WCO

CUSTOM News

Representing custom farming in Wisconsin and beyond | **Fall 2026**



Gwen Boettcher shares how schools and custom operators can develop tomorrow's workforce. *Photo by Maria Woldt*

Growing tomorrow's ag workforce starts in today's classrooms *By WCO*



Gwen Boettcher

Finding and retaining qualified employees continues to be a challenge for farmers and custom operators. As experienced workers retire and agricultural equipment becomes increasingly sophisticated, developing the next generation of skilled employees requires more than posting job openings. It requires building relationships with students long before they enter the workforce.

That was the message from Gwen Boettcher, agriculture educator and FFA advisor at DeForest Area High School, during the 2026 Forage Symposium in Wisconsin Dells. Her session, "From Classroom to Career: A Model for Growing Ag Interest in High School Students," offered WCO members practical ways to partner with local schools and introduce young people to agricultural careers.

Boettcher, now in her 22nd year of teaching at DeForest, understands agriculture from both the classroom and the farm. She grew up on a 600-cow dairy near Lake Mills and continues to help with her family's dairy farm. She and her husband also operate a beef farm.

Her experience has helped shape an agricultural education program that demonstrates what can happen when schools, employers, and communities work together.

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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.

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Ag workforce
(continued from p. 1)



Above: The Deforest FFA is the largest chapter in Wisconsin with 791 FFA members as of June 2026. Below and right: DeForest students build career skills through the Youth Apprenticeship program where students earn money and academic credit. *Photos contributed*

A successful model in DeForest

The DeForest agriculture program has experienced substantial growth over the past two decades. In 2005, the program served approximately 150 agriculture students with 1.5 teachers and had 70 FFA members. Today, it serves almost 800 students, grades 7–12, with approximately 650 FFA members.



Boettcher credits much of that success to community partnerships, career-focused curriculum, hands-on learning, and strong relationships with employers.

The program emphasizes that agriculture offers opportunities for students with many different interests and backgrounds. Students don't necessarily need to come from farms to discover rewarding agricultural careers.

Through classroom experiences, FFA activities, and supervised agricultural experiences (SAEs), students develop practical skills while exploring career options. Industry involvement helps connect those experiences to actual employment opportunities.

An important part of the program's success is its advisory council, which connects educators with industry representatives. These relationships help ensure students are learning skills that employers need and that classroom instruction reflects today's agricultural industry.

Connecting students with employers

For custom operators, Boettcher emphasized that getting involved doesn't need to be complicated or expensive. Even small commitments can make a meaningful difference.

Local businesses can volunteer as classroom guest speakers, host equipment demonstrations, offer facility tours, or welcome students for job-shadowing experiences.

For example, a custom operator could introduce students to precision agriculture technology, explain how a forage harvesting crew operates, or demonstrate the skills needed to maintain modern equipment. These experiences expose students to career opportunities they may never have considered.

Another important opportunity is Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship program, which allows high school students to earn wages and academic credit while gaining practical work experience.

These arrangements are partnerships between employers and schools, with scheduling flexibility that can accommodate seasonal agricultural work.

For students, apprenticeships provide paid experience, professional connections, career direction, and valuable skills to include on a resume.

Continued next page

Employers benefit by developing relationships with potential future employees who already understand their business and workplace expectations.

Boettcher noted that students can follow several successful paths after high school, including entering employment through apprenticeships, attending technical college, or pursuing university degrees. Each pathway can lead to a valuable career in agriculture.



Above: Since Boettcher started in 2005, the program has grown exponentially. Right: Boettcher speaks at the 2026 Forage Symposium. *Photos contributed and by WCO*

Building a pipeline in your community

Boettcher encouraged WCO members to begin by contacting agriculture teachers in their local school districts. Ask what opportunities already exist and where industry participation could help strengthen programming.

Employers can also provide seasonal work, offer mentorship, and give educators feedback about the skills needed in today's workforce.



Consistency is especially important. Building a successful talent pipeline takes time, and ongoing relationships are more valuable than one-time interactions.

For custom operators facing labor shortages, these partnerships offer a practical, long-term approach to workforce development while supporting agricultural education in their communities.

