

Rusty Bahl - The Little Guy with the Big Equipment!

Having been born and raised on a farm on the extreme eastern edge of Iowa, a career in agriculture was a forgone conclusion for Rusty Bahl, a farmer and custom chopper living near Sherrill, IA. “I’ve been farming all my life,” says Rusty, “It’s a way of life that appeals to me. I’ve never considered doing anything else.” In addition to farming with his wife Sandy on ~600 acres (including pasture), Rusty also manages a thriving custom chopping business. According to his business card, Rusty is known as “The Little Guy with the Big Equipment!” – a phrase his wife believes is not only a catchy slogan but an apt description of Rusty’s small stature. He stands at just 5’4” (but still towers over Sandy at 5’2”, he’s quick to point out).



Sandy, Rusty, Mataya, and Tanner

Rusty’s foray into chopping started at the age of 15 running his dad’s chopper. When Rusty was just 19, the local custom operator retired. Rusty’s dad suggested he buy a chopper and start his own business. Following his dad’s advice, he purchased a 5460 John Deere Forage Harvester and began Rusty’s Custom Chopping in 1984.

That was 31 years ago and things are continuing to grow each year. Rusty currently has 60 customers to whom he provides full service alfalfa harvesting from start to finish, along with rye, oats, and corn. His chopping service cuts, merges, chops, hauls, bags, and/or packs bunkers. His motto is ‘the customer always comes first’ – meaning his own crops have to wait until his customers are served, leaving him with some very long days when he needs to finish his custom work before moving his equipment home to harvest his own crops.

Rusty’s family has been renting a farm next to the original family farm for over 50 years. Rusty took over running that rental property 30 years ago. Rusty and Sandy also own 100 acres of crop and pasture land and rent additional pasture ground to graze their cows.

A member of the Iowa Cattlemen’s Association, Rusty raises beef cattle and has 1,000 head of fats and 200 stock cows, which explains his reliance on 300 acres of corn and 250 acres of alfalfa. “Our crop rotation is generally corn, alfalfa, and rye. We tend to do a three-year rotation with alfalfa.” Rusty also has ~50 acres of rye as a cover crop he harvests in May and follows that with a late corn variety.

With regard to his agronomic practices, Rusty says, “We plant our alfalfa in the fall with a Brillion seeder and always have our soil tested. Our goal is to have the corn harvested and chopped by August 16th. We then pump liquid manure – 10,000 gallons per acre, apply lime, then direct seed leaf hopper resistant alfalfa before August 25th.” Rusty believes this timely procedure helps perfect the stand for the following year. Rusty plants 15 lbs to the acre and does not interseed anything with alfalfa. Rusty adds, “After the first year we apply fertilizer annually, 300 lbs of potash per acre.” In terms of storage, Rusty utilizes a 3.5 acre lot where he stores his crops in silage bags. He takes four cuttings of alfalfa per year. However, his fourth harvest date varies greatly due to his custom business requiring him to be on the road chopping corn and grinding earlage, but it is always done before first frost.

For his first and second crop, he cuts and lays out the alfalfa with his Krone Big M discbine. From there it gets merged with his Oxbo merger. Third and fourth crops are cut and merged with the Big M (30’), then merged again with the Oxbo merger (another 30’). This double merge process is beneficial as thinning crops need to be piled up to be harvested in a timely manner and keep the chopper running at appropriate speeds. All of Rusty’s alfalfa is chopped with his John Deere 7980 Forage Harvester, hauled in silage trucks, and bagged with a 2015 self-propelled table Ag Bagger. Rusty personally modified the bagger this summer, adding a used combine cab to make it more efficient to operate.

Rusty feeds approximately two thirds of his alfalfa to his own cattle. The rest he tests and markets to his dairy customers within a 30 mile radius.

Rusty contends his biggest management challenge is Mother Nature. “Weather affects the size, volume, stand, and harvest date. You just have to deal with it and make necessary adjustments.” His second biggest management difficulty? Nutritionists! According to Rusty, “They are constantly changing their minds about how crops need to be harvested, so we as custom operators have to change our equipment (which can be costly) to satisfy everyone’s needs due to the nutritionists’ recommendations.”

The best management advice Rusty has is to “just stick with it.” “In my opinion chopping hay silage is still the best crop for the cheapest protein value.”

Rusty joined MFA a couple of years ago after learning about the association while attending the Symposium. He has attended the event each year since and greatly values the networking and connections made through MFA and the Symposium. “I have learned a lot from others and have made some great friends. The Symposium seminars are very informative. I look forward to attending each year as do my wife and kids.”

