

CUSTOMNews

Representing custom farming in Wisconsin and beyond | SUMMER 2026



Covering a 150-mile radius, Schultz Brothers serves farms throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. All photos by Mike Rankin

Oh brother! These guys can chop

By Mike Rankin, senior editor, Hay and Forage Grower



Mike Rankin

The large forage chopper roared to life. Viewing through the cab window, I watched as the machine gobbled standing corn like a Great Dane eating its first meal after two days of fasting. Sitting next to me and manning the controls with precision was Charlie Schultz, the co-owner of Schultz Brothers Forage Service LLC.

On this fall day, we were traversing cornfields on a dairy farm so close to Chicago that you could almost smell the deep-dish pizza. Schultz and his younger brother Dave started their

custom harvesting business a little over 10 years ago. Even though they grew up working on both grandparents' farms, there was metaphorically no room at the inn when they graduated high school. Dave eventually began hauling livestock across the country while Charlie, after graduating from Iowa State University with a degree in agricultural education, managed river terminals for a large grain exporter.

"The time eventually came when we both wanted to get back into something closer to farming and be near family," Schultz explained over the clamor of the chopper. "In the fall of 2014 while still working those other jobs, we started doing some custom chopping with a

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UPCOMING DATES:

WCO Fundraising Auction
Nov. 24 – Dec. 8

Forage Symposium
Feb. 15-17, 2027
Chula Vista, Wis. Dells

Forage and Manure Safety Day
March 18, 2027
Arlington, Wis.

CONTACT WCO:

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(608) 577-4345

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Schultz Brothers

(continued from p. 1)



Three Claas choppers anchor the Schultz Brothers fleet, helping crews harvest thousands of acres of forage each year.

used harvester we had purchased. That went well, and we saw a need and had the opportunity to move full time into custom farming in 2015.”

That fortuitous opportunity arose when an existing custom business desired to downsize, and the owner wanted to focus more on his own farm. The Schultzes bought some of the equipment, including two more choppers, and began harvesting for the former business’s customer base.

Initially, the brothers worked out of a small shop at Dave’s house. As that facility started to bulge at the seams, they began planning for the construction of a new facility. Once again, Lady Luck came calling when an existing set of buildings came up for sale that fit their needs.

A full-service provider

Schultz Brothers Forage Service stays equipped to provide any services related to feed. The business currently chops corn and hay crops and does mowing, tedding, merging, large-square baling, and round baling. “When we started out, baling was a much bigger part of

our business, but now it’s a lot more chopping,” Schultz noted. “In addition to forage harvesting, we also do some custom tillage, planting, and combining, but those activities are done on a smaller scale than the feed services.”

The Schultzs run three Pottinger triple mowers (one with conditioners), three mergers (two Oxbo and a Kuhn), and have one to two balers of each type, depending on the current demand and the ages of machines.

Three Claas 980 choppers and one 970 model comprise the forage harvester inventory. “Now, it seems like the industry is changing and those types of machines are more difficult to find. People are running their choppers longer before trading them in. We’d like to update a few of our current machines, but we’re still discussing how we want to deal with that. Our current fleet of choppers are within an age range where parts are interchangeable, so if we buy something new, that’s going to result in the need for an expanded parts inventory.”

The custom business also uses about 20 of their own trucks, which include both

straight trucks and semitractor-trailers. “We’re kind of unique for this region in that we travel a long way between jobs, so we’ve had to stick with road-ready tires on the trucks and trailers rather than go to the agricultural flotation tires,” Schultz said. “We work about a 150-mile radius from our shop, which includes farms in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

It’s a business

Each year, the brothers chop or bale about 10,000 acres of hay and do a similar amount of corn silage and earlage, with the latter mostly harvested for beef operations. During the busy corn silage harvest, they will run three different crews on separate farms. “We don’t harvest for many operations with storage systems that can handle feed from more than one chopper,” Schultz explained. “Our customer base remains mostly stable, and over time, we have been able to focus on clients that best fit our system and resources. We eventually figured out that it was okay to say ‘no’ to wishful clients.”

