Rebuilt Cornhead Leads To New Farm Business

A big farm shop, a switch to 20-in. rows, and the confidence to build their own 18-row cornhead all lead to a profitable sideline business for Allan Prestegard and his son Richard. The Blue Earth, Minnesota farmers built a few heads for neighbors and then got an order for five. Before they knew it, they were in the cornhead rebuilding business.

"We have four full time employees, and the cornhead business has allowed us to make better use of their time," says Richard. "New 18-row, 20-in. cornheads run around $100,000. We can provide one that runs great for $37,500. The others are great products and may have more features, but they charge for them, too. It's just a matter of where the customer wants to put his money."

Five years after building their first corn head, about 40 customers have put their money on the lower cost units from the Prestegards. Although they are advertised as rebuilt, only the frame, the tin and the gearbox are original. Chains, rollers, deck plates, chain guides, sprockets and poly grouts are all replaced. Although it is not replaced, the gearbox is checked over and given a 1-year warranty.

Best of all, the business finances itself. All cornheads are rebuilt to order. A customer needing a cornhead leaves a cornhead with them along with a down payment Trades are sometimes made and, if new rollers have just been installed, the customer will get credit for them. While the Prestegards keep an inventory of used cornheads, they only rebuild on order. This keeps costs down.

"We don't keep a big inventory of parts, and what we do have is for heads that we have orders for, so we know the income is coming," explains Richard. "Of course, the more rollers or other parts you can buy at one time, the lower the cost and the better our margin."

Figuring out margins is part of the learning curve of any business. When they got their first order for five units, they thought they had priced them right. When the units were done, the Prestegards realized they were underpriced. Prices of future units were adjusted upward.

While they currently have time and capacity to build about 12 heads per year, the Prestegards have no interest in expanding the business. It fits with their large farming operation and farm shop, as does a third enterprise which is buying and selling used trucks, trailers and other ag equipment.

"Farming is number one, and building cornheads is number two," says Richard. "If anything is expanded, it will be the farm. If the cornhead business goes away, we will roll with the punches."

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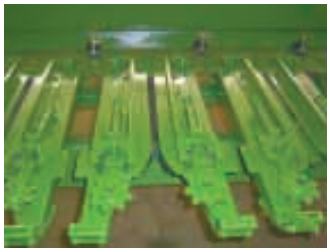
Rebuilding cornheads is a profitable sideline business for Allan Prestegard and his son, Richard. "We can provide a rebuilt 18-row, 20-in. cornhead for $37,500," they say.



Chains, rollers, deck plates, chain guides, sprockets, and poly snouts are all replaced. The gearbox is reworked as needed and given a 1-year warranty.

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Ditch Swather Makes Gathering "Free" Hay Easy

With 140 cows in dry lot year round, Harold Reimer needs lots of forage. Since he built his first-of-its-kind ditch swather, he's been getting all he needs for free. Center pivots operating in fields near his farm often overshoot field edges and irrigate the ditch grass. Even in a dry year, the grass grows 3 to 4 ft. tall.

"Gravel roadsides are usually too steep to harvest," explains Reimer. "I needed a machine that could stay on the road, cut the grass and pull it up to the chopper."

With the help of a friend and professional welder, Harvey Nikkel, Reimer put together a rigid frame with a swather header mounted on a hydraulic arm. The header can be lowered down the ditch bank to cut and transfer grasses up to a forage harvester on the road that chops and blows into a high dump wagon. A 110 hp tractor powers all three units. Reimer uses a truck to transfer chopped grasses back to his bunkers.

The concept for the ditch swather came from a Saskatchewan header manufacturer who had built a couple of machines for that purpose. The manufacturer was more than willing to share suggestions and also sent him a video of a unit operating.

"He was very helpful," says Reimer. "Seeing it operating helped me develop a pattern. A farmer who owns one gave me some suggestions, too."

Reimer started by building an all-steel framework. It had to be capable of staying on the roadway while the header went from a vertical position to 45º below road level on the steep ditch slope.

"I used 7 by 7-in. square steel tubing for the hitch, sealed it at both ends and used it as the hydraulic fluids reservoir," explains Reimer. "The wheel legs and the main carriage are built out of 4 by 5-in. steel tubing, and the header arm is built out of heavier walled 5 by 5-in. tubing."

Reimer tore apart an older sugar beet harvester for parts. He used the hinge from the walking axle as one of the hinges for the header arm.

A brace from the rear of the header is hinged to a point on the frame behind the main pivot point. It serves to counter the high degree of torque on the end of the header and helps stabilize the header as it's lifted and lowered.

To make the header, Reimer cut a used, 25-ft. Case IH header in half and mounted it on the new frame. The aluminum reel was simple to cut and reassemble. The removable platform tables were lengthened or shortened as needed with new canvas. All the drives were hydraulic, which made it easy to synchronize the speeds of the canvas-covered platforms once they were reassembled.

"I learned a lot about hydraulics from a guy at Kirchner Mfg. where I bought parts. He went out of his way to help on controls and how to hook them up."

The shortened header feeds the ditch grass to the left side of the frame. Here, it's picked up by a short platform and lifted up to drop on a 16-ft. conveyer. This long conveyer moves the grass back to the forage harvester.

"I had to add the second short platform to the header conveyer to guide the grass onto the rear conveyer," explains Reimer. "Without it, as the header lowered onto steep banks, grass would be thrown up and over the rear conveyer"

Reimer knew that lowering and lifting the header arm would require a significant counterweight on the opposite side of the frame. In addition to the heavy steel frame and the oil-filled reservoir in the hitch, he mounted a 750-lb., 25-in. dia. circle cut from a 5-in. thick sheet of steel. When that was not enough, he added two 350-lb. tractor wheel weights. Finally, he cut a hole in a length of the frame on that side and filled it with car wheel balancing lead weights. A pail set inside the circle formed by the wheel weights was also filled with lead weights.

"The header arm weighs about 2,500 lbs. with the entire machine running about 6,000 lbs.," says Reimer.

To power the forage harvester, Reimer ran a 15-ft. pto shaft across the ditch swather frame. Along the way, a belt pulley mounted on the shaft powers a hydraulic pump on the swather. It supplies pressure to all the hydraulics except the cylinder for the header arm. That is run directly off the tractor's hydraulic system. Running everything off hydraulic orbital motors made set-up much easier than belts and pulleys.

"Since the orbit motors that are direct drive on the conveyer platforms are all the same size, they run at the same speed," he says. "All I had to do was plumb them in series and, that way if one stops, they all stop."

The entire machine less the used header cost him about $10,000.

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With his home-built ditch swather, Heimer is able to stay on the road while cutting grass in ditches. He chops it and hauls it home.

Forage harvester on the road chops and blows material into a high dump wagon.