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Future of Water for Food Conference: The Right Time and the Right Place

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President's Welcome

The Right Time and the Right Place

James B. Milliken
 President
 University of Nebraska

“All of life and all ecological processes are conditioned on the circulation of water on the planet,” said University of Nebraska President James B. Milliken, quoting from Jeffrey D. Sachs’ book *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*. “Since civilization began,” Milliken continued, “water has been central to life. We’ve established cities around it, fought wars over it, created myths about it and depended on it for food, power and transportation.” Maintaining an adequate supply of usable water has always been a challenge, but today a tangle of interrelated issues — rapid population growth, climate change, the introduction of pollutants, new water-dependent sources of energy — has created a far greater sense of urgency,” he said. “Today’s speakers, some of the best minds on the subject of water in the world, will add to our understanding of these issues and perhaps, given the scope and the severity of the challenge that faces our world, frighten us a bit.”



James B. Milliken

Nebraska is a fitting place to host the Water for Food conference, Milliken said. Nebraska is one of the world’s leading agricultural centers and sits atop the High Plains aquifer, one of the largest in the world with more than 2 billion acre-feet of water in groundwater reserves; a state where the center pivot irrigation system was invented and changed the

face of agriculture; a state that leads the nation in the number of irrigated acres and ranks fourth in food production. “We are a place that has been providing food for the world for a long time, and we’re acutely aware of our need to continue to improve how well we do this and that the world depends on our ability to do it,” Milliken said.

Forty-five years ago the university’s Board of Regents established a Nebraska Water Resources Research Institute to serve as a center for research and policy, Milliken said. The Water Center has become a widely-respected resource for research on water quality, irrigation, drought, surface and groundwater management, crop productivity and economic and legal issues relating to water. More than 160 faculty members across the university, in disciplines ranging from engineering to law, natural resources, economics, agriculture, chemistry, biology and other disciplines, contribute to the center’s work. “While we believe we’ve accomplished much of importance over the last 40 years, not only for farmers and ranchers, but for all of those who depend on their work, we believe we’re in a position to do more,” he said.

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For these reasons the university believes this is the right time and the right place to create a Global Water for Food Institute, a world-class research, education and policy center that will provide a knowledge base for effective, practical solutions to the challenges of managing limited water resources worldwide and producing more food with less water. This conference is an important step in the process. It is exciting to bring together so many experts to engage in a conversation about how a Global Water for Food Institute could make the greatest contribution to resolving the water and food issues facing the world and to provide advice on the appropriate scope and the mission of this institute, Milliken said.

To eliminate any doubt about the link between water and prosperity, Milliken closed with a quote from Sachs' *Common Wealth*. "The variability of water availability is strongly and negatively related to per-capita income. It is not surprising that all 10 of the countries ranked as having the lowest human development are water-stressed countries with extensive dryland populations."