The two brothers can’t cover the number of acres and miles required to serve customers by themselves. To make that happen, they’ve built a deep and dependable workforce. “We’ve been fortunate to have a good core team of employees,” Schultz said emphatically. “We typically have two to four full-time employees along with a group of about 50 part-time or seasonal workers. The part-time employees come from a variety of backgrounds, including other local farmers, people with other seasonal jobs, retired farmers, and those that just find silage harvest to be a lot of fun.”

Unlike most corporations, the CEO and

CFO of a custom harvesting business are the same individuals who turn the wrenches and unplug the choppers. For Schultz Brothers Forage Services LLC, Charlie takes care of payroll, client billing, and the financials.

The custom business charges their clients based on the running machine hour, but a few field operations such as merging are charged by the acre. Schultz said he's sharpened his business acumen over the past 10 years. Although he had been used to employee management in his previous job, he underestimated the amount of time needed for collecting payments, especially at the beginning. "Over time, some of that has sorted itself out, and now we have a customer base that is good about making payments or at least letting us know what their intentions for making payments are."

Relationships breed success

Trust and honesty are virtues that stand at the forefront of any successful custom forage harvesting business. When the equipment is working and the weather is good, everyone's happy. It's when those things don't occur that the strength of a relationship is tested. If the weather turns unfavorable for harvesting, Schultz said the best you can do is just stay honest with clients and keep everyone informed of your situation. "Sometimes it just comes down to first call, first served."

Nutritionists also play a key role in helping the brothers prioritize farms since some of them are servicing several of their clients. "We pride ourselves on doing the best quality job that we can and value our relationships with a farm's nutritionist," the elder brother said. "If

you can please the nutritionist, they are more likely to recommend you to other good farms. Nutritionists have come to appreciate the consistent results we provide to their clients. That level of confidence has taken time to develop, but trust is critical in this business. At a minimum, I check the silage pile every morning and night and then make sure someone is monitoring the silage during the day," he added.

The Schultzes also value their time spent building relationships with others in the custom harvesting industry. They have been active members of the Wisconsin Custom Operators organization since their business began. Charlie currently serves on its board of directors. "It's been a valuable networking opportunity," he said of the organization's annual symposium that they attend every year in Wisconsin Dells.

Schultz acknowledged that being in the custom harvesting business isn't always easy on the families at home, but theirs have always been supportive. He and his wife, Jen, have two children while Dave and his wife, Amy, are the parents of three children.

When asked about what the future might look like for the business, Schultz said they are willing to grow but not actively looking to do so. "I still like the variety of work associated with custom



Charlie Schultz has found a rewarding path in custom harvesting. Although the work demands long days, it's one he has never regretted. "I still like the variety," he said.

harvesting. I appreciate working with our clients and employees and strengthening the relationships we've developed with other custom harvesters."

Schultz noted that they've had some clients retire, so that's allowed them to add a few new ones. He prefers the diverse clientele that they serve. "Some custom operators basically service only a few large dairies, but we're not comfortable putting all of our eggs in one basket, so to speak," he explained. "If one of our clients retires or someone calls and says they don't need us anymore, I know we'll still be in business. I like the relationships we've built with some of our smaller clients, and they really appreciate we're willing to come in and harvest for them. It makes you feel satisfied."

On this day of chopping, as Schultz hoped to finish the suburban Chicagoland farm and be home before midnight, his brother was back in the Wisconsin shop prepping machinery for his next day's job in Waukon, Iowa. The goal: Keep the choppers fed. There's no time for fasting. 🍷

From the President's Cab: *Looking ahead together*

By John Osterhaus



Hello all,

I'm writing this column on a hot evening here in northwest Illinois. This summer has brought plenty of heat and humidity, making it very difficult at times to get hay completely dried down. Add in the smoke from the Canadian wildfires, and dry hay harvest has been a bit of a challenge. I hope your spring and summer crops have been good and that your harvest season has been safe and successful as well.

The WCO board had a meeting recently that was very productive. We worked out a number of details that needed to be addressed regarding the WCO/PNAAW merger. This merger has gone very well and smoothly so far, although there has been a lot of work being done behind the scenes by both the WCO and PNAAW boards.

