

CUSTOMNews

Representing custom farming in Wisconsin and beyond | SUMMER 2025



Hoff Farms chops corn for 20 to 25 clients each year, focusing on small and mid-sized dairies. All photos by Mike Rankin

Headwinds haven't stopped this forage harvester

By Mike Rankin, senior editor, Hay and Forage Grower



Mike Rankin

Farming is never easy, but it can be made that much tougher when you're beginning from scratch. As with many who set their life's sail

toward a sustainable farm business and start with little or nothing, Allen Hoff knows what it's like to simultaneously fight for a bank loan, operate with and constantly fix older equipment, build and keep a client base, and start a family.

Growing up on his parent's small family farm near Knapp, Wis., Hoff always had his sights set on being his own boss as a custom forage harvester. "I love this

business; I've always loved this business. I like the challenge and the people," he said last fall as we circled a cornfield in his chopper. Our sharing of the chopper cab came after a night where he got 40 minutes of sleep because of a silage bagger repair that needed to be made before morning.

It wasn't long after graduating from high school in 2000 that Hoff began working for a local tractor salvage yard. He bought his first used silage bagger in 2003 and added another a year later, renting both out to area farmers. He eventually would add two more baggers to his inventory and began working for a local custom harvester in 2006. "We laid out about 3 miles of bags in 2013,"

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UPCOMING DATES:

WCO Fundraising Auction
Coming in late November

Forage Symposium
Feb. 16-18, 2026
Chula Vista, Wis. Dells

Forage and Manure Safety Day
April 9, 2026
Arlington, Wis.

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From the President's Cab: *Exciting times for WCO*

By John Osterhaus



Greetings from northern Illinois!

As I write this, we're experiencing yet another hot and humid day – part of a seemingly endless pattern of high

temps and regular rain showers. These conditions are making hay production, whether for silage or dry hay, particularly difficult. I hope the weather is treating you better than it is here and that your operations are running smoothly.

Your WCO Board has been busy exploring new ways to grow our reach and add value for both current and future members. While we continue to focus on the core areas of harvesting and manure application, we're also looking beyond to expand our network and presence in the broader ag community.

One of our newest initiatives is a sponsorship with the Badger State Tractor Pullers (BSTP). Many of our members are involved in tractor pulling—either behind the wheel or in the stands—and this partnership offers a unique opportunity to connect with a wider audience. Our

hope is to raise awareness of WCO among potential members and customers alike. If you have a chance to attend a BSTP event this summer, we'd love to hear your feedback.

Another exciting project in the works is a joint Forage and Manure Safety Day, co-hosted with U.S. Custom Harvesters, Inc.

“As we head into a busy fall season, I want to wish everyone a safe and successful harvest and manure application season.”

This event will take place on April 9, 2026, at the UW Research Farm in Arlington, Wisconsin. We're planning a full day of hands-on safety training tailored specifically for forage and manure crews. Our goal is to provide your team with practical skills to help them work more safely and efficiently. A detailed agenda

with speakers and topics will be released soon, so stay tuned—and please consider bringing your whole crew.

We've also entered into an agreement with the Professional Nutrient Applicators Association of Wisconsin (PNAAW) to begin the process of combining our two organizations. While this merger is still in its early stages, both groups will maintain their individual identities for now, with all financial operations being managed through WCO. If all goes as planned, PNAAW will eventually become part of WCO. We see this as a positive step toward building a stronger, more unified voice for our industry.

As we head into a busy fall season, I want to wish everyone a safe and successful harvest and manure application season. As always, thank you for being a part of WCO. If you have questions, suggestions, or want to get more involved, don't hesitate to reach out. 🇺🇸

Stay safe and take care,

– John



Hoff Farms

(continued from p. 1)

Hoff said. "That was our peak year when there were still a number of smaller dairies that liked to fill their own bags."

When the custom forage harvester he was working for got out of the business in 2016, the young entrepreneur extended himself to purchase a used chopper and three trucks. These days, Hoff runs a 2015 Claas chopper, three silage baggers, three trucks, a silage cart, a Hesston center-pivot mower, and an Oxbo windrow merger from his home base in Glenwood City, Wis.

Smaller farms

Hoff's custom forage business, operating as Hoff Farms LLC, services 20 to 25 farms, both dairy and beef, and many of those are return clients every year. Occasionally, he will chop for a bunker or pile silo operation, and on rare jobs will still chop and fill an upright silo. He also helps assist other custom forage harvesters as requested. In the category of unique chopping jobs, Hoff said he has been asked to chop miscanthus, or silver grass, which some farms use for bedding and construction companies use for mulch. He said it gets chopped in the spring when the plants are brown from overwintering.

