

CUSTOMNews

Representing Custom Farming in Wisconsin | FALL 2023



The Liska family and harvesting crew of Apollo-Vale Enterprises. All photos by Mike Rankin

A passion to chop

By Mike Rankin, managing editor, Hay and Forage Grower



Mike Rankin

The hills of Wisconsin's Driftless Region were masked in a smoky haze from wildfires burning much farther north. Earlier that morning, it had rained. It wasn't the best of hay drying days. Even so, by late morning, Ray called and said it was a "go."

On this particular afternoon, 38-year-old Ray Liska was chopping alfalfa for Ocooch Dairy near Hillsboro, Wis. Chopping forage runs in the sixth-generation farmer's blood. Between planting and harvesting their own crops, producing broiler chickens, and raising a family, Ray and his wife, Holly, own

and operate a successful custom forage harvesting business called Apollo-Vale Enterprises.

Liska grew up on a small Wisconsin dairy farm, also near Hillsboro, but he was more interested in machinery than his father's show cows. "When I was still young, my father suffered a stroke that resulted in right-side sight damage," Ray recalled. "I started doing the harvesting with our pull-type chopper when I was about 12 years old because it was easier for me to look back at the header."

Following high school, Liska attended technical college to study diesel and heavy equipment mechanics. One day while driving a dump truck during the summer, he noticed a self-propelled chopper in the field and decided that

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UPCOMING DATES:

WCO Mini-grant program
Accepted on a rolling basis

WCO Fundraising Auction
Ends Tues. Dec. 12
Online

Forage Symposium
Feb. 19-21, 2024
Chula Vista, Wis. Dells

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(608) 577-4345

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Ray Liska has been chopping forage since he was 12 years old. These days, he owns and operates a custom forage harvesting business along with his wife, Holly.

was what he wanted to do. In 2006, Liska bought his first truck and began hauling silage. He purchased a Miller Pro hay merger one year later and bought his first self-propelled chopper in 2010, which eventually caught on fire but not before logging 6,500 hours.

"Ray is passionate about chopping," asserted Holly, a fourth-generation farmer who was also raised on a dairy farm. "Ray is jealous when someone else is out in the field and he isn't. We can be in the middle of a deep conversation, and if Ray sees a silage truck on the road, I know the conversation is over. He will want to go and see where the action is taking place."

A well-oiled system

These days, Apollo-Vale Enterprises is a full-service custom harvesting business that offers forage cutting, merging, chopping, trucking, and packing services. Harvesting alfalfa and corn silage comprise the large bulk of their business.

The business employs two full-time

and three or four part-time workers, but additional help is also available during busy times such as corn silage harvest. "Labor has been a massive issue industry-wide, but we've been lucky and have always been able to find good employees locally," Ray said.

Safety education has been one of Liska's top priorities. He is heavily involved in the Wisconsin Custom Operators organization and their safety training program. All of his employees receive routine safety education,

When it's time to hit the fields, alfalfa is mowed with a Claas triple mower. Swaths are brought together with two Oxbo mergers and chopped with a Claas Jaguar 970, which is equipped with a shredlage processor for corn silage.

"It's definitely worth having two mergers on days when the hay is drying fast," Ray explained. "My mower doesn't have conditioning rolls, which saves fuel, offers less maintenance, and maneuvers easier. The downside is that the hay

doesn't always dry as fast in less than ideal conditions." He also mentioned that the cut hay lays out in the same direction without conditioning rolls, so he typically will merge at a slight angle to the way it was cut, which aids in picking the crop up off the ground.

With only one chopper, Liska can't afford too many breakdowns. "If the chopper goes down for some reason, I have a pretty good gentlemen's agreement with other harvesters in the area, and we will cover for each other," the former president of the Wisconsin Custom Operators said. "I have rarely needed to call on someone else, but it's good to know they're available. It's about 40 miles to our nearest dealer, so we do all of our maintenance and repairs in-house and try to keep parts in stock.

"I've never been married to new iron, but I do like to invest in the latest technology, which is sometimes only available on newer machines. Overall, though, our philosophy is to make a piece

of machinery last by taking care of it," he added.

Liska also prioritizes taking care of his clients' fields. All of the hauling units are equipped with flotation tires to minimize compaction and plant damage. His fleet includes four straight trucks; two forage boxes, which are used when conditions are excessively wet; and one semitractor-trailer. "There's definitely evidence that the large-footprint tires make a difference even though they cost more and wear faster," Ray asserted.

Working harder and smarter

Liska services both dairy and beef operations. He likes to stay within a 25-mile radius but will go farther for the right job. The business has about a half dozen core farms that they harvest for every year, and then they will pick up additional farms as time allows.

Being in the Driftless Region, Liska said that you have to work harder to get feed harvested, as many fields are small with significant slope. "It helps that I've grown up here my whole life and I don't know much different. It makes harvesting more expensive with the smaller, odd-shaped fields, but we are also diverse enough that there are rarely complete crop failures."

