

Custom Forage Harvesting

Some of the busiest times on a dairy farm are when forage is harvested and put into storage for future use. It is during these times that milk production (and income) can suffer as the labor and management demands of the farmer are stretched to the limit. At times, extra help not familiar with operating farm machinery on a daily basis are called upon to help out. Work safety is at a higher risk during these times due to extra long hours and inexperienced help.

One method of improving working conditions and safety at harvest time is to hire a custom forage harvester to handle chopping, hauling and storing your forage crop. This allows the dairy farmer to concentrate on managing the dairy herd.

What is Custom forage harvesting? For the purposes of this Tip Sheet, custom forage harvesting (CFH) is defined as hiring a commercial operator to harvest and put into storage (bunkers, bags, etc) either corn or hay silage. Although there are other custom services available (baling, grain harvest, etc.) these are not considered in this document.



CFH is increasing in popularity. Individual farm conditions determine if this method is cost-effective.

Advantages: There are many reasons why Custom Forage Harvest might make sense for your operation.

- **Expansion.** If you plan to expand your herd, or your old equipment has worn out, custom forage harvest can save further capital investment in harvesting equipment. There are a number of good resources for finding out where the break-even point is for purchasing new equipment. ^(1,2) In most cases, additional factors need to be taken into consideration such as; quantity and quality of forage, labor and management availability, and available capital.
- **Faster.** A custom operator with a self-propelled harvester can cover 3 to 4 times the ground in the same time as a pull-type forage harvester. This speed can be critical when it comes to feed quality, or trying to take advantage of small windows of opportunity in the weather.
- **Better feed quality.** For each day past “prime,” an alfalfa crop can lose up to 5 points in relative feed value. Any loss in RFV can mean lower milk production.³ Some custom forage harvesters also offer processing, which improves digestibility of corn silage.⁴
- **Free up time.** By hiring a custom forage harvester, you can free up more of your time to concentrate on the facets of your farm that require the most attention. For many dairy farmers, this involves managing the dairy herd rather than recruiting, hiring and managing short-term laborers to help with forage harvest and hauling.
- **Able to spread manure sooner.** Many farms have manure storage that allows them to store manure and spread it as soon as possible after a forage crop has come off.
- **Less weather risk.** If your custom operator can harvest and store your forage faster, there is less chance that weather will disrupt your schedule.
- **Save on taxes.** You’ll have less capital equipment investment to depreciate, and your custom harvest costs would be deductible on a schedule F.

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TIP SHEET

Ideas for more efficient dairy farm work

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What are the disadvantages?

1. **Timing.** The custom operator needs to schedule work considering your location, size and estimated crop maturity.
2. **Investment.** If you've recently invested in a new tractor or forage equipment, you might not be using that investment to its fullest.
3. **Soil compaction:** Custom operators' equipment is heavier than a standard pull-type forage harvester and wagon. Your equipment may be lighter, but need more passes over a field to complete the harvest. Tire selection and tire pressure may also compensate for the impact of the custom operator's heavier equipment. More study is needed in this area.

How to work with a custom operator.

First, decide if custom forage harvest might be right for your operation.⁵ The resource list at the end of this document is a good starting point. If you decide to try custom harvesting, you can contact the Wisconsin Custom Operators (c/o Doug Sutter; Brown County Extension; 920-391-4612) to find an operator in your area. One custom forage harvester advises that communication, sticking with agreed upon schedules, and working together are very important in a successful CFH contract⁹ Joe Stellato, Shawano County Extension agent, has put together an excellent resource on working with Custom Forage Harvesters, entitled, "Contract Feed Production Arrangements"⁷

Resources

1. "Evaluating the Custom Harvesting Decision: Pros and Cons." Gary Frank, UW Center for Dairy Profitability. November 30, 1999. <http://cdp.wisc.edu/pdf/ownvscustharv.PDF>
Find the spreadsheet software at <http://cdp.wisc.edu/wk1/ownvscust.xls>.

2. "To buy or not to buy." Susan Harlow, Midwest Dairy Business, March 2001.
3. "Alfalfa Yield and Stand." Presentation by Dan Undersander. <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/forage/wfc/proceedings2002.html>.
4. "Silage - processing paybacks look good." Rotz, C. A., Harrison, J. H. and Johnson, L. M. Hoards Dairyman, August 10, 2001.
5. "Should you custom harvest or contract your forage needs?" Midwest Dairy Business, January, 2001. www.dairybusiness.com/midwest/Jan01/contract.htm
6. "Working Successfully with a Custom Operator." Stellato, Joe and Biese, John. University of Wisconsin-Extension <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/forage/wfc/CUSTOP11.html>
7. "Contract Feed Production Arrangements." Stellato, Joe. University of Wisconsin Extension. <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/forage/wfc/CONTRACT.html>
8. "Timing Corn Silage Harvesting and Custom Operators." Lauer, Joe, UW Extension, August 28, 1997. [http://corn.agronomy.wisc.edu/Publications/WCM/1997/Custom corn silage harvesting.html](http://corn.agronomy.wisc.edu/Publications/WCM/1997/Custom%20corn%20silage%20harvesting.html)
9. "Advice from a Custom Harvester." Sattler, JoDee Midwest Dairy Business, January 2001. www.dairybusiness.com/midwest/Jan01/harvester.htm

This material was developed by the Wisconsin Healthy Farmers, Healthy Profits Project. Our goal is to find and share work efficiency tips that maintain farmers' health and safety and also increase profits. For more information, call (608)262-7408 or visit our website at [http:// bse.wisc.edu/hfhp/](http://bse.wisc.edu/hfhp/)

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