

Custom Farming

As Equipment Costs Skyrocket, More Dairymen are Turning to Custom Operators

BY GINGER SECRIST MYERS
Adams Co. Correspondent
GETTYSBURG — If you're a dairyman who wants to spend more time with your cows than in your cornfields, or a farmer with limited grain acreage and no harvesting equipment, or someone who just wants to try the newer technology, such as no-till forages, without purchasing the equipment, then perhaps you should consider having at least part of your cropping program done by a custom operator. So says Adams County extension agent Bill Murray. He describes the custom operator as someone who often purchases the larger equipment for his own large acreage and then does custom work to help his cash flow, most often working for his own neighbors.

What is fair price for having your corn no-till planted or your

wheat combined? One source of information available to farmers free from their county extension service or the Department of Agriculture's Crop Reporting Service is their publication, "Pennsylvania's 1986 Machinery Custom Rates." (See Lancaster Farming, June 7, page D14.) This publication reflects the custom rate averages reported voluntarily by custom operators throughout the state for such services as planting and drilling, spraying, harvesting, plowing and cultivating, grinding feed, manure hauling, fertilizer spreading and others. The rates are listed by two regions, Mountain and Valley, which reflects the difference in terrain, soils, labor, and equipment used between the Southeast portion of the state and the upper and western counties. A straight "state" average is also listed.

Custom operator Merle Weant, Littlestown, uses the Crop Reporting Services rate sheet as a guideline for setting his prices for his services, which include corn planting, silo filling, combining, plowing and spray incorporation. With the exception of the month of August, Weant does custom work from the end of April through to Christmas. He feels the rates in the guide are too low if the operator figures in anything for his machinery investment.

Says Weant, "The machinery dealers say I should charge \$1 per hour for every \$1000 I have invested in equipment. When I fill a silo I take out my chopper, three chuck wagons, and a blower which add up to about a \$128,000 investment. I can't charge a man \$128 an hour to fill his silo. I try to get somewhere between that and the crop reporting services figures.

Weant also has a seed dealership. His wife Olwyn, who also teaches school, helps with the seed deliveries and custom work scheduling. She states, "It's like a three-ring circus around here. Someone is always calling to get work done." Merle explains that he started doing custom work 20 years ago when he bought some larger machinery to do his own crops. Now he shells corn and picks soybeans across about 1100 acres a year, plants 600 acres of corns and soybeans, and chops and fills silos from about 1,000 acres of silage corn. In addition he farms over 560 acres of his own and rented ground. "It started small and then more people started coming for business. I have enough to do that I never have to go solicit



Adams County Extension agent Bill Murray reviews the 1986 custom rates published by the Department of Agriculture. Copies are available at county extension offices.



Merle Weant started custom cropping 20 years ago after buying larger equipment for his own operation. He and his wife Olwyn have a seed dealership as well.

any more work. Most of my business is with dairymen who don't want to invest in the equipment as long as I can get it done on time," says Weant.

When looking for a custom operator for service, Weant advises, "Get someone who will do the job the way you want it done. Check around and see how long or short he cuts silage, or how much wheat he leaves on the ground."

From the operator's end Weant reveals that he usually knows most of the people he works for and who's going to pay and who isn't. Adds Olwyn, "It's not unusual for us to have accounts out over five digits. If a guy tries to pay something right along, we try to work with him."

John Hess, Gettysburg, breaks the traditional mold of the

dairyman who needs custom work done, by being a dairyman who has the services to offer. In addition to operating a 150-cow dairy and cropping 700 acres of his own, Hess does custom manure hauling, corn planting, and silo filling.

Hess explains, "I don't think of myself as the typical dairyman. Most of the management of the dairy has been turned over to my children and wife. That has allowed me to diversify my operation." He notes that he spends from 500 to 1000 man-hours a year doing custom work. With his additional time away from the dairy, he has increased his crop sales and is now also selling silage year around.

Hess feels that getting into custom work has been good for his

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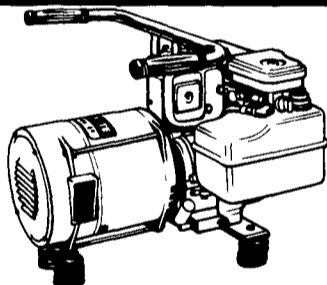
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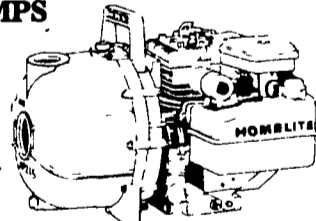
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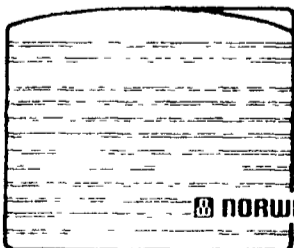


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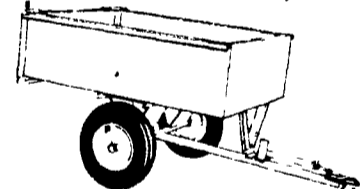
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