I can honestly say that we have a great group of people on both boards who are looking at the long-term needs of our members and putting those needs first when making decisions. Thank you to all the board members for the work and effort you have put forth during this process. A big thanks also goes to Schultz Bros. for hosting our summer meeting. It is always interesting to see and hear

“
**Getting together
in person is a great
way to share ideas
and learn from each
other as we work
toward a stronger
future together.**
”

how someone else runs their custom business. Getting together in person is a great way to share ideas and learn from each other.

I would also like to take a moment to thank all of our sponsors of the joint WCO/USCHI 2026 Safety Day. I feel that it was a successful event, and I want to

thank everyone who attended as well. The topics and speakers were well received, and we got some great feedback. We will be making a few minor changes moving forward based on what we heard from those who attended.

That being said, we have already begun the process of planning the 2027 Safety Day. It will be held March 18 at the UW farm in Arlington, and we will once again be joining forces with USCHI to put this event on. Please make plans to attend and bring your crew. We will have some new speakers and topics planned for the day. Mandi from USCHI and Maria will also have some really great door prizes to give out. We hope to see you and your crew there.

It's hard to believe, but corn silage and fall manure season will be here before we know it. As we head into another busy time of year, remember to take the time to look out for yourself, your employees, and the other people working alongside you. These seasons are demanding enough without someone getting hurt.

Be safe, and I hope you have a great harvest season. 🇺🇸

—John





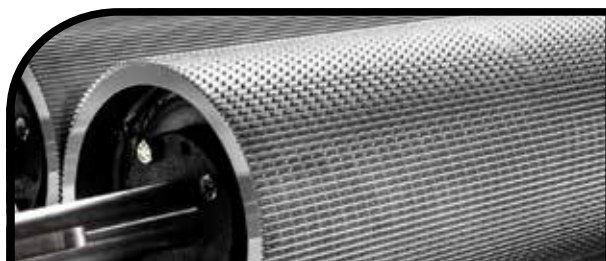
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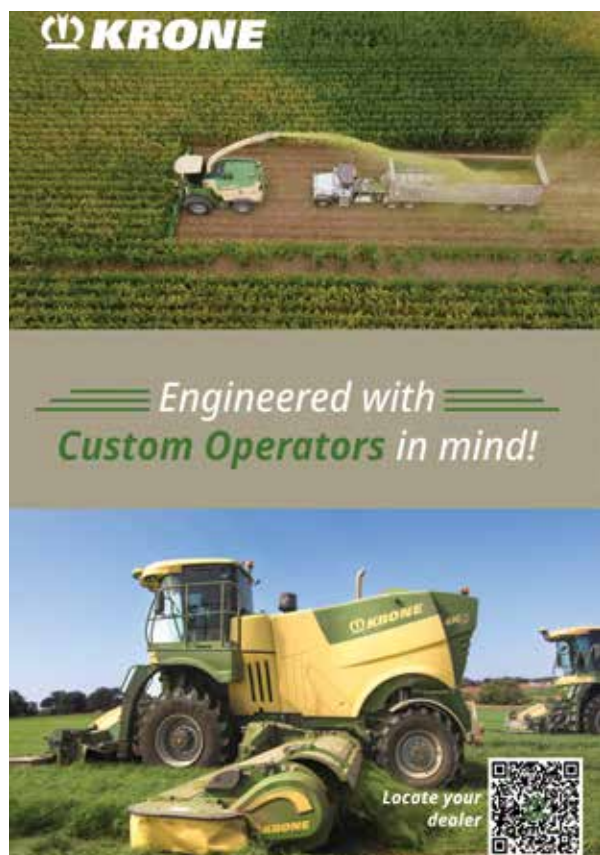
iManure

Back by popular demand: safety event set for March 18

Mark your calendars! WCO and USCHI will co-host a hands-on Safety Training & Certification session on Thursday, March 18, 2027, at the UW Agricultural Research Station in Arlington, Wis. The event is designed for custom operators and crew members to sharpen their safety knowledge ahead of spring fieldwork.

The day will include equipment walk-arounds, manure and forage safety, basic first aid, and emergency response. New for 2027, the manure and forage sessions will each be offered twice, allowing attendees to participate in both rather than having to choose. We'll also wrap up with a custom operator roundtable featuring real-world safety practices and tips.

