

Custom harvesting in new era

A new breed of custom harvesters and producers is emerging, and their relationship is mutually beneficial.

By JONATHAN JACOBSON*

I AM pretty diligent at getting the oil changed in my car every 3,500 miles or so. At each change, my oil guy, Bob, asks which type of oil I want to use when refilling — synthetic versus conventional — and also which brand I prefer.

I like the options, and truth be told, whether valid or not, I do have oil brand and type preferences. What I like most, though, is that Bob allows me to be in control and make the decision. It's my car and my investment, after all.

Business relationships depend on both parties and are often referred to as synergistic: You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. It sounds nice, but it's not always that easy in practice.

The relationship I have with Bob is a lot like the relationship producers and custom harvesters have. They depend on each other.

The difference is that these relationships aren't like the typical retail variety. It seems that a lot of heritage and tradition sometimes gets in the way of doing what's best for the cows. After all, it's invariably the cows that will either be helped or harmed by the forage management decisions made.

The good news is that there's a new breed of custom harvester emerging and a new type of producer as well, and their relationship is mutually beneficial.

What defines them? For the new producer, it means they're keenly interested in high forage quality (especially given high feed costs) and want a business partner relationship with their custom harvester.

For the custom harvester, it means ensuring that the product produced is the best it can be for the time spent in the field (especially given high fuel costs) and working toward achieving their customers' goals.

The new producer wants high-quality silage and wants it put up quickly but also wants the custom harvester to genuinely understand his concerns about the nutritional goals for his animals.

The new custom harvester is paying attention, too, and is offering solutions that aren't just centered on equipment and speed but, rather, centered around the best forage for

their customer. That can mean anything from chop length and inoculation to compaction and laboratory analysis.

Together, the new producer and new custom harvester agree that they should make the most out of their time together in the field. That can mean shedding some of the old traditional mentalities of, "You'll take what we give you," and, "Just put it up."

What's emerging is a relationship more like the one I have with Bob, where I'm good for his business and he has done right by my car.

Here are some suggestions and protocols that outline what these "new" relationships look like.

New producer

The following details the new producer's approach to hiring a custom harvester:

1. Ask if the custom harvester will act as a forage production team member. Will it ask about production and nutrition goals? What is its commitment to producing forage to achieve those goals?

2. Find out if the harvester routinely take samples to have them tested for nutrient content as well as fermentation analysis. This is a big step to protecting itself but, even more so, to ensuring that it's meeting the nutritional goals the team has set forth.

3. Learn if the custom harvester knows how to make production adjustments if the analyses of chop length, moisture, speed, etc., aren't meeting goals. Get an idea in advance if it knows how to hit density and pH goals, for instance.

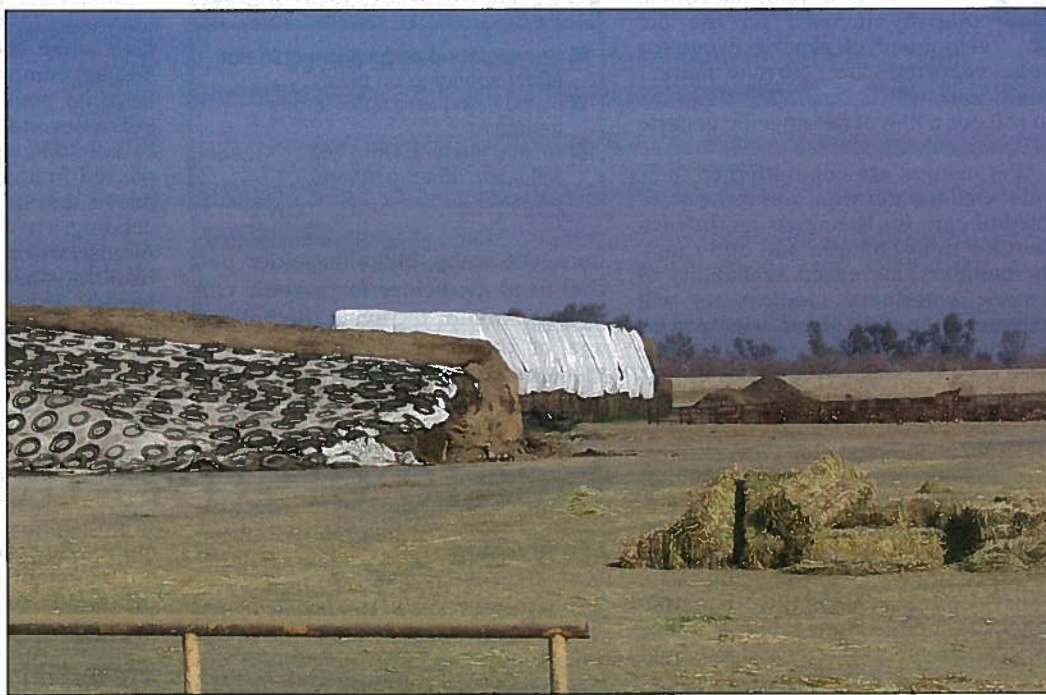
4. Does the custom harvester have a team attitude, and will it involve your nutrition staff together as a team (which could include the nutritionist, farmer, veterinarian and maybe others)?