"I kind of specialize doing the smaller and medium-sized farms," Hoff explained. "Some custom operators only want to do a few big jobs, but I enjoy working for a variety of different operations."

Glenwood City is hardly a "city," with a population of around 1,200. It's located in northwest Wisconsin and is known as the "City of 57 Hills."

That moniker offers some idea of the terrain that Hoff often deals with. "We have to cut higher because of rocks,"

Hoff noted. "Most fields are small and hilly, so we charge by the cutterhead hour on the chopper. This also helps us avoid having to chop the really bad fields with washouts." As for the trucks, Hoff said those are charged for by the hour, whether they are moving or not. He encourages his clients to make improvements that will speed up harvest such as trimming trees around field edges and fixing holes in driveways or field roads.

Family matters

In the harvest offseason, Hoff works at a wood shavings company where he does metal fabrication and machinery repair. He is also a regular attendee at the U.S. Custom Harvesters Convention and the Wisconsin Custom Operators Symposium, where he enjoys talking to his peers and company representatives.

Hoff's wife, Megan, works for a neighboring county's human services department. The two were married in 2011 and had a son, Leo, in 2019. Hoff describes their son as their "miracle baby several times over." Megan had been diagnosed and treated for two different forms of cancer before the age of 26. To add to those complications, she was diagnosed with HELLP Syndrome during her pregnancy, air-lifted to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and Leo was born premature, weighing 2 pounds, 2 ounces. He remained in neonatal



Allen Hoff has a passion for custom chopping. Although it isn't an easy path, it's one he has never regretted taking. "I like the challenge and the people," he said.

intensive care for 65 days.

Hoff recalls that spring of 2019 when there was widespread alfalfa winterkill in his area. "I only had one alfalfa chopping job that summer, and that turned out to be a blessing for me because I put 9,000 miles on the car between here and Rochester, which is about a 200-mile round-trip drive." Today, Leo is a typical 5-year-old boy full of sass and orneriness, according to his proud father.

To be sure, it hasn't always been smooth sailing for Hoff and his family. Nevertheless, the young custom operator hasn't been deterred. "A lot of the medium and smaller dairies in this area are or have gone out of business because of retirement or economic reasons, but I still want to keep growing," he asserted. "For that to happen, we'll probably have to expand our geographic service area, but right now, I have a family to think about."

Even with headwinds, it's never smart to bet against a young farmer with a passion. Most of those boats don't sink. 🇺🇸

WCO and PNAAW announce strategic affiliation to strengthen custom farming *By WCO*

In a move that will benefit members and strengthen the custom farming community in Wisconsin and beyond, Wisconsin Custom Operators (WCO) and the Professional Nutrient Applicators Association of Wisconsin (PNAAW) are proud to announce a formal agreement to join forces under a newly signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This "affiliation" represents the beginning of a closer relationship between the two organizations, with the goal of a full merger at the end of the two-year MOU.

Both WCO and PNAAW share a deep-rooted commitment to Wisconsin's agricultural industry. While PNAAW has traditionally focused on representing

and supporting professionals in manure management and application, WCO serves operators who provide a range of custom farming services including planting, tillage, harvesting, and manure. By combining forces, the organizations aim to streamline resources, increase member value, and enhance educational and networking opportunities for all custom operators across the state and region.

The official affiliation began in April. Under the terms of the MOU, WCO will provide PNAAW with administrative support, infrastructure, and executive leadership as the two groups explore a full merger over the next two years.

What members can expect during the affiliation period

During the 24-month affiliation period, WCO will support PNAAW with a variety of essential services, including:

- Executive support from Maria Woldt, WCO Executive Director
- Access to WCO infrastructure, such as the website, communications systems, and office resources
- Bookkeeping and IRS-compliant tax reporting
- Enhanced educational offerings and partnerships

In exchange for these services, PNAAW will provide WCO with an administration fee and will share in costs associated with member services and events. Importantly, both organizations have agreed to an open and collaborative process for moving toward a full merger. This includes discussions about consolidating financial assets, streamlining organizational structures, and evaluating long-term staffing needs.

A shared vision for the future

"We welcome PNAAW members to the WCO community and look forward to working together to ensure a smooth transition," said John Osterhaus, president of WCO. "Our missions have always been closely aligned, and this affiliation is a natural step toward better service and greater impact."

Isaac Lemmenes, president of PNAAW, echoed the sentiment: "This is an exciting time for our members and for the future of custom farming in Wisconsin. By



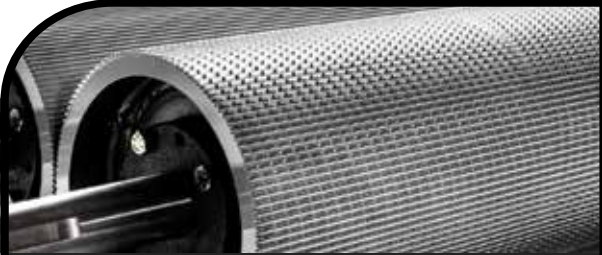
aligning with WCO, we're bringing together two organizations that have always worked in parallel to support Wisconsin agriculture. Together, we're stronger and better equipped to serve our members in a changing industry."

