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Nebraska Network 21 —
Summary of Visionary Food Systems Curricula Action Team, Governor's Task Force on Agriculture and Natural Resources Education

Nebraska Network 21 was established as a result of a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources to creatively meet the learning needs of Nebraskans in the 21st century. One outcome was establishment of the Visionary Food Systems Curricula Action Team. The Action Team held Summit I on Reinventing Agriculture and Natural Resources Education on Feb. 10, 1998 and Summit II on Nov. 19, 1998. Both Summits attracted more than 100 Nebraskans from across the state. Following Summit II, the Legislative Committee proposed establishing a group that would maintain broad-based support for lifelong learning in and about agriculture and natural resources and set a goal for establishing a state task force for this purposes. The idea was presented to then Gov. Mike Johanns who subsequently appointed the Governor's Task Force on Agriculture and Natural Resources Education. The Task Force included statewide representation in agriculture, business, natural resources, agribusiness, education and government. Since its inception, members of the Task Force have been thoroughly dedicated to the group. They have a profound interest in furthering agriculture and natural resources literacy among all Nebraskans throughout life.

During the initial meeting on Dec. 3, 1999 in Kearney, Task Force member Lloyd Bell of Lincoln made a presentation on the "Background, Mission, Purpose and Goals for the Task Force." The mission and goals were adopted later in the meeting and an Interim Coordinating Committee was established. Task Force member Richard Katt of Lincoln gave an "Overview of Agriculture and Natural Resources Education" in K-6, middle school and high school. Small group discussions followed on what should be happening in agriculture and natural resources education.

Based on discussions at the first meeting, the Interim Coordinating Committee decided to invite two individuals to address the Task Force on Jan. 21, 2000 in Lincoln. Douglas Christensen, Nebraska Commissioner of Education, discussed "Future Directions of K-12 Education--Implications for Agriculture and Natural Resources Literacy." James Leising, formerly of Arapahoe, now head of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications at Oklahoma State University, spoke on "Advancing Agricultural Literacy: Working Toward a Seamless System of Agricultural Education Grades 1-12." He developed "A Guide to Food and Fiber Systems Literacy" for grades K-12.

Officers elected at the Jan. 21 meeting were: Gregg Classen, Omaha, chair, and Rachel Wise, Omaha, vice chair. Jerry Warner of Omaha subsequently succeeded Classen. Wise later resigned but there is no successor. Dick Fleming is the coordinator.

Based on responses Jan. 21, the Executive Committee decided to pursue several topics at the third meeting March 2, 2000 in Kearney. Jim Woodland, science consultant in the Nebraska Department of Education, discussed environmental education in the schools. Katt gave an update on the Young Farmers Program and continued to do so at subsequent meetings. He also outlined the procedure for developing new essential learnings in agriculture and natural resources for K-12 education.

Based on discussions at various meetings, Task Force members recognized a need to provide basic education on agriculture and natural resources to young people and adults in both rural and urban areas. Many people discourage young people from entering the field although there are opportunities in agriculture, servicing agriculture and processing agricultural products. While there are many dollars being spent to enhance understanding of agriculture and natural resources, the efforts are not reaching the target audiences. These efforts need to be coordinated and targeted. Furthermore, an increasing number of Nebraskans do not have the background to deal with agriculture and natural resources issues.

During the March 2, 2000 meeting, Task Force members decided to pursue development of essential learnings for K-12 agriculture education and natural resources education that would be related to the new Nebraska Science Standards. Katt, Bell and John Turnbull of York agreed to serve on an Essential Learnings Committee to develop a plan and resource needs. Commodity and other interested groups would have an opportunity to provide specific materials at various grade levels and avoid duplication. Materials could be made available electronically. Once developed, these materials could be adapted for adult education.

Two farm radio broadcasters--Mike LePorte of KRVN at Lexington and Tim Marshall of KFAB in Omaha--were invited to share ideas on public relations at the March 2 meeting. After discussion, Task Force members decided to develop a plan. Jerry Warner, Omaha, agreed to serve as chair of the Public Relations Committee to develop a plan and ways to implement the plan. Other committee members were Barbara Batie, Lexington; and Don Hutchens of Lincoln.

Governor Mike Johanns addressed the Task Force at the fourth meeting May 18, 2000 in Lincoln. The Governor said that "I see this Task Force being able to play an important role in at least three key areas:

1. Making the general public more aware of agriculture and the importance of sound farm policy;
2. Educating children and young people about agriculture and the opportunities for them in this industry; and
3. Providing correct and complete information to the public about current issues that may be controversial or cause for public concern or confusion."

The Governor also pointed out that "...a great deal of who we are as a state is tied to our agricultural heritage. Nebraskans are independent, self-sustaining and resilient. We have a keen appreciation of our natural resources and their importance to our state. We understand the unpredictability of nature and the ups and downs of the economy, and we have learned to weather those ebbs and flows with a focused, conservative approach."

Greg Ruehle, executive vice president of the Nebraska Cattlemen in Lincoln, spoke to the Task Force on "Leading Nebraska Cattlemen Into the 21st Century" at the fifth meeting June 29, 2000 at Grand Island. Then members of the Essential Learnings Committee presented a proposal for the project which received a favorable response. A $250,000, three-year grant for the project was submitted to the Nebraska Environmental Trust in September 2000. However, the grant was not among those approved.

