small expense, and the Chinese really appreciate seeing the company putting back into their people. It does not go unnoticed or unappreciated."