Breakfast, lunch, and snacks will be provided. Sponsorship opportunities are available. Watch for registration details soon! 🇺🇸



Policy update: Elections, rural roads, and labor

Wisconsin's August 11 partisan primary officially kicked off the sprint toward the November election. Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley won the Democratic nomination for governor and will face Republican U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany in November. Congressional, legislative, and other races were also narrowed during the primary, making the coming months an important time for agriculture to keep rural and farm issues in front of candidates.

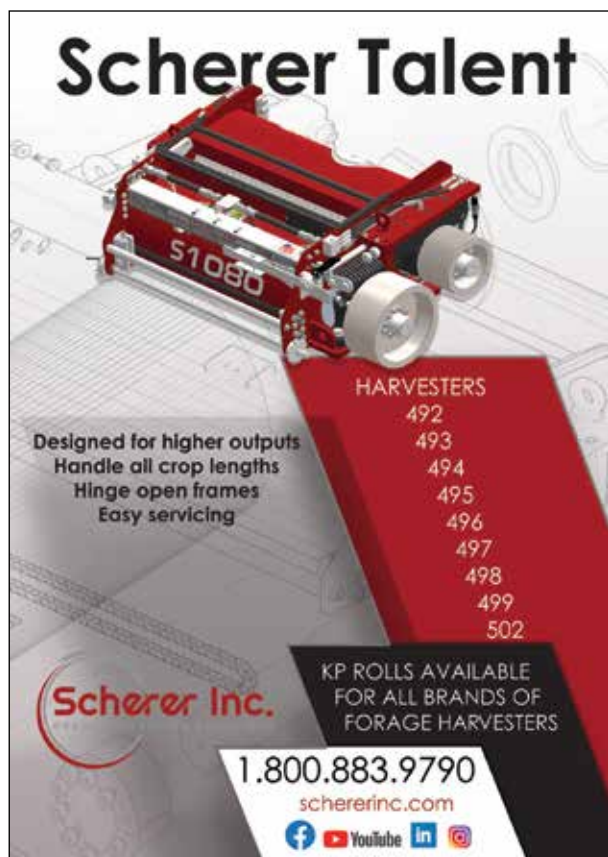
Infrastructure remains one of those issues. Wisconsin's Agricultural Roads Improvement Program (ARIP) continues to provide significant resources for rural roads that directly serve agriculture.

The 2026-27 biennium includes \$120 million for the program, which can reimburse up to 90% of eligible costs to improve deteriorating Class B and weight-restricted roads, bridges, and culverts. For custom operators moving increasingly large equipment between farms, investment in local infrastructure remains especially relevant.

At the federal level, changes to the H-2A agricultural guest worker program are generally welcome news for employers. The U.S. Department of Labor revised its wage methodology, moving to occupation- and skill-based wage rates and recognizing employer-provided housing in calculating compensation.

The change can reduce H-2A labor costs compared with the previous methodology, although rates vary by occupation, skill level, and state.

One major limitation remains: H-2A is still restricted to temporary or seasonal agricultural work. That makes the program of limited value to dairy farms needing year-round employees. Custom operators, however, may be better positioned to use H-2A because forage harvesting, manure application, planting, and other fieldwork can fit within a defined seasonal employment period. For businesses struggling to find seasonal employees, the changes make H-2A worth another look. 🇺🇸



