APC Hearing

John Owens

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, jowens2@unl.edu

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Members of