Boettcher closed with a straightforward challenge to attendees: "If you want employees tomorrow, invest in students today."

For WCO members, that investment could start with something as simple as a phone call to a local agriculture teacher.

To learn more about the DeForest agriculture program, visit deforestffa.org or contact Gwen Boettcher at gboettcher@deforestschools.org.



From the President's Cab: *Learning from each other*

By John Osterhaus



Hello all,

As we wrap up another busy fall, I hope the weather cooperated and you were able to get your crops harvested in a timely manner. While many of the choppers and combines have been parked for the season, our manure hauling members are still busy getting nutrients applied before winter sets in. Hopefully, everyone can get their work wrapped up and enjoy a little downtime before we start thinking about next year.

As we head into the winter months, WCO has been busy planning the 2027 Forage Symposium, which will be held February 15–17 at Chula Vista Resort in Wisconsin Dells. We have another great program coming together with a good mix of business topics, industry updates, and opportunities to learn from other custom operators.

One of our keynote speakers this year will be Nick Horob, who will bring some valuable perspectives to improve the business side of custom farming. We are also planning a session featuring custom operators from different parts of the country. I always enjoy hearing how other operators run their businesses, and I think there is a lot we can learn from each other. As part of our ongoing merger with the PNAAW group, you'll note our continued efforts to improve the manure-focused sessions. I encourage everyone to make plans to attend.

> **"I always enjoy hearing how other operators run their businesses, and I think there is a lot we can learn from each other."**

We are also looking ahead to the 2027 WCO/USCHI Safety Training and Certification event, scheduled for Thursday, March 18, at the UW Agricultural Research Station in Arlington. We received some good feedback from last year's event and are making a few changes to improve the program. One of the biggest changes will be repeating both the forage and manure sessions so attendees can participate in both instead of having to choose between them.

The day will again include hands-on equipment training, safety discussions, and practical information that you and your employees can take back to your businesses. Safety is something we can never spend too much time on, and getting everyone together before the busy spring season is a great opportunity.

I also want to thank our board members, sponsors, and everyone who has supported WCO throughout the past year. There is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes, and we are fortunate to have a great group of people willing to give their time to support our industry.

As we head into the holiday season, I hope everyone gets a chance to slow down and spend some time with family and friends. Thank you for your continued support of WCO, and I look forward to seeing many of you at upcoming events.

– John



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Mark your calendars for two big WCO events: Forage Symposium and Safety Training

By Maria Woldt for WCO



Attendees learn about manure safety at the WCO/USCHI safety event last Spring. *Photo by Izzy Dannenberg*

As we head into the winter meeting season, WCO is gearing up for two major events you won't want to miss. Both events offer valuable networking, practical education, and information you can put to work in your business.

Forage Symposium: Feb. 15–17, Chula Vista, Wisconsin Dells

The 2027 Forage Symposium will feature a wide range of sessions focused on the business side of custom farming, equipment, workforce challenges, and emerging technology. This year's program places a strong emphasis on practical information and peer perspectives, giving operators opportunities to learn from others facing similar challenges across the country.

One highlight will be a keynote presentation from Nick Horob, who will explore how artificial intelligence is creating new opportunities for custom operators and the farmers they serve. His session, "AI-proofing your farm and business", will focus on practical applications of AI, from scheduling and customer communication to billing, paperwork, and understanding business costs. Through live demonstrations, Horob will show how AI agents can handle everyday business tasks, helping operators save time.

Attendees can also look forward to a popular feature of WCO programming — hearing directly from fellow operators. A multi-state panel, "Custom operators across America," will bring together folks from around the country to share their experiences, compare business practices, and discuss the opportunities and challenges facing the industry. These peer-to-peer conversations are consistently among our most valuable sessions, offering ideas and perspectives that members can take home to their own businesses.

Additional business-focused sessions will address employee recruitment and retention, the H-2A visa program, insurance costs, succession planning, and forage harvester maintenance. Whether you're managing employees, making equipment decisions, or planning for the future, there will be something relevant to your business.

