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## Agriculture Builders of Nebraska Inc.

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AGRICULTURE BUILDERS OF NEBRASKA, INC.  
January 10, 2001  
John C. Owens  
NU Vice President and IANR Vice Chancellor

It's a "pleasure" to be able to speak with you today. I want you to know that Virginia and I are "delighted" to be in Nebraska. And I'm especially happy to have arrived in the state at a time where I can, on my <sup>17<sup>th</sup></sup> day on the job, learn so much about UNL just by "reading" the state's largest newspaper!

There is an old adage that says, "May you live in interesting times." Well, these are interesting times in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and throughout the entire University of Nebraska system. They're also exciting times, and I am "pleased" to be part of that excitement.

You know that "we" in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources are "strong-believers" in the land-grant university mission, and I want you to know that I am a "strong advocate" of that mission. We take our land-grant university responsibilities to Nebraska very seriously. We certainly welcome opportunities to discuss the University's and the Institute's "role" in the lives of Nebraskans and in the success of Nebraska. We are proud of the work done in the Institute and the work done throughout UNL and the entire university system. We certainly are proud of our "unique" statewide mission, and the benefits we provide the citizens of our state.

We also welcome all opportunities to talk about agriculture, and the importance of agriculture to Nebraska. We realize that more-and-more people are further-and-further removed from the land and the people who feed them, and that not everyone understands the complexities and concerns of Nebraska agriculture today. Nor do they always understand how those complexities and concerns directly affect them. We are an educational institution, and we welcome all opportunities to educate.

We also know that many people don't realize when we say "agriculture" we are talking <sup>about</sup> a system that stretches from the field to the table, including such important issues as food safety and the development of new products that in turn provide jobs to help fuel Nebraska's economy.

I also welcome the opportunity to visit with those who don't know about the work we do in the Institute and tell them about University of Nebraska programs that benefit individuals, families, and communities. We also realize some folks still seem to view Cooperative Extension as a Norman Rockwell portrait of the extension of the 1950s, and it's exciting to take part in discussions in which we can make known how extension changed, and all extension has to offer to Nebraskans today.

These are exciting, challenging times to work and live in Nebraska, and I am glad to be part of those times.

I've been asked to tell you something about myself today, and about my

goals for the Institute. I'd like to begin with the three reasons I left a job I really enjoyed in New Mexico to come here.

**First**, the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources has "high-achieving" faculty and students. Some of those students might be your "own" sons and daughters, your grandsons and granddaughters, and they are wonderful young people. I was especially impressed with the students, faculty, and staff I met when I interviewed here. It was – and it is – both exciting and invigorating to talk with them and to learn <sup>THEIR</sup> of activities and accomplishments.

Looking at these people – these students who are your children, and your neighbors' children, and all the other "young people" who make up our student body and looking at our dedicated, talented faculty and staff members, I saw the future of the University of Nebraska, and I wanted to be "part" of that future.

**Second**, I was drawn here by the tremendous support the University of Nebraska and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources receive from the people of Nebraska. This IS Nebraska's University, and it's a pleasure to visit with "all of you" who take that so personally and who hold "us" responsible to accomplish "those things" you need your University to do for Nebraska.

As a firm believer in the land-grant university mission, I know these "special universities" exist to serve the people of each state, both on campus and in each state's communities and counties, so the state's residents can access the riches of science and technology "to enhance" their lives. Your "strong support" indicates

Nebraska believes that, too. It also shows "you know" the University belongs to you, and that you have "clear expectations" of the University.

Your support also indicates that you "value" all the University can offer Nebraska's citizens to help improve and strengthen their communities and their individual and family lives. You certainly recognized "the importance" of the University to agriculture and natural resources in your original, far-sighted "creation" of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources over 25 years ago, and you "reaffirm" that importance in your continued support for the Institute and the University today. The structure of the Institute and "the fact" that the Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources "also is" a Vice President in the University of Nebraska system was especially appealing to me. I "will work hard" to ensure that the Institute continues to serve our citizens well and remains a key component of the University of Nebraska system.

The Institute is a "great gift" that you've given to the people of Nebraska, and great gifts certainly "carry" great responsibilities. We in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources take our responsibilities very seriously as we strive to be good, helpful, and trusted partners with the citizens of Nebraska. Be assured I will "champion" the causes of agriculture, natural resources, and human resources for all of Nebraska.

The **third** reason I came to Nebraska is that agriculture, natural resources and human resources are absolutely critical to the success and prosperity of this

state. This position provides me with the opportunity to again be more involved "directly" in agriculture. This is a return to my academic and professional roots. I consider my time spent in agricultural and family and consumer science "activities" to be the most rewarding years of my career. I've certainly enjoyed the opportunities and challenges of university-wide academic administration, but it's a "distinct pleasure" to once again be more closely-aligned with people in agriculture and related areas. Especially when I find myself working at a University which I've held in the highest regard since my years as a faculty member at Iowa State.

