

Is the Investment in Corn Chopping Worth the Potential Income?

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



Another great day in the beef business. The inventory count is correct. The sun is shining. The wind is blowing. The outlying cows are already hauled in for fall corn grazing. And the bulls are home. All the yearling heifers--including the one that launched to the west but was eventually captured--are home. One cow is still unaccounted for but she is branded, and should find her way home via the neighbor's roundup.

The crisp fall air brings thoughts of "what could we have done differently?" We are preparing for the most expensive part of the cow life cycle (winter feeding) and have started the cows on standing corn, a winter feed regimen we have used at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center for the past several seasons.

Quite often we are asked: "Why standing corn? Why not make silage and feed it in the winter?" Those questions prompt visions of the old threshing crews. Chopping silage requires that huge labor force with the addition of lots of expensive equipment.

I recall a visit I had with a local corn dealer and commented on a picture of corn being chopped. I inquired why the picture didn't include the trucks, dump wagons, packers and tractors needed to harvest the crop.

Although the expense of each operation must be considered, the availability of labor to run the various pieces of equipment adds to the expense. In many rural areas, finding labor for farming and ranching operations that require people power is no simple task. The Dickinson Research Extension Center used to chop corn. It required three to four weeks of chopping for six to seven hours a day and hauling, packing, covering, and other related activities for the remainder of the daylight hours.

According to our ranch manager, Garry Ottmar, preparation for the corn chopping season included high dollar budgets and equipment. He noted the price of a large forage chopper with two heads could reach \$50,000. The operation also needed a 140- to 150-horsepower tractor at \$70,000 to \$90,000, depending on the age of the tractor. A new silage wagon runs \$10,000

to \$12,000. A good used silage wagon, Garry noted, is just that--good and used.

The truck inventory would need upgrading. The truck fleet consisted of one reasonably good truck plus "old beaters that haven't seen black top for many years," according to Garry. They posed a challenge for many mechanics and it took days to get them ready for the long haul ahead, including the plywood sides "and that special end gate that took four men and a boy to install." A front end loader was also required to move and pack the silage pit -- a pit encased in concrete.

Anyway, previous experience indicates it took four people to chop 300 acres of corn, service and fuel equipment and repair break downs. An added challenge for any fall is work is the lack of suitable day length. The sun fades early, requiring extra lighting. The lighting, even at best, does not offset the long hours and potential accident waiting to happen. Alas, even when the job is done, at least six people need to be recruited (available between wind gusts) to cover the pile with plastic, and roll on used tires everyone else is trying to get rid of.

A return to chopping corn would require a huge investment on our part. And, likely as not, we'll eventually decide not to chop corn again. When that happens, we'll make a little bit on the auction sale, but it'll all go to pay the tire disposal fee.

To sum things up, corn chopping, didn't fit in our operation. We weighed the costs against the benefits and made our decisions accordingly. The scales may tip in a different direction on your ranch, just make sure you take all the costs into consideration.

At the start of the story, I talked about grazing standing corn. Data collected from those trials will be forthcoming. Stay tuned and may you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0113.

Ranch Investment for Chopping Corn

Equipment	Value
Two row forage harvester	\$40,000 - \$50,000
140-150 hp tractor	\$70,000 - \$90,000
Silage wagon	\$10,000 - \$12,000
Truck 1	\$10,000 - \$12,000
Truck 2	\$6,000 - \$8,000
Front end loader tractor	\$30,000 - \$40,000
Concrete bunker	\$10,000 - \$15,000