Next steps and member involvement

Throughout the affiliation period, WCO will keep members informed and involved in discussions about the proposed merger. Members can expect updates, opportunities to provide input, and access to expanded resources starting immediately, and both boards are committed to working toward a successful, long-term merger.

The MOU will remain in effect through March 31, 2027, unless a formal merger agreement is reached sooner. Members with questions about the transition or how it may affect their membership benefits are encouraged to contact Maria Woldt.

As the agricultural landscape continues to evolve, WCO and PNAAW are confident that this affiliation marks a positive step toward a more unified and effective voice for Wisconsin's custom operators. 🇺🇸



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Safety first: WCO spring training event set for April 9

Mark your calendars! WCO and USCHI will co-host a hands-on Safety Training & Certification session on Thursday, April 9, 2026, at the UW Agricultural Research Station in Arlington, Wis. This event is tailored for custom operators and crew members to sharpen their safety knowledge ahead of spring fieldwork.

The day will include expert-led sessions on equipment walk-arounds, manure and forage safety, basic first aid, and emergency response. We'll wrap up with a custom operator roundtable, where experienced members will share real-world safety practices and tips.

Breakfast, lunch, and snacks will be provided, with sponsor details to come. This is a great opportunity to learn, certify, and prepare your team for the season ahead. Watch for registration details soon! 🇺🇸



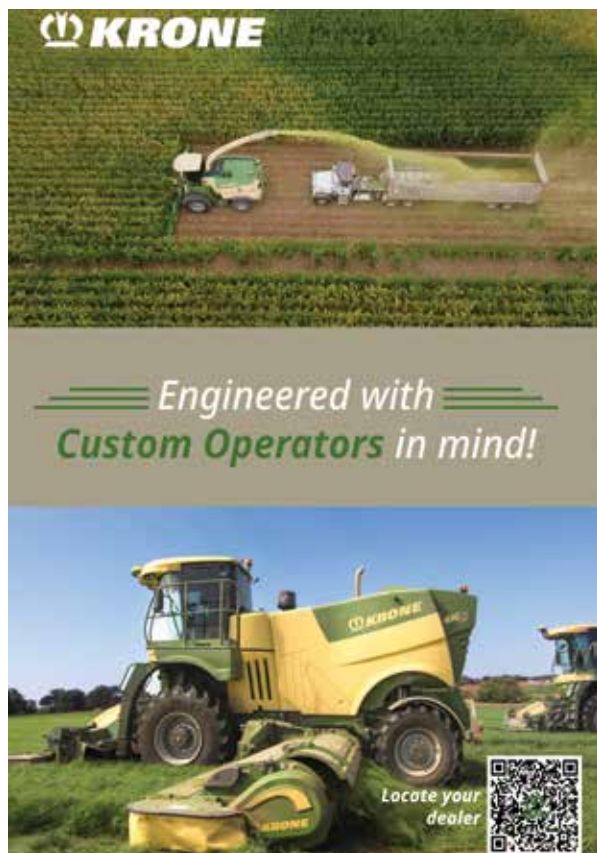
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Policy corner *issues to watch*

State budget signed – in early July, the Legislature and Gov. Tony Evers passed the 2025-27 state biennial budget, which includes key investments that support custom farming and rural communities.

WCO is especially pleased with the reauthorization of the Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP), which dedicates \$150 million to upgrading local farm roads and bridges. These investments are critical for the safe, efficient movement of custom farming equipment and agricultural goods across the state.

Last budget cycle, this program funded 92 road projects. Continued funding ensures long-term access and reliability

for the roads our members rely on daily.

The budget also maintains support for conservation, ag innovation, processing, and mental health services—important resources for both our members and the broader farm economy.