My regard for the University of Nebraska and IANR was only strengthened when Irv Omtvedt became "Chair" of the Board on Agriculture for the National Association of State University <sup>ies</sup> and Land-Grant Colleges in 1997. I'd been elected to that same position in 1995, and by working "so closely with Irv" through the land-grant university national organization, I developed "a deep professional respect for him and, by association, an even deeper respect for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska.

I know that the Institute has been in exceptionally good hands with Irv at the helm, and then with Edna McBreen serving as "Interim Vice President and Vice Chancellor" between "Irv's retirement and my arrival. It's both a privilege and an honor to follow such "class acts." Thank you, Irv, and thank you, Edna, for all you have done and continue to do for the University and the people of

Nebraska.

Because I was asked to tell you something about myself and my goals for IANR, let me give you a "quick rundown":

My wife Virginia and I both were born and reared on the High Plains of Texas in the agricultural community of Plainview which has prided itself for decades as being "the county seat" of the most agriculturally productive county in Texas. Both of our mothers still live there and, as a matter of fact, my mom still farms there – although with "today's commodity prices," she can hardly afford to leave the county! My maternal great grandfather, Heinrich Englebrecht, immigrated from Germany just as the Civil War broke out. He left Germany to "escape" military conscription and, with remarkably bad timing, was "sworn" under gunpoint, into the confederacy immediately after landing at the port of Galveston. "So much" for avoiding military conscription in my family! After the civil war, he began farming and accumulated land both in Central Texas where he lived and on the High Plains where "no one" in his family was willing to live! Those farms still exist today. As a matter of fact, my mom and her two surviving sisters "sold" that original High Plains farm in February, and some of my cousins sold "a portion" of the Central Texas farm of my great grandfather that same month to "a fellow" who's been in the news a lot recently. I read in the paper, Governor Johannis, that you "just returned" from a trip to my great grandfather's farm, now known as President-elect George W. Bush's "Texas Ranch" near Crawford!

I earned my baccalaureate degree in biology at West Texas State University, now Texas A&M University at Canyon, and my master's degree in entomology at Texas Tech. My doctorate in entomology is from Iowa State University, and I began "my career" as an assistant professor there in the Department of Zoology and Entomology.

I also served as an associate professor of entomology at Texas Tech and as an entomologist for Pioneer Hi-Bred International before going to New Mexico State University, where I became a full professor. I then served as academic department head of the Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology, and in 1985 became Dean and Chief Administrative Officer of the College of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, and the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station.

I did that work for 12 exciting years until, in 1997, I became NMSU's Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, a position I held until coming here. In fact, I literally "walked off the stage" at the Pan American Center following New Mexico State University's December 16th commencement, got into the car, and Virginia and I started our trip toward Nebraska, with a quick "overnight stop" along the way "to winterize" our cabin in the mountain village of Ruidoso in New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains.

As Executive Vice President at New Mexico State University, New Mexico's



land-grant university, I served as the Chief Academic Officer of a 23,818 student Carnegie Research I University with 15,449 students on the main campus and the other students on four branch campuses. I was responsible for the administration of NMSU's academic colleges and schools and for the coordination of all divisions of the university. All academic deans and all vice presidents, except the Vice President for University Advancement, reported directly to me.

It was an exciting, challenging job, and I certainly enjoyed it. I had become "the longest-serving" administrator at New Mexico State University, having "served" in academic-administrative roles since 1984, when I became a department head. I even had "the opportunity" to serve as NMSU's acting president.

I was fortunate enough to experience "virtually every academic and administrative job "possible" at NMSU, from untenured faculty member to full professor to faculty senator to each of the "academic-administrative" positions on that campus.

I knew the ropes, and I certainly was comfortable there. We had a new president from Utah and I liked him, and he's "the person" I supported for the presidency.

But then came "inquires" to me about this position in Nebraska. I had reached a point in my professional life where I could consider some other

possibilities and pursue other opportunities, and I could afford to be highly selective about what I considered. As I explored the possibilities, the challenges, and the opportunities<sup>“</sup>awaiting<sup>”</sup> the next University of Nebraska Vice Chancellor for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I began to learn what Nebraskans mean when you say, “there is no place like Nebraska.”

I am absolutely<sup>“</sup>delighted<sup>”</sup> to be here. I am excited by all we can do, working together, to fulfill the Institute's vision to be, “the premier provider of educational, research, and outreach programs<sup>“</sup>essential<sup>”</sup> for shaping Nebraska's future as a leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources.”

I am<sup>“</sup>optimistic<sup>”</sup> about what we can do, working together, for Nebraska.