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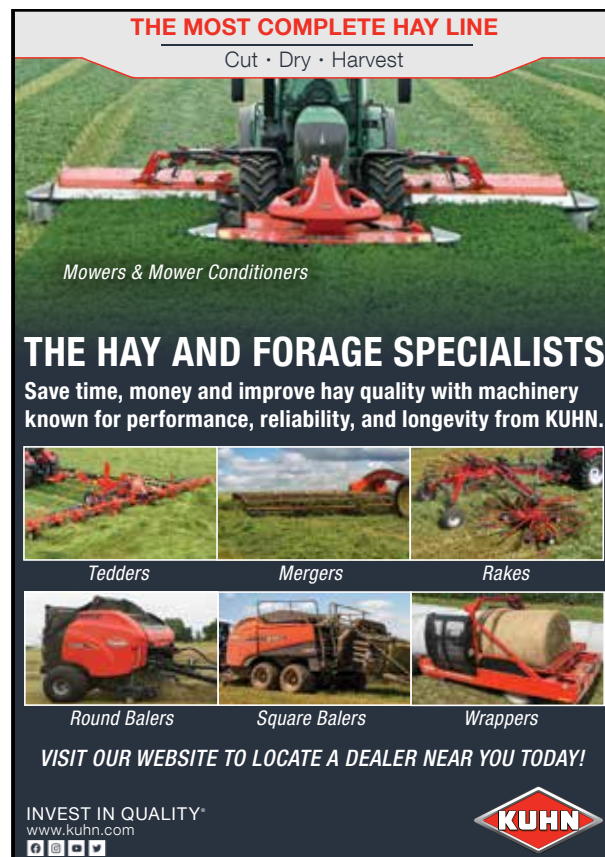
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WCO and USCHI host spring safety event

By WCO



Two groups work their way around the chopper focusing on specific safety concerns. Photo by Izzy Dannenberg

Safety took center stage April 9 as WCO and U.S. Custom Harvesters (USCHI) welcomed custom operators, crew members, and industry partners to the UW Agricultural Research Station in Arlington for a full day of hands-on training.

The Forage & Manure Safety Event drew more than 70 registered attendees and offered a mix of equipment walk-arounds, breakout sessions, and practical emergency-response training. The event also qualified for WCO Safety Certification, giving members an opportunity to complete training before the busy spring season.

The day began with Rodney Sherwood of Integrity Testing Services LLC leading a truck and trailer walk-around focused on safety checks, lighting, marking, and maintenance. Sherwood, a DOT third-

party inspector with approximately 40 years of commercial vehicle safety experience, shared practical considerations crews can incorporate into their everyday routines. Dean and Drew Manthe provided the truck and trailer used for the demonstration.

Attendees then divided into manure and forage breakout sessions. Isaac Lemmenes of Nuhn Industries led the manure session, focusing on safety considerations with manure pumping. The forage group took part in a chopper walk-around and discussion of forage harvesting safety led by John Osterhaus of Silver Streak Ag Services, Seth Buxcel of BXL Inc., Bruce Dannenberg of Triple D Farms, and Randy Clark of Ag-Bag by RCI.

Safety training extended beyond equipment. Kaitlin Vesely, communication officer and 911 dispatcher for Chippewa

County, led a session on making an effective 911 call from the field. Her best advice: Stay calm, speak clearly, and be as descriptive as possible when talking with a 911 dispatcher.

Jeff Nelson from UW-Madison's Department of Biological Systems Engineering followed with a session on handling emergencies in the field and basic first aid, including what operators should consider keeping in their first-aid kits. In addition to his research, teaching, and outreach at UW-Madison, Nelson is also a first responder, making him uniquely qualified to help farmers prepare for in-field emergencies.

The program wrapped up with a custom operator roundtable. Osterhaus moderated the discussion with panelists Buxcel, Jeremy Heim of Heim Brothers Custom, and Luke Vander Kinter of

Vander Kinter Farms. The conversation brought the day's topics back to the realities of running crews and managing risk during a busy season.

WCO and USCHI would like to thank the sponsors and industry partners who helped make the event possible, including Agri-King, Krone, Total Crops, Lallemand Animal Nutrition, and Acurich. Additional equipment and logistical support came from New Holland, R. Braun Inc., Nuhn, D&J Manthe Forage, Lemmenes Custom Farms, Manthe Grain Farms, Gruett's, Puck, and Meyer Manufacturing.

Most importantly, the event gave crews a chance to think about safety before the season gets into full swing. From equipment checks to emergency calls and first aid, the day reinforced a simple message: Taking time to prepare can

help everyone make it home safely at the end of the day.

Events like this are an important part of WCO's ongoing commitment to safety education. Our members work long hours when changing weather, tight schedules, and fatigue can create risk.