The manure track offers a strong lineup of technical and business-focused education, including manure application technology, spill response, equipment safety, and customer relationships. Operator perspectives will be featured throughout the program,

Continued next page

along with opportunities to learn about new developments in equipment and technology.

Whether you're a longtime Symposium attendee or haven't joined us in a few years, we encourage you to attend. Registration opens in December, so watch your mail and email for additional details on sessions and registration.

WCO/USCHI Safety Event: March 18, UW Ag Research Station, Arlington

Following the Symposium, WCO and the U.S. Custom Harvesters, Inc. (USCHI) will co-host a hands-on Safety Training and Certification event on Thursday, March 18, 2027, at the UW Agricultural Research Station in Arlington.

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



Nick Horob is a tech company founder, farmer, and consultant who helps fellow farmers and business owners leverage technology.

Breakfast, lunch, and snacks will be provided, and sponsorship opportunities are available. Registration is open, watch for speaker details soon!

We look forward to seeing everyone in February — and again in March!



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Register for the March 18 safety event!

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. We'll wrap up the day with a custom operator roundtable featuring real-world safety practices and tips.

Registration is now open on the WCO website, and sponsor support has been outstanding. *A special thank you to Agri-King, our "presenting" sponsor*. The full speaker lineup will be announced soon.







Policy update: *Engaging with the new Legislature*

Wisconsin voters delivered a significant political shift in the November 3 election. Democrat David Crowley defeated Republican Tom Tiffany in the governor's race, and Democrats will gain control of both chambers of the state Legislature. The results end 16 years of Republican legislative majorities.

For WCO, the transition presents an opportunity to build new relationships and educate lawmakers about an industry that is essential to modern agriculture but often operates behind the scenes.

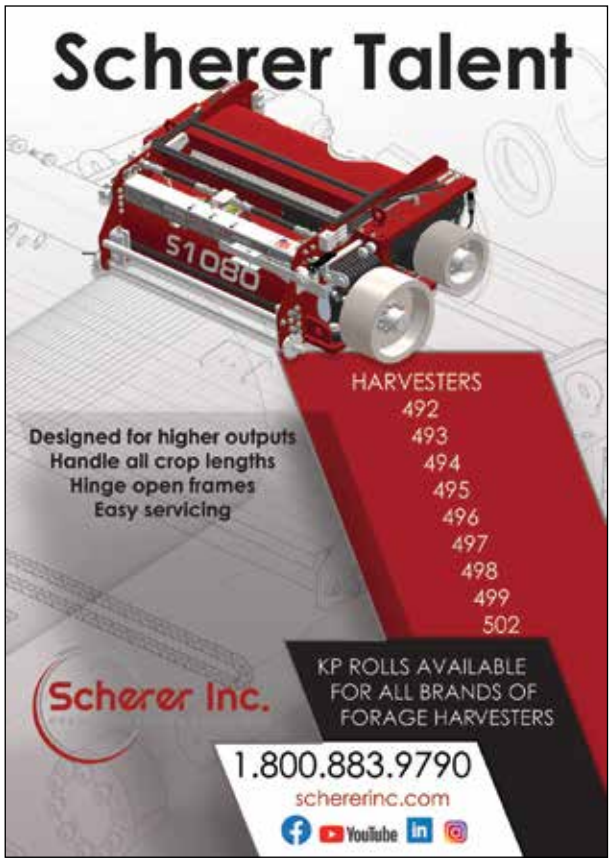
Many incoming legislators are unfamiliar with agriculture, dairy, and custom farming. They may not yet understand the challenges you face.

As WCO members, you can help bridge that gap by introducing yourselves, inviting elected officials to visit your businesses and sharing firsthand experiences about the services you provide to Wisconsin farms.

Several policy issues deserve continued attention. Investment in rural infrastructure, including the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program (ARIP), remains critical for operators transporting large equipment between farms. Workforce availability, seasonal employment programs and practical environmental regulations are also important to the industry's future.

WCO will continue monitoring these issues and working to ensure custom farmers have a voice in policy discussions. Building relationships with legislators from both parties will be an important part of that effort.

Members are encouraged to connect with their elected representatives and share their experiences. The more lawmakers understand about custom farming, the better equipped they will be to consider how their decisions affect Wisconsin's agricultural businesses.