Task Force members also decided to proceed with a Public Relations proposal which included developing a Task Force slogan, flier, display, media packet and calling cards which members can share with media representatives, youth groups and others. Radio spot announcements were developed and producers, persons involved with natural resources, agribusiness and business leaders and government officials were encouraged to be spokespersons. The radio spots were aired on KRVN and the Pinnacle network. The Nebraska Corn Board provided $300 to help finance development of two displays and loaned two flannel displays to the Task Force. Two traveling displays were developed by Lancaster County Cooperative Extension staff. The displays were included in exhibitions at three statewide conferences at Kearney in November and December 2000 as well as in Lincoln and at the Omaha Public Schools during 2001. Chadron State College staff printed 5,000 Task Force fliers.

Those attending the Grand Island meeting also recognized the need for a place to handle Task Force funds. After review, the Task Force set up an account at the Nebraska Community Foundation in September 2000 and established a Fund Advisory/Fund-Raising Committee. Jim Pillen, Columbus, was elected chair. Other members were Batie, Classen, Warner and Wise. Jeff Yost of the Nebraska Community Foundation discussed Foundation services at a subsequent meeting.

There were discussions at the Grand Island meeting on the need for ongoing funding from private and public sources to carry out various Task Force activities and programs. A $15,000, one-year start-up grant for general operations was developed and submitted to the Nebraska Environmental Trust in September 2000, but was not approved. A Legislative Committee was appointed. Members included: Larry Hudkins, Malcolm, chair, Frank Johannsen of Bayard, Greg Ibach of Sumner and Bell. The Task Force also considered and unanimously approved a proposal to establish a Task Force Advisory Committee.

Chadron State College hosted the sixth Task Force meeting on Sept. 7-8, 2000. Chadron State President Tom Krepel spoke at the opening dinner followed by two commodity board representatives. They included: Ron Maas, Nebraska Wheat Board and Dale Eirich, Nebraska Dry Bean Board. Then Chuck Butterfield and Mike Leite, members of the Chadron State faculty, discussed range resources and fossils, respectively. The new Task Force fliers and calling cards were distributed to members. Since then, 5,000 fliers have been distributed. The flier has been reprinted.

Members of the Legislative Committee proposed a $158,000, two-year request to hire an agriculture and natural resources literacy consultant to initiate educational programs from pre-kindergarten throughout life. The program would begin in the Omaha-Lincoln area and eventually spread across the state. The proposal was approved by the Task Force and was submitted to Governor Johanns in September 2000 and reviewed with Senator Roger Wehrbein, but was not funded.

During the seventh meeting Oct. 30, 2000 in Kearney, John Carter, coordinator at the Nebraska State Historical Society, discussed "American Bounty: The Story of Food," which is the title of a $250,000 grant received by the Society. This project ties together the story of food and the history of Nebraska in lesson plans for use by school teachers. Task Force members felt there was a good fit with the Task Force mission/goals and suggested that the Essential Learnings Committee work with the Historical Society to coordinate and expedite efforts.

The eighth meeting was held in conjunction with the Nebraska Historical Society's Reception January 3, 2001 in Lincoln. In addition to committee reports, Rob Robertson of the Nebraska Farm Bureau discussed the "Future of Animal Agriculture In Rural Nebraska" (FAAIR) developed by the FAAIR coalition. It was agreed that the Task Force and FAAIR would share information and keep up-to-date on activities.

Two speakers, Syd Hime , formerly of Lincoln, and Brooke Levy of Kearney discussed the new Nebraska Alliance for Conservation and Environmental Education at the ninth meeting March 4, 2001 in Kearney. Task Force member Gary Bergman represented the Task Force at a meeting of the new group. Jane Polson of Lincoln initially represented the Alliance on the Task Force, but later resigned. The Task Force agreed to sponsor an "Imaging Workshop" for teachers in Omaha in July.

Task Force members attended a joint meeting with the Nebraska Agricultural Educators Association at their 10th meeting in Kearney June 4, 2001. An initial anonymous donation was received for the Task Force and was placed in the account at the Nebraska Community Foundation. Members recognized a need to initiate efforts to raise funds for the Essential Learnings proposal as well as operations and other activities. It was decided to work with Jeff Yost of the Nebraska Community Foundation to contact various foundations and commodity groups to secure funds for various projects and activities. A successful "Imaging Workshop" for teachers was held in July at Omaha and the proceeds were placed in the Task Force account at the Nebraska Community Foundation.

There have been periodic meetings over the years, but Task Force program proposals have not been funded.

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Jerry Warner, Chair of the Task Force, called a meeting in Lincoln, NE on June 11, 2007 to consider: (1) whether or not there is any future for the Task Force, and (2) use of remaining Task Force funds.

Following discussion, Steve Gaul moved to disband the Task Force. Ken Spellman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Chair Warner agreed to notify the Governor's Office.

Richard Alden moved to use the remaining funds in the Task Force Account in the Nebraska Community Foundation to establish a scholarship for a student majoring in Agricultural Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the University of Nebraska Foundation. Ken Spellman seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. Chair Warner agreed to write a letter to the Nebraska Community Foundation to transfer the remaining balance in the Task Force Account to the University of Nebraska Foundation to establish a $1,000 scholarship for a student majoring in Agricultural Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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