

Custom Harvesting in California

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While the title of this article is "Custom Harvesting in California," actually it will deal with conditions in the South San Joaquin valley, south coastal area, and Imperial valley.

Mechanical harvesting of sugar beets came into rather general use in the above areas in 1945. This was possible because of the heavy purchase of beet harvesters, principally of the Marbeet type, by the various sugar companies, the farmers generally being reluctant to purchase equipment as costly and as untried as were the available harvesters. Another handicap experienced, particularly in areas where beets were grown on beds, was to find farmers with heavy enough tractor power to pull double row harvesters. However, in areas where single row beets were grown that was not the problem, for the average grower could handle a single row harvester with the power he had.

For the next couple of years, a great deal of the mechanical harvesting was done with sugar company-owned machines, rented to the growers. This system was entirely wrong for it put such a terrific burden upon the agricultural forces of the processors that they had little time for any other duties. The machines generally were mistreated, causing terrific upkeep, and the performance per machine was very low.

After the machines had proven themselves capable of doing a satisfactory job, many growers purchased their own machines. It was very noticeable that with growers owning the machines the number of breakdowns was greatly reduced, and deliveries per machine improved accordingly.

It was at this point that custom harvesting entered the picture, and it has filled a very great need in the sugar beet business, in a great portion of our area where double row beets are planted, and which require the 2-row harvester. The grower still lacks the necessary tractor power to satisfactorily pull a 2-row harvester.

The custom harvester is particularly suited to the grower who does not plant sugar beets year in and year out, which type is quite general in some of our areas; also, the smaller grower who could not afford an investment in a harvester for limited yearly operation. The fact that a grower has access to custom harvesting has made the beet crop more attractive to growers who might otherwise plant a crop which could be handled more easily; for instance, if the grower had to rig up a tractor and arrange for trucks, and rent a harvester to pull, or be faced with possible hand labor for harvest, he could very well decide against beets.

The general practice in California is for the custom operator to supply the necessary trucks needed for hauling the beets to a loading station, so that when a grower engages a custom man he has very little to do with the harvest except supervision. The cost to the grower for using this method

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of harvest has been considerably less than by hand; this year's rates running generally at \$1.30 per ton of net beets yielding 20 tons per acre. The price varied up and down with the tonnage. This price generally included two pick-up men, where needed.

It has been my observation that the most successful custom operators have been the men using the 2-row machines, because this machine is more adapted to large scale operation, and because of its heavy construction is subject to less breakage; this is important to a custom operator.

There are several large custom operators in California who work the Imperial valley in the spring and then move to the coastal areas or interior valleys for the fall campaign. Some of these operators are running as many as five 2 row machines. Practically all makes of tractors will be found in use pulling harvesters; however, you will find one thing universal amongst custom operators, and that is they will use tractors overpowered rather than under-powered, for their success depends upon plenty of tractor power.

The usual practice is for the operator to make his contracts with the growers well in advance of harvest and arrange for the jobs at that time, then at harvest time take the beets in the order of their maturity.

The factor which makes for the success of a custom operator is that he be allowed to work every day and on a reasonable delivery basis, and to encourage this type of operator we have regulated harvest schedules to accomplish this, feeling that with a very heavy investment in equipment, unless the operator can realize a return on his investment and a fair labor return, he will become dissatisfied with beet harvesting and turn his efforts elsewhere; this could be a big loss to the industry.

One hears of exceptional deliveries made by some operators, but it has been our experience that if a 2-row machine will average 125 to 150 tons per day, and this is 20-ton beets, it has done very well. Possibly, a fair average for Marbeet Jr. and Midgets would be 75 to 100 tons per day.

In conclusion, I would urge all growers who contemplate the use of mechanical harvesters, either their own or that of a custom operator, to exercise some care in land preparation and in the planting, then follow through with clean fields. If the above practices are followed, mechanical harvesting can be most successful.