Liska sees a push for higher forage diets on farms. "This makes timeliness of harvest really important, but the windows are narrow. Sometimes it's too early to cut in the morning and by early afternoon, it's too late," he joked.

When Liska shows up to cut for his customers depends on the individual farm. In some cases, he might be the one to make the call of when to start. For others, they want the hay knocked down every 28 days, regardless of growth stage.

For corn silage, Liska encourages the farm's nutritionist to be on site to check the particle length and kernel processing early in the harvest process. This occurs even though he checks the feed daily himself. Liska said that he never has a kernel processing score below 80. "My feeling is that the nutritionist is the one who will work with the feed and scrutinize my work, so I want them there. I want to have a relationship with the nutritionist. I learned this the hard way years ago when a nutritionist called me three or four months after harvest to complain about some aspect of the corn silage, and, by then, it was too late to do anything about it."

By the hour

Out of the harvest season, Liska keeps in communication with his customers regarding next season's plans. The analytical custom operator also is interested in evaluating the job that was done the previous season in terms of forage quality, yields, and packing densities. From this information, he tries to improve the next year.

Liska charges his clients by the hour for each machine and truck, but there are different rates for hay crops and corn silage. "I've looked at using a per ton or per acre metric, but in such a diverse area with smaller fields, it would be difficult to charge that way," he said. "Our efficiencies can change dramatically within a few hours. That said, in the future, we may be able to incorporate an efficiency bonus whereby if we do better, then we can get paid more," he noted.

"It has to be a symbiotic relationship between the farmer and us," Holly added. "Depending on the customer, we only have so much control on the decisions

that can be made. Ray is very much a data-driven guy, and he's always trying to figure out a better way for both us and the farmer. But there are some customers who want to call all of the shots, so we can't always control the forage quality or yield outcomes in those situations."

Beyond custom work

Although running a custom harvesting business entails many long days during the growing season, Ray and Holly still find themselves with many other activities on their plates. They own several hundred acres of farmland near their home in



Ray Liska makes his way to the chopper with daughters Mahala and Rayabelle.

Hillsboro where corn for silage, soybeans, and alfalfa is grown. This is land that the Liskas purchased from Ray's parents.

Liska sells his corn silage that is wrapped with an Orkel Dens-X compactor and sold as compacted silage bales. "It's excellent quality feed that usually sells to smaller dairy and beef producers who are just looking to supplement corn silage with what they are already feeding. We make 500 to 600 corn silage bales per year," he noted. The alfalfa is either baled as dry hay or wrapped as baleage and then marketed. Since 2009, the Liskas also

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operate the family farm on his mother's side in Cochrane, Wis., which is about two hours northwest of their home. There, they have two commercial chicken barns and grow 165 acres of corn and soybeans.

Ray and Holly, who were married in 2018 and share a strong Christian faith, have four children with a fifth due to be born shortly. Holly remains actively involved in the custom business by either working in the field or with business and employee management. She also homeschools their children.

To keep their business viable, both Ray and Holly are strong activists for regulation reform in the state. Holly has testified in front of the state legislature for issues such as getting the length of a farm service commercial driver's license (CDL) extended to 210 days to better

accommodate the length of the harvest season. Such a change would match the federal regulation. The Liskas are also concerned about other regulations that impact agriculture, such as those that define agricultural equipment and overreaching climate change policies that add to the cost of operating. "We feel burdened to ensure that our children have a good future in life and agriculture if they want it," Holly said of her passion for regulation bird dogging.

Although Ray has a degree from the technical college, he attributes most of his success to the mentors he has had in his life. That includes his dad, other local farmers, and the relationships he has forged by being a member of the Wisconsin Custom Operators organization.

As for future plans, the Liskas are satisfied with looking for opportunities. "If the kids want to get involved someday, maybe their outlook will be different," Holly surmised. "Both our 12-year-old boy and 14-year-old daughter are already involved in helping where they can, including the operation of equipment. If that interest continues into their young adult years, we'd like for them to work for someone else before they come back here permanently, though."

Added Ray, "We, like every other farmer, are always looking for better ways to do things, improve efficiency, and make money. I always joke that someday the merger and chopper will be one machine." In the meantime, the Liskas are just happy for the freedom to work and worship side by side as a family.

Member survey data on the WCO website

Data from the WCO member survey is online. Go to wiscustomoperators.org and click the "resources" tab. From the drop down, select "member services and rate information". Users have the option to view rates only, or the entire survey, which contains information on technology adoption, employee management, and other relevant topics.

WCO invested significant time and money into the member survey itself and the resulting data visualization. We hope that you will find value in this resource, and complete the survey when it lands in your email! 🇺🇸

Complete the WCO member survey, win \$1,000!



This could be you! Julie Kraus won \$1,000 because she completed the WCO member survey. Be like Julie. The survey is sent to WCO operator members in January and everyone who makes a submission is compensated and entered to win our grand prize.

WCO Wisconsin Custom Operators

HANSEN AUCTION GROUP

This December!