Those of you familiar with the Institute's vision<sup>“</sup>know<sup>”</sup> “IANR is dedicated to providing the highest quality programs that are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially responsible, and scientifically appropriate.”

I am<sup>“</sup>pleased<sup>”</sup> to be part of that vision,

Our product is knowledge. We discover it – our Agricultural Research Division reminds us that they are pioneering the future, and that truly is what research is all about. Pioneering. Discovery. That “eureka” moment when something new is found and known.

Once discovered, we<sup>“</sup>share<sup>”</sup> that new knowledge with the world. This is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, unbiased, research-

based information that people can use to make choices and decisions in their lives.

We transfer that knowledge in our classrooms and teaching laboratories, along with the learning and living skills that help people apply knowledge and build on it so they can participate in lifelong learning, and so they can be responsible community, state, national, and world citizens. We also transfer that knowledge in another way when we extend knowledge to Nebraskans through our statewide extension education programs. I consider Cooperative Extension to be the best, "out-of-the-classroom" educational opportunity ever devised. Extension is a key component of the land-grant university mission.

Sometimes when a newly recruited administrator arrives on campus, the first question asked – or, perhaps, thought, if not asked! – is, "So what are you going to change?"

I want to make it clear that I have not come to Nebraska feeling like a physician who believes the Institute or the University needs a totally new prescription. I know without doubt that the Institute, UNL, and the entire University system bring this state invaluable strengths. Working with IANR's dedicated, administrators, faculty and staff, others within the University, and all our partners in Nebraska, I intend to build on those strengths. Working together, I think we can increase them, and discover and grow new strengths to meet the needs of the future.

This early in my tenure here I do not claim to know exactly what the Institute, nor the University, should focus on either short-or long-term. I do, however, intend to find out.

In the next few months, I will be traveling throughout Nebraska, eager to meet and discuss with as many of you and other Nebraskans as I can, the needs you identify as work for the Institute. I want to know this state's people, their culture, their hopes, their dreams, and their needs. I want to work with the many talented people within the Institute and the University of Nebraska, as well as those outside the University system, to help meet those needs and to help make Nebraska's hopes-and-dreams come true.

We are fortunate in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources to have a strategic plan already in place as a guide to the future, and I am blessed to follow into this job some people who were far-sighted enough to initiate this strategic planning.

Input to determine IANR's priority programs and operational needs outlined in that strategic plan was solicited at some 25 listening sessions across the entire State of Nebraska. More than 700 stakeholders, students, faculty, and staff contributed their views, which are reflected in three key program themes:

\*To enhance economically viable and sustainable food and biomass systems;

\*To improve natural resources management and promote environmental

quality; and

\*To strengthen the quality of life of individuals and families and contribute to community viability."

I am pleased that before the Institute's strategic plan was finalized that "the input of so many people was solicited. I think that's a significant investment" in the future.

I also think it "demonstrates" the Institute's "dedication" to meeting Nebraska's needs. It emphasizes the importance we place on our local partners all across the state. It also illustrates a "clear understanding" of our land-grant university mission.

Land-grant universities and colleges of agriculture have been "the topic" of a great deal of study in the past few years – in fact, I can count at least 20 recent studies in "the broad area" of land-grant universities, agriculture, and related areas. Some of them carry titles such as, "Rethinking the Outlook of Colleges Whose Roots have been in Agriculture," and "Challenges Confronting Agricultural Research at Land-Grant Universities."

As I've read and participated in those studies, I've concluded that it is when land-grant universities "move away" from the precepts of the Morrill Act that they "drift" into trouble.

When a land-grant university's "service" to everyday, ordinary people gives way to pursuit of prestige or exclusivity, the land-grant university is "in trouble."

When clients are “excluded” from the process of helping set the direction of experiment station research and extension education programs, land-grant universities are in trouble. I am a firm believer that land-grant universities that “disfranchise” their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant “existence.”

That's why I think it is so important that those of us who wish to successfully address the future of land-grant universities must embrace “new needs” and “new audiences” while meeting the needs and maintaining the support of those with whom we've traditionally worked.

We must identify and meet our state's needs – something land-grant universities are positioned to do “better” than any other institution. We must further the understanding between our new and our traditional audiences, and we must respond to “the concerns” of each. I'm only stating the obvious when I say that it's a very small planet, and we're all riding it around the sun together. We need to understand how interdependent so many things – and so many of us – are in today's global economy.

If we in the Institute are “to fulfill our vision, we must be responsive to both traditional and new audiences in relevant ways that “contribute” to the future of Nebraska's citizens and the state in our focus areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources.

These are exciting, “challenging” times in research, teaching, and extension –

education at the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. So much is being done, and there is yet so much to do. I look forward to being part of all of it with high-anticipation and a great deal of enthusiasm. I certainly look forward to working with each of you.

Thank you!