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In 2027, WCO will elect:
- At-large operator director
- South region operator

Board nominations & annual meeting

WCO is seeking board of director nominations. Elections will be held during the annual meeting at 8 a.m. on Feb. 17, 2027, at Chula Vista Resort in Wisconsin Dells. Directors must be WCO members and serve three-year terms, with a maximum of two consecutive terms.

The board meets 3-4 times per year:
February - At Forage Symposium
March *(if needed)* - At WCO safety event
July - At a member farm/shop
December - Stand alone meeting

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

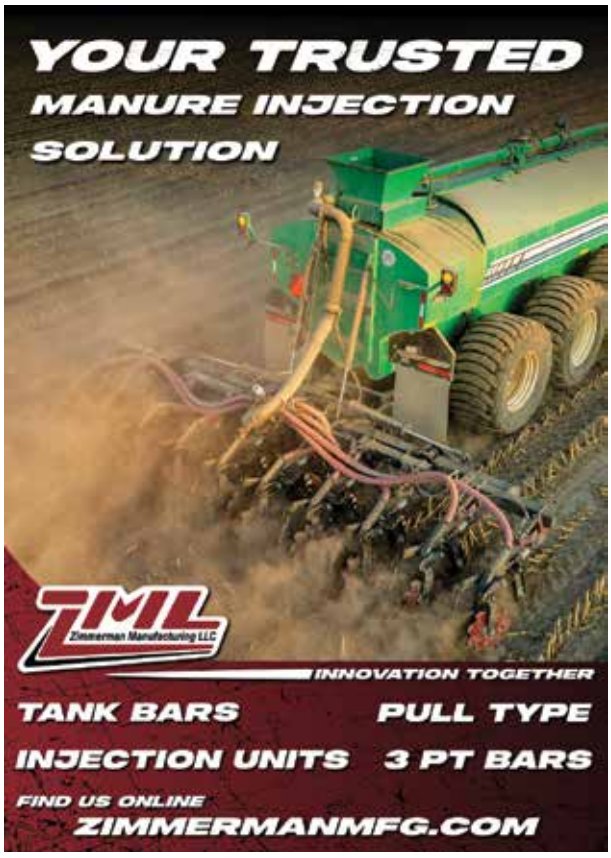
Renew your membership or sponsorship

Membership renewals mail in early December with details to register for Forage Symposium. You can renew with your registration or directly with WCO—direct renewals by check or online are appreciated. Sponsorship renewals mail the week of Thanksgiving and must be paid directly to WCO.

Available committees

- *Education/Conference*
- *Media*
- *Scholarship & Awards*
- *Safety/Regulations*
- *Nutrient/Manure application*





The unseen load: addressing mental wellness in agriculture *By WCO*

Long hours, unpredictable weather, and the responsibility of keeping a business running are familiar challenges for farmers and custom operators. But the toll these pressures take on mental health is not always as visible.

At the 2026 Forage Symposium, a session titled "The unseen load: stress, support & mental wellness in the field" brought together personal experience and professional expertise to address an issue that continues to resonate with WCO members.

Dan Dohrmann of Dohrmann Enterprises in Waite Park, Minn., opened the session by sharing his personal mental health journey. Through stories of family, loss, and personal challenges, Dohrmann encouraged attendees to recognize that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

His presentation emphasized the importance of setting manageable goals, whether five years down the road or simply for the day ahead. One message was especially straightforward: "Give your tomorrow self the gift of accomplishment."