Mark your calendars for March 18, 2027, for next year's event. We'll be back at the UW farm in Arlington with a similar lineup of topics. As a change, we'll repeat the forage



Using a shop towel and a pool noodle, Jeff Nelson demonstrates how to properly pack a wound while waiting for help to arrive. Photo by Izzy Dannenberg

and manure sessions so attendees can participate in both. Registration will open this fall. 🇺🇸

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With help from WCO, 80 students complete tractor safety in 2026

By WCO

For WCO, promoting safety doesn't begin when someone joins a custom crew. It starts much earlier — with young people learning how to safely operate farm machinery and understanding the responsibility that comes with working in agriculture.

This year, WCO continued that commitment by supporting tractor and farm safety certification programs through our mini-grant program. WCO helped sponsor five sessions at two locations, resulting in 80 young people earning tractor safety certification.

The Food + Farm Exploration Center (F+FEC), located in Plover in Portage County, hosted three sessions — two during spring break in March and another in June. Seventeen students completed

the March sessions, while another 19 were certified in June.

The hands-on courses introduce students to tractor components, safe operation, preventative maintenance, agricultural hazards, emergency response, and other skills they need to safely work around farm machinery. Students must demonstrate what they have learned through both classroom instruction and practical assessments.

WCO has supported tractor safety programming at F+FEC for three consecutive years, but this year we expanded our support to a new location: Camp Tapawingo, located near Mishicot in Manitowoc County.

Camp Tapawingo hosted two weekend certification sessions, one in April and

another in May, certifying a combined 44 students from across Wisconsin. The weekend, overnight, camp format is one of the program's unique features, giving busy families another option for fitting required training into already packed schedules.

Both programs serve youth ages 12-17 as part of the Wisconsin Youth Tractor & Machinery Safety Certification Program, which is supported statewide by UW-Madison's Division of Extension. Youth complete 24 hours of instruction and must pass both written and driving exams to earn certification. The program helps young people meet Wisconsin requirements for operating agricultural equipment on public roads and federal requirements that apply to 14- and 15-year-olds employed on farms other than their parents' farms.

Supporting these programs helps accomplish two goals: getting more young people trained to safely operate machinery and helping make certification opportunities accessible in different parts of Wisconsin. Tractor safety courses are an important entry point for young people who may eventually work on farms, for custom operators, or elsewhere in agriculture.

And WCO would like to do more.

The tractor safety sponsorships are just one example of what is possible through WCO's mini-grant program. Awards ranging from \$500 to \$5,000 are available for projects and programs that benefit custom farming and the broader agricultural community. Applications are





In addition to tractor safety, programming at the F+FEC included Stop the Bleed and CPR training. These hands-on programs give students basic life-saving skills they can use in an emergency, whether they pursue a career in agriculture or another field. *Photos contributed*

Badger State Tractor Pullers

CHECK OUT OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

accepted on a rolling basis, and funding is available as soon as an application is approved.

Priority is given to projects that directly benefit custom farming, involve custom operators or their clients, provide opportunities for youth, post-secondary students, or emphasize farm safety and health, leadership, teamwork, sustainability, innovation, or community involvement.

Potential projects don't have to be large or complicated. Funding could help cover the cost of an educational event or farmer meeting, support a student working on a larger research project, or provide incentives for farmers and custom operators to try a new practice.

WCO members can help by thinking about needs in their own communities. Is there an area of Wisconsin that needs a tractor safety course? Is there a local organization with a great agricultural education or safety idea that simply needs some financial support to get started? Tell them about the WCO mini-grant program.

Applications and additional information are available at wiscustomoperators.org under the "About Us" tab. Questions can be directed to (608) 577-4345 or execdir@wiscustomoperators.org.

Great programs often start with a good idea and a little support. WCO wants to help bring more of those ideas to life. 🇺🇸



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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! 🇺🇸



Bryce O'Leary and the team at O'Leary Brothers Chopping Service this past June in Janesville, Wis. Photo by Tracey Leeder.

Summer board meeting



The WCO board held its summer meeting at Schultz Brothers Forage Service in Juda, Wis. After the meeting, board members browsed the equipment and toured the shop. During this time of transition, the WCO and PNAAW boards are meeting together. Photo by WCO 🇺🇸



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*WCO's April safety event at the UW Arlington Agricultural
Research Station featured hands-on manure and forage
safety training. Photo by Izzy Dannenberg*

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