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Nebraska Farm Bureau Legislative Conference

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NEBRASKA FARM BUREAU LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

February 1, 2001

John C. Owens

NU Vice President and IANR Vice Chancellor

Thank you for inviting me to be with you this morning. I am happy both to be here at your conference, and to be in Nebraska.

My wife Virginia and I slipped into the state - literally - the week before Christmas, arriving in the face of a strong north wind and windchills hitting 35 to 40 below. It was an exciting advent to our new home, driving for hours over icy, snow packed roads. Living in New Mexico all those years, I'd forgotten how tightly a person can grip a steering wheel during a white-out!

Since then several bouts of Nebraska snow and ice -- including this week's -- have helped us acclimate quickly to our change of scene. We've found that while the winter may be cold, we've received such warm welcomes from so many gracious Nebraskans that we feel we already know what you all mean when you say, "there is no place like Nebraska."

Actually, it's people - many of them gracious Nebraskans - who are

the first of "three" key reasons I left New Mexico State University and a job I thoroughly enjoyed to come to the University of Nebraska and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. When I met the wonderful young people "who are students in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources in IANR, and the high-achieving, "invigorating" faculty and staff who work here, I was highly impressed with them. As I visited with these students and with the Institute's dedicated, talented faculty and staff members, I "saw" the future of the University of Nebraska, and I wanted to be part of it.

It's invigorating for me, in "my-new-role" as Vice President and Vice Chancellor, to work with people in the Institute who are true believers, as I am, in the land-grant university mission to take the resources of the University to the people of Nebraska. We take our land-grant university responsibilities to this state "very seriously." We are proud of the Institute's "unique" statewide mission, the work we do, and the benefits we provide Nebraska residents.

I was asked to tell you "a bit" about myself and about my goals and plans for the Institute today, and I am happy to do so.

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 my mom still farms there.

My maternal great-grandfather, Heinrich Englebrecht, immigrated
from Germany just as the Civil War broke out. He left Germany to escape
military-conscription but, with remarkably bad timing, was sworn, under
gunpoint, into the confederacy immediately after landing at the port of
Galveston. 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 until my grandfather married my
grandmother! Those farms still exist today. As a matter of fact, my mom
and her two surviving sisters sold that original High Plains farm last
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 has been
in the news a lot recently. My great-grandfather's farm is now known as
President George W. Bush's "Texas Ranch" near Crawford! *Never called
a Ranch before!!*

I earned my baccalaureate degree in biology at West Texas State
University, now Texas A&M University at Canyon; my master's degree in

entomology at Texas Tech; and my doctorate in entomology from Iowa State University, where I began my career as "an assistant professor" in the Department of Zoology and Entomology.

I also served as a "faculty member" at Texas Tech and as an entomologist for Pioneer Hi-Bred International before going to New Mexico State University. There I became a full professor, served as academic department head, and in 1985 became Dean and Chief Administrative Officer 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.

As Executive Vice President at New Mexico State University, New Mexico's land-grant university, I served as the Chief Academic Officer of a 24,000 student Carnegie Research I University with 15,000 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. It was

an exciting, challenging job, and I certainly enjoyed it. I knew the ropes, and I was comfortable there. We had a new president from Utah and I liked him. He's the person I supported for the presidency.

But then I received inquiries 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 awaiting the next University of Nebraska Vice President and Vice Chancellor for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, it was clear this was something I wanted to do. As I said earlier, the students, faculty, and staff within IANR comprise the first of three key reasons I decided to come here.

The **second** is the tremendous support the University of Nebraska and the Institute receive from the people of this state. When you hold us responsible to accomplish those things you need your University to do, you demonstrate how much you believe this is Nebraska's University. That delights me, because this University, its knowledge and its riches of science-and-technology do indeed belong to each of you, and to your

neighbors, and to the people all across Nebraska.

Nebraska certainly recognized the importance of the University to agriculture and natural resources in the original, far-sighted creation of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources over 25 years ago. That importance is reaffirmed in your continued support for the Institute and the University today. The structure of the Institute and the fact that the Vice Chancellor of IANR also is a Vice President in the University of Nebraska system were especially appealing to me as I considered coming here. I will work hard to ensure that the Institute continues to serve Nebraska's residents well, and remains a key component of the University of Nebraska system.

You can be assured that I will champion the causes of agriculture, natural resources, and human resources for all of Nebraska. We in IANR take very seriously our responsibility to be a good, helpful, trusted partner with 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, and 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, IANR's former vice chancellor, became chair of the national land-grant university Board on Agriculture that I've also had the privilege to head. I developed a deep professional respect for Irv, working so closely with him through that national organization, and, by association, an even deeper respect for the Institute.

I am excited by all I think the Institute, working with you and others in the state, can do to fulfill the Institute's vision to be and I quote - "the premier provider of educational, research, and outreach programs essential for shaping Nebraska's future as a leader in the 21st Century in the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources." I am optimistic about what we can do, working together, for Nebraska.

Those of you familiar with the Institute's vision know that – and I'm quoting again -- "IANR is dedicated to providing the highest-quality programs that are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially responsible, and scientifically appropriate."

I am pleased to be part of that vision.

Our product is knowledge. We discover it through research and, once discovered, we share that new knowledge with the world. This is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, research-based information 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. Extension is a key component of the land-grant university mission.

When you ask me what my goals and plans are for IANR, I need to make it clear that I have not come to Nebraska feeling like a physician

“who thinks or the University needs a totally new prescription. I know, without doubt, that IANR, UNL, and the entire University system bring this state’s valuable strengths.” Working with the Institute’s dedicated administrators, faculty and staff, others within the University, and all our partners throughout 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, or 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, its culture, its hopes, its dreams, and its 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 IANR to have a strategic plan already in place as

"a guide" to the future, and I am "blessed" to follow into this job people far-sighted enough to initiate the strategic planning process, and to involve so many people across the state in it. I'm told more than 700 stakeholders, students, faculty, and staff in 25 listening sessions "provided" input into this plan of what the Institute should be doing.

Because I am a firm believer that land-grant universities that "disenfranchise" their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant existence, I think "our constituents" must always be part of the process of helping set the direction of research and extension education programs. I also "firmly believe" that land-grant universities that substitute "pursuit" of prestige or exclusivity for service to everyday, ordinary people are in trouble. Indeed, what the successful land-grant university should pursue are "high-quality" programs. High quality programs will boost the reputation of any land-grant university and such programs will make "the pursuit" of prestige or exclusive national rankings absolutely unnecessary.

I think it "tremendously important" that those of us in land-grant universities must continue to meet the needs and maintain the support of those with whom we've traditionally worked while addressing new needs and new audiences. 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.

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. There is so much 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 you.

Thank you!