Additional key budget items relevant to WCO members:

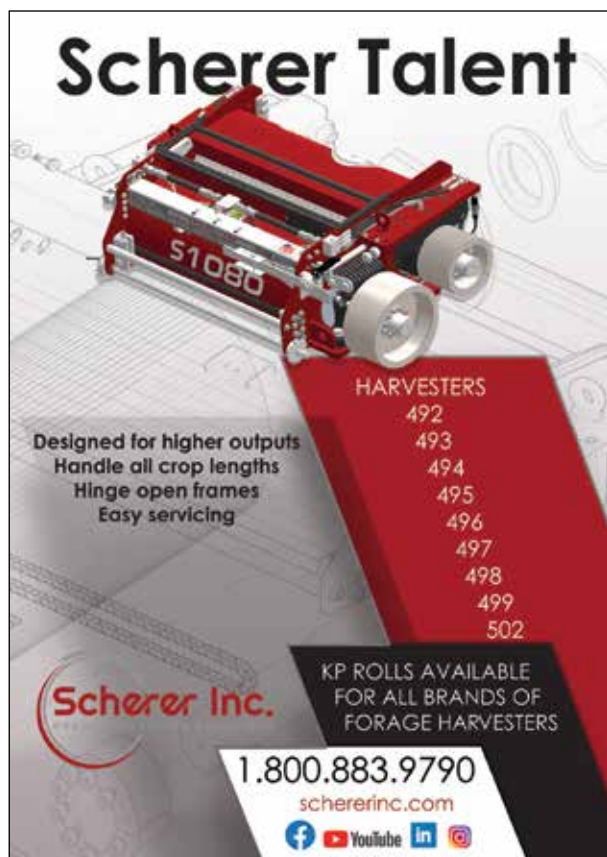
Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants (\$2 Million) – Continued funding to support farmer-led conservation efforts that protect water quality.

Cover Crop Insurance Premium Rebate Program (\$1.6 Million) – Ongoing support to encourage the use of cover crops by offsetting insurance costs.

Nitrogen Optimization Grant Program (\$2 Million) – Funds to help farmers adopt innovative practices and technologies that improve nitrogen use efficiency.

CDL Driver Training Grant Program (\$500,000) – Funding to help cover tuition costs for training new CDL drivers, addressing the ongoing labor shortage in the ag hauling and custom application industries.

Dairy Cattle Innovation Program (\$20 million) – WCO is watching closely as more details emerge about this new investment to help farmers purchase equipment and technology that improve efficiency and sustainability in dairy operations. 🇺🇸



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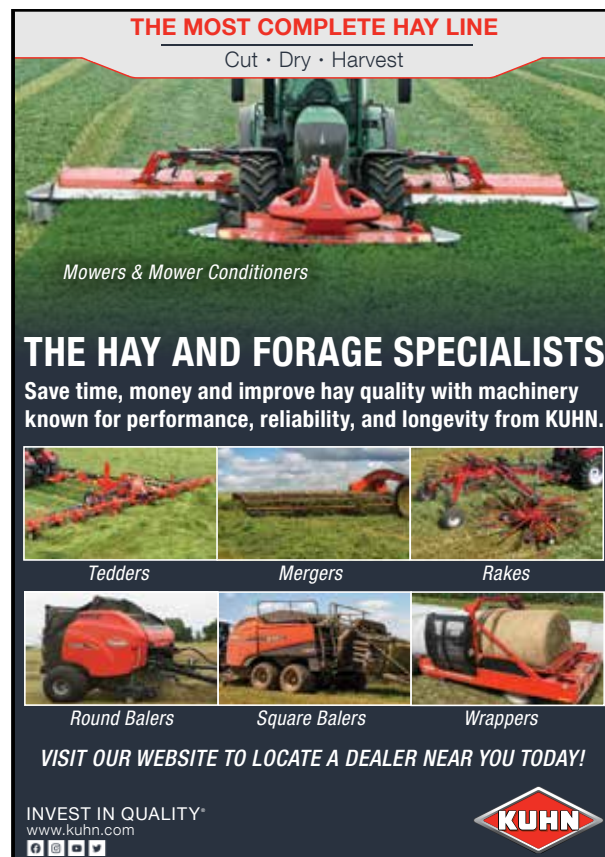
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Membership incentive program

Don't forget - WCO has a membership incentive program! If you sign up a new member you receive \$25 towards your 2026 membership. Sponsors can participate also. Simply list your company name on the "referred by" line and earn money towards your 2026 membership or sponsorship.

Incentive not to exceed cost of membership or sponsorship. Help WCO grow our membership base!

Welcome to WCO

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Please e-mail your high-resolution images (1MB or larger) to execdir@wiscustomoperators.org and we will be sure to feature you on our social media channels and in our publications. Thank you in advance! 🇺🇸



The next generation of the Vander Kinter Farms team works to get the job done this past June in Denmark, Wis. Photo by "proud mom" Kathy Vander Kinter.

Summer board meeting



The WCO board held its summer meeting at Heim Brothers Custom/Heims' Hillcrest Dairy in Algoma, Wis. After the meeting, board members toured the dairy as well as the shop. During this time of transition, the WCO and PNAAW boards are meeting together. Photo by WCO 🇺🇸



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*WCO sponsored a tractor safety course at the Food + Farm
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