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Serving Rural Nebraska Panhandle

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SERVING RURAL NEBRASKA
PANHANDLE RESEARCH AND EXTENSION CENTER
AUGUST 1, 2001
JOHN C. OWENS

I'm going to jump right into my topic tonight – Chuck Hibberd asked me to talk briefly about my ideas on serving rural Nebraska before our open-discussion. And serving rural Nebraska is a topic on which I have a great-deal to say! So I'm going to talk fast here for 12 minutes or so, and then I'm looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

First off, my ideas about of serving rural Nebraska grow out of my firm belief in the land-grant university mission, which I mentioned earlier today and which guides the work of the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. I think land-grant universities were established to take the resources, riches, and technologies of the university to the people of the state. In the Institute we do that through on-campus classes and statewide research and extension education programs. I think cooperative extension is the greatest out-of-classroom learning experience ever devised, and as a fervent believer in service, I consider it the Institute's honor, privilege, and responsibility to serve Nebraska in our focus-areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and

HUMAN RESOURCES,

[redacted].

I think our ongoing research in sugar beets and dry beans represents one way we serve Nebraska, and this region specifically. Other research conducted as the need arises follows our land-grant university mission. Just a few examples that come to mind include:

– **Our rhizomania research**. When the disease was first confirmed in a Scotts Bluff County field in June 1992, sugar-beet growers and sugar-processors asked the Institute, Nebraska's Legislature, and the Department of Agriculture to help prevent rhizomania's spread. We launched a rhizomania research, education and diagnostics program that continues to this day.

– **Chicory research**. We all know the food industry seeks ways to retain the satisfaction of consuming fat while avoiding the calories associated with eating fats. That's no small order! But chicory produces inulin, which may just be part of the solution to the problem. It also may be of interest to the pharmaceutical industry; it helps stimulate beneficial bacteria in the lower intestines, and its low-sugar qualities make it useful in diets for diabetics. Its production is similar to sugar beets, and it could offer an alternative crop for this area. I understand there are 950 acres of chicory being grown this year – a great start! We're pleased Dave Hergert of Scottsbluff is building a chicory drying facility to dry chicory for the U.S. pet food

market. We're also hopeful the future holds an inulin extraction facility to produce purified inulin for human consumption.

– **Grass seed production**. Our research and extension education programs in forage and turf grass seed production offers Panhandle producers a new crop and marketing option to help diversify. Grass seed production jumped in the late 1990s, with 1,500 acres of seed harvested in 1999. Last year it was estimated that turfgrass seed production contributed at least $1 million annually to the region's economy.

– **Value-added markets**. Panhandle faculty worked with Cheyenne County to attract Pennington Seed Co., a grass and birdseed company, to Sidney. Our research led to proso millet, sunflower and safflower varieties that perform well in the region, and laid a foundation for expanded birdseed production. Our research and extension staff met with seed company owners and provided Cheyenne County economic development staff with information on these crops and the region's ability + CAPACITY to grow them. Since the Pennington Seed Co., plant opened in the mid-1900s, Panhandle birdseed production has increased by about 100,000 acres, which translates into a new market worth $10 million annually.

Then, of course, there's the Institute's wheat research. Hard red winter wheat varieties developed in the Institute are planted on roughly three-fourths of the state's wheat acres. These varieties are specifically adapted for Nebraska's wheat growing

regions and have increased Nebraska's annual yields by 19 percent compared with the 1960s. These improved varieties are worth roughly $31 million to $37 million annually to Nebraska producers based on increased yield alone. We are very excited about the promise of Nuplains, (PRONOUNCED New Plains) the new white wheat variety developed for Nebraska's plains, as well.

Those are some examples of what we've done in the past, as well as an introduction to some of our ongoing work. A number of other examples exist, as well, and it's tempting to go on talking about them, but I'd like to take the next few minutes, before we move to discussion, to talk briefly about the University's systemwide, multi-year Rural Initiative, and specifically, about the Institute's part in it.

This Initiative, certainly meant to be of service to rural Nebraska, arises from concern that the state has a dual economy, where urban areas prosper economically while rural counties' economies suffer. It places University resources at the disposal of people and communities in rural Nebraska areas. It also steps up, expands, and coordinates efforts already under way throughout all campuses of the university system to provide rural Nebraska with specific programs, services, and assistance in five areas. They are: business development and entrepreneurship; e-commerce for small businesses; expansion of distance education and expanded application of

information technology; telehealth and telemedicine; and value-added agriculture and niche crops.

The University plans to begin the Initiative on three fronts: 1) focusing on rural economic viability including computer connectivity; 2) building on a proven track record in health care; and 3) collaborations with K-12 education. In the Institute, we'll focus on rural economic viability. We know that if people are to survive, sustain, and hopefully thrive on rural Nebraska farms and ranches, as well as in the state's small towns, jobs are important, expanding the reach of small businesses is important, and finding new ways to add value to agricultural products and to develop niche crops is important.

Over the next two years we hope for funding to hire five new specialists and four new extension educators. The specialists would work in the areas of rural community impact assessment, rural social infrastructure, rural informatics, rural entrepreneurial development, and agricultural opportunities. These specialists would be located across the state, with one here at the Panhandle center.

The four new cooperative extension educators would be specifically skilled in information technologies and community education. They would work with communities to help develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities individuals and businesses need to make the most of their communities' telecommunications

connections (communications at a distance), and to apply this knowledge to entrepreneurial ventures.

Why is this important? Suppose you have a specialty business located in a small town – someone who makes saddles, perhaps, or grows herbs, and wants to live in that town. That's home for them. Volume of business may not be enough for that business to survive economically depending solely on the local business area, but if they can do business on the Web, their customer base has the potential to grow worldwide.

Or suppose you have a small grocery or hardware store in your town, and one day the chain that supplies that store lets all its affiliates know that by X date, the chain only will take supply orders via the Internet. Without connectivity in that small town, that business could no longer order from its supplier, and an important business could be threatened.

Or suppose you have the opportunity to compete to bring a business to your town, a business that would hire 30-60 people, maybe more, but that business requires advanced telecommunications capabilities. Rural communities need to retain current businesses and add others. We think information technology EXPERTISE + CAPACITY can help.

We hope you'll support this work and join us and our partners in this effort to

strengthen rural communities here, and throughout Nebraska.

Thank you.

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