

# Is a Custom Harvester Right for You?

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**D**etermining if a custom harvester is right for you requires review of your and their operations. Ask yourself these questions when making the decision:

**Can a custom harvester harvest forage at lower cost?** Your first step should be to understand your harvesting costs. One way is to complete a partial budget analysis. UWEX ([learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/A3510.pdf](http://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/A3510.pdf)) and others provide worksheets to help with this important step. It helps you understand equipment and timeliness costs of your operation. However, it's difficult to include all costs or benefits, such as the silage uniformity resulting from filling your bunker in a couple of days versus a couple of weeks, postponing response to animals' needs during harvest, or missing your child's baseball game, to name a few.

**So what is timeliness cost?** Timeliness cost is the loss in crop value as the optimal harvest window is missed. For example, with alfalfa, this can be harvesting at the wrong stage of maturity or not being able to harvest hay lying in the field before it is too dry; both result in lower quality silage. Farmers with larger high-capacity equipment have a better chance of putting up more tons of optimally harvested material than a farmer with smaller equipment. Unfortunately, the larger equipment has a higher investment cost. This is where the specialized capabilities of a custom harvester pay off. The custom harvester doesn't determine capacity of equipment based on your farm needs but on all farms they service. Thus, equipment capacity and, therefore, harvest timeliness is much different than that which the dairy could justify on its own. For instance, if an 80-cow dairy wants to increase equipment capacity, they'd have to absorb higher production costs or add extra harvested acres (e.g., neighbor's forage) to dilute the added cost. Although these scenarios are possible, it is hard to compete with the number of acres over which a well-established custom harvester can dilute costs.

**What if a custom harvester is not available at the optimal time?** You need to find one who can work on your schedule. This is a partnership. It is important you communicate your needs with the operator and that they integrate this information along with your harvested acres so clients can be properly scheduled. Remember, they may not start when you would have, but with proper management, they'll finish before you would have. Communication is the key to a successful partnership.

Communicating your acreage and crop maturity expectations will ensure a satisfactory partnership with your custom harvester. This will help them schedule your harvest. These conversations must take place early in the year, not two days before you want first cutting. It is critical the custom harvester has a clear picture of the expectations from all clients well before the first tire hits the field. Continuing with the same operator over a number of years is also critical to the partnership. This allows the operator to become familiar with your fields, haul distances, and feed storage site. This will ensure timely harvest for you, allowing the operator to more accurately schedule clients. Hiring the lowest bidder will save you in the short run but could result in untimely harvest as they integrate you into their schedule. It will take time for you to build a working relationship with any new partner, and switching operators frequently can be risky.

**How do I choose a custom harvester?** Interview custom harvesters and ask about their other clients. How long have they worked with them? How many new clients do they expect to take on? This will give you an idea of customer loyalty and their ability to fit you into their schedule. Ask for references. Talk to their clients; ask questions about their expectations and the dynamic of their relationship. Visit each custom harvester's shop. Look over their equipment. Is it well maintained? What is their maintenance program? Who are their employees? Are employees seasonal or do they maintain them throughout the year? What is their training program? Are they certified by a trade organization (e.g., WCO Certified)? Expect operators to interview you as well. Remember, businesses don't partner without all of the facts. Don't be surprised if they, too, ask for references or even letters of credit. This protects not only their interests but also their other clients' interests and the sustainability of their business.

Take time to do a cost-benefit analysis and see if a custom harvester fits your needs. They can leverage high-capacity equipment to harvest faster and, thus, at higher quality and uniformity, all without interrupting daily activities necessary to maintain profitability of your milking, calf, or heifer operations. Partnering with a custom operator could result in lower forage costs, a more consistent work schedule for employees, and a more timely response to animal needs.