



One of the reasons Birchen runs Massey Ferguson® 8600 Series tractors is their versatility. Among other duties, he uses them to mow, haul, plant, till and prepare his alfalfa and snaplage with a scraper blade. **TOP RIGHT:** Birchen, center, with son Andrew (left) and customer Rodney Block.

in partnership with the owner, eventually buying out his half, too. By 1995, the milking herd was up to 500 cows, from which it has continued to grow.

Birchen's story is a testimonial for how a custom operation can help a farm such as his. Due to the demands at harvest time, he used to hire a custom harvester to chop alfalfa and corn silage. "Unfortunately, our best custom operator quit the business," he relates. "So, in 2001, we decided to buy our own equipment."

That same year, Birchen also helped a neighbor harvest his silage—paving the way for what was to become his own custom business. By 2008, he was already up to a third tractor and running two harvesters at a time.

"Right now, we're harvesting about 4,500 acres of whole-plant corn silage and cutting 1,000 to 1,200 acres of alfalfa four to five times a year for the equivalent of around 6,000 acres," says Birchen. That's in addition to his own farm, two-thirds of which is devoted to corn. Another 450 to 500 acres is planted to alfalfa, while the rest is in wheat and grass hay.

He's also harvesting about 1,000 acres of corn for snaplage for his customers, noting that snaplage consists of the kernels,

cob and parts of the husk and shank harvested at around 34% to 36% with a snapper head and kernel processor. "That's a growing business," he adds, "partly because it produces a feed product that is ready to use as it comes out of the field. Plus, the ground cobs and husks not only provide a little buffer, but they add more per acre over what you'd get with shelled corn alone."

Generally speaking, custom farming is itself a growing business, says William Edwards, an Extension economist at Iowa State University. While some custom operators, like Birchen, garner business from those who don't want to invest in a full line of machinery, other custom farmers are taking on the whole crop production process for those who are fully employed away from the farm or are retired. In essence, custom farming has become an alternative to leasing farm ground for some.

Other than the cost of equipment, Edwards says, "one obvious advantage to the custom operator is that little or no additional operating capital is needed. In addition, custom farming offers a fixed return as opposed to the yield risks faced by the property owner."

Landowners find advantages to custom farming as well.