Fundraising auction

WCO receives 2% of the 10% buyers fee
More info coming soon!

Online equipment auction benefits WCO; now accepting consignments *By Maria Woldt for WCO*

WCO is proud to announce another online auction, starting in late November through Dec. 12, coordinated by Hansen Auction Group. Consignments are being accepted through November 27. The auction includes machinery typical for custom operators, but virtually all items will be considered.

As an association, WCO is looking for creative ways to maintain a strong financial position. WCO's investments are slowly recovering and membership is strong, but sponsorships are not as easy to come by due to industry consolidation. In addition, we have ideas for several new programs that could become a reality with additional funds.

The WCO board wants to continue

supporting our members through quality content and speakers at Symposium, increased scholarships, industry data, and policy initiatives.

The board wants to keep membership and event costs affordable and doesn't want to pass organizational losses on to members. This has never been WCO's practice, and we don't plan to start now.

Like our previous auctions, WCO will receive two percent of the buyers fee which represents several thousand dollars for the association. The more consignments, the better we will do. Thank you in advance!

Consignments from WCO members and outside sellers are accepted and sellers commissions will be 10 percent at most.

To make a consignment, contact Parker Massey from Hansen Auction Group at parker@hansenauctiongroup.com or by phone at (715) 642-3981.

To preview and purchase items, go to hansenauctiongroup.com and search for the WCO auction. We will also send an email and promote on our social channels. The auction runs from Nov. 27 thru Dec. 12 at 6 p.m. 🇺🇸

To make a consignment, contact Parker Massey at parker@hansenauctiongroup.com or (715) 642-3981



From the President's Cab: short but sweet

By William Smith



This is my last column as president. I still have a few months left in my term, but it's the last time you'll see me in this in this section.

We knew my time as your president would be short because I was on the last year of my second term on the board, but like everything, the time has flown by.

It's been short and sweet. 2023 has been a good year for WCO, not only are we making progress as an association, but we had a chance to influence legislation and make some allies both in the Capitol

and with agriculture partners.

WCO isn't a huge group, but the ag industry looks to us to share our thoughts on important legislation, regulation, and industry happenings.

I've had the chance to talk to a few reporters throughout the season both during corn silage and combining. The media appreciates our "view from the cab", both literally and figuratively.

The last six years on the board have been fulfilling and fun. It's been a great group to share ideas and see how others do things across the state.

We have gotten work done too. In addition to policy impacts, we have grown

our scholarship program to include people pursuing CDL or other trade certifications. This is a step in the right direction to help grow our workforce.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to serve WCO and this industry. At our annual meeting, we will fill a few board vacancies. Please consider running for the board and sharing your perspective with others who are just as passionate as you are.

Merry Christmas and see you at Forage Symposium in February. 🇺🇸

-Bill

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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 2024 membership. Sponsors can participate also. Simply list your company name on the "referred by" line and earn money towards your 2024 membership or sponsorship.

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

Welcome to WCO

General Members (\$50/year) derive their income (whole or part) from custom farming. Receive full voting rights and featured on website with business information.

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In 2024, WCO will elect the following:

- Southwest region director
- Southeast region director

Join a committee

If you are looking for a small but important way to get involved, consider joining a committee:

- » Education/Conference
- » Media
- » Scholarship & Awards
- » Safety/Regulations

Renew your membership or sponsorship

Membership renewals mail at the beginning of December and will include information to register for Forage Symposium. You can renew your membership when you register or you can renew directly with WCO. Either option is acceptable, but we always appreciate direct renewals by check or online payment. Sponsorship renewals will mail the week of Thanksgiving and must be paid direct to WCO. 🇺🇸

Board nominations & annual meeting

WCO is looking for board of director nominations. Elections will take place during the annual meeting at 8 a.m. on Feb. 21, 2024 held at the Chula Vista resort in Wisconsin Dells. Directors must be members of WCO and serve three-year terms with no more than two consecutive terms.

The board meets four times per year:

February - At Forage Symposium
March (if needed) - At WCO safety event or conference call
July - At WI Farm Tech Days
December - Stand alone meeting

If you are interested in running or know someone who is, contact Maria Woldt, executive director at execdir@wiscustomoperators.org or (608) 577-4345. 🇺🇸

Forage Symposium speaker highlights:

- » **Jolene Brown** – professional speaker, author, and farmer from Iowa
- » **Luke Keulers** – farmer, custom operator, and avid tractor puller from the Netherlands
- » **Sarah Wagler**, Nutrient Management Partners, Morgantown, Ind.

Please send your photos to WCO

Photos featured in the *Custom News* are taken by staff or submitted by members and sponsors. We are always looking for high quality images and we do our best to feature diverse equipment brands and custom farming practices.

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! 🇺🇸



WCO member Jon Orr with friends from USCHI at the 2023 Forage Symposium dinner



On Aug. 4, Gov. Tony Evers signed WI Act. 28 lengthening the term for Farm Service CDL holders. This legislation had bipartisan support and WCO members played a significant role. Photo by Shawn Pfaff



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