

# Custom Forage Harvesting is Franken's Business

*Stephen Barnhart, Iowa State University*



Jake Franken and his family manage Franken Custom Inc. from their farm in far northwest Iowa near Sioux Center. There has been a heifer replacement production enterprise on the home farm for many years. Jake's parents and brother continue to manage that enterprise. They keep about 14,000 heifers on feed in open lots. Heifers range in size from just weaned and on feed to bred heifers. The family manages the heifer replacement enterprise with 15 hired employees. A significant feed source for the heifer replacements comes from 2,000 acres of their own corn (for silage) and 150 acres of pasture.

Jake has taken over management of the custom farming enterprises. They have 30 customers stretching over a 200 mile radius around northwest Iowa. Customers range from single, upright silo size farms up to 50,000 ton scale farms. In addition to custom chopping, their custom activities also include custom planting and trucking. The custom harvesting and cropping enterprises are run by Jake, three full-time employees, and as many as 30 seasonal employees.

Over the past 15 years the custom chopping business has changed considerably; it has grown from 4-row choppers and dump wagons to 12-row choppers and transport trucks.

Customer feedback guides some of the enterprise decisions and practices in Jake's chopping operations. He noted the

'beef feedlot' customers want shorter chop lengths while the dairy customers are trending toward longer particle length. Franken says he has the equipment technology to produce shreddlage, but thus far his customers have not wanted to move to that type of chopped product.

Franken is generally optimistic about agriculture and is encouraged that forage-based livestock production remains strong in his surrounding area in northwest Iowa.

Franken says his short-term concern is the rapidly changing feed costs and associated profitability for livestock producers. He says he has a longer-term concern about the stability and availability of ethanol by-products for livestock producers at an economically viable price.

Jake keeps in close communication with his customers, getting feedback on industry trends. He also picks up tips at farm shows and through Midwest Forage Association publications and meetings.

When asked what he would like to know more about, he replied 'economics.'

Franken sees value in his MFA membership. He attends meetings, likes the mix of presenters, and thinks the conferences are well run. He feels MFA events are valuable enough to take some of his employees and that it helps to elevate the professionalism of their business.