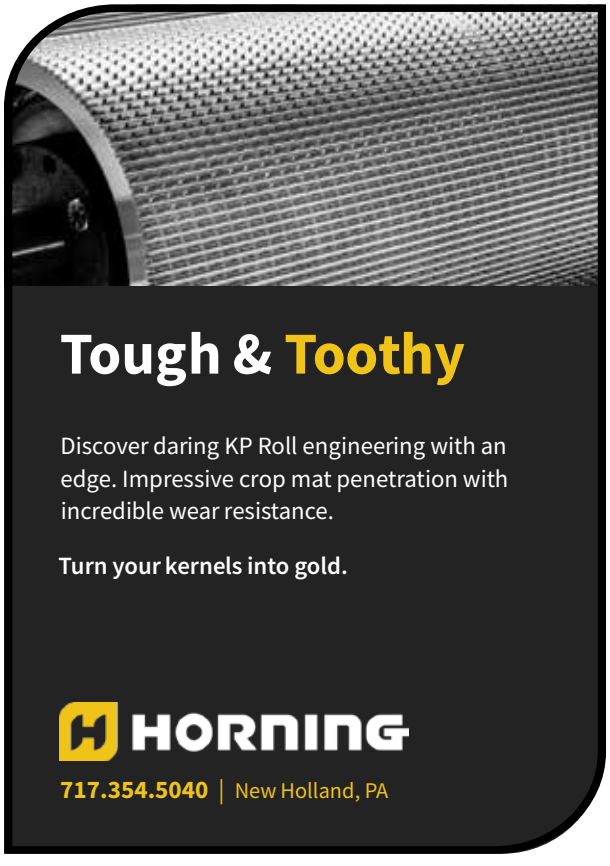
Dohrmann also encouraged attendees to appreciate the good moments in life rather than continually focusing on what comes next.

Karen Endres, Farmer Wellness Program Coordinator with DATCP, followed with a look at the unique stressors facing farmers and custom operators.

Endres, who has worked in Wisconsin agriculture for 30 years, explained how financial uncertainty, labor challenges, long hours, changing markets, and family relationships can contribute to stress. These pressures often overlap, making it difficult for farmers to separate business challenges from their personal lives.

The consequences extend beyond mental wellness. Stress and exhaustion can affect decision-making, physical health, and workplace safety — particularly important considerations for custom operators managing crews and equipment.

Megan Wolf, owner of Soul Good Counseling in Shullsburg, Wis., brought the perspective of a licensed mental







Dan Dohrmann, Karen Endres, and Megan Wolf (left to right) speak at the 2026 Forage Symposium. The session underscored the importance of mental wellness and the resources available. ***Photo by Maria Woldt***

health and substance use counselor with an agricultural background. Wolf discussed the challenges rural residents face when seeking professional support, including limited access to providers, scheduling difficulties, cost, and concerns about confidentiality.

Together, Endres and Wolf highlighted resources available through Wisconsin's Farmer Wellness Program, including counseling vouchers, telehealth appointments, in-person counseling, and online support groups.

More than 500 counseling sessions were provided to farmers and their families during fiscal year 2025. Participation in online support groups also reached an all-time high, increasing more than 51% over the previous year.

Additional resources include the Rural Realities podcast and the **24/7 Farmer Wellness Helpline at (888) 901-2558.**

For custom operators, whose work often involves seasonal demands, tight deadlines, and employees, the session offered an important reminder that taking care of people is just as essential as maintaining equipment and managing a business.

Mental wellness continues to be a topic requested through WCO's Symposium surveys. By featuring these topics, WCO hopes to encourage greater awareness, reduce stigma, and connect members with resources when they need them.

For more information about Wisconsin's Farmer Wellness Program, **visit farmcenter.wi.gov.**







Membership incentive program

Don't forget - WCO has a membership incentive program! If you sign up a new member, you receive $25 towards your 2027 membership. Sponsors can participate also. Simply list your company name on the "referred by" line and earn money towards your 2027 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!



Last winter, the WCO board toured Meyer Manufacturing in Dorchester, Wis. Board members enjoyed talking shop with the makers of their favorite equipment. Want to host a future tour? Contact us!

John Osterhaus on the Mid-West Farm Report

The Mid-West FARM REPORT LIVE 5-6am Weekdays

WCO President John Osterhaus of Silver Streak Ag Services in Chadwick, Ill., recently spoke with the Mid-West Farm Report about the 2026 corn silage harvest and challenges facing custom operators. Osterhaus discussed rapidly drying corn, variable yields, and the pressure to keep harvest crews moving. He also highlighted rising equipment and insurance costs, ongoing labor challenges, and why more farmers are turning to custom operators. ***Scan the QR code to listen.***



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