5. The custom harvester should work with reputable suppliers so there are no excuses. Does it charge fair and reasonable prices for products and services? Can the harvester justify the costs, and is it open to the brands you suggest?

New harvester

Therefore, the new custom harvester's pitch to a producer might look like this:

1. Take on a genuine customer service attitude from the start. The more you can help that producer succeed, the more you help your business over the years.



2. Speed of harvest is important, but more and more, the new producers are expecting that you'll also help them achieve nutrition goals. Proactively ask about nutrition specifications, and offer to meet with the nutrition staff. That will put everyone on the same page right away.

3. Based on the nutrition goals, discuss chop length, compaction, moisture content and inoculant brands. Flexibility here is important to your customers. Make recommendations, but allow

them to select their own brand preferences, and work with their team on harvest protocol.

4. During harvest, offer an ongoing analysis of your production practices to meet end goals. That may include monitoring moisture, chop length, speed, weather and packing procedures. Post-harvest analysis helps ensure that your work was done properly and meets your customers' expectations.

5. Commit that your equipment and staff are ready for the rigors of harvest,

share a team attitude and have the knowledge to make adjustments on the fly to hit goals.

Bob has won my business by being forward thinking about his own business and providing points of differentiation that keep me and my car coming back. For the new producer, welcoming the custom harvester to the team is novel, and for the new custom harvester, the greatest differentiator it can provide is putting the customer in the driver's seat.

Trade, food needs discussed

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HAUSMANN pointed out, however, that trade continues to be limited by the threat that shipments could be contaminated by unapproved biotech events.

He said bringing new lands into sustainable crop production — in Brazil, for instance — will depend on building a world consensus "about the right course of action, what seeds we will use, what is the right type of land to bring into production."

The investments in infrastructure will come from a host of companies in Brazil and in Africa "if we see not only governmental support but also the broad-based public community support necessary for the course of action. Without that public agreement, we will not meet that challenge," Hausmann said.

Schafer pointed out that at the U.N. Food & Agriculture Organization's High-Level Food Security Conference earlier this year in Rome, Italy, the U.S. committed \$5 billion over two years to help several developing countries double their food supplies, focusing on medium- and

long-term capabilities for local crop production, post-harvest management and trade in products.

Schafer spoke of the system-wide improvements needed for food production, but he also focused on the need for acceptance of genetically modified crops.

"Today, we know biotechnology is one of the most powerful tools for building agricultural productivity and boosting prosperity among the rural poor," he said.

Schafer noted that some countries "are empowering their farmers to produce biotechnology crops," adding that last year, "biotech crops were grown by more than 12 million farmers in 23 countries, (and) about 10 million of those farmers were small and resource poor in developing countries."

Schafer praised Egypt and the West African country Burkina Faso for recently commercializing biotech events.

He also called on the international community to help fund all of the technologies that will be needed to meet the challenge of doubling the world's food supply.

"The U.S. cannot do it alone," Schafer said. "The

other international partners are critical to move these technologies forward and into everyday use."

Trade round

The WTO Doha Round was reconstituted after the failed ministerial meeting in Seattle, Wash., in part with the hope of devising global trade rules that would help alleviate poverty and facilitate trade for developing nations.

So far, however, that hope remains dim.

World Bank president Robert Zoellick, who served as the Bush Administration's top trade representative during the first several years of the Doha Round, said while he has not given up hope of a potential agreement, "these deals don't happen unless the U.S. plays a leadership role."

Apparently referring to recent rhetoric in Congress and from election campaigns, he said, "What I hear in the political debate is that the U.S. is not playing a leadership role."

Zoellick noted, however, that an agreement is still within reach — a deal that, "by the way, would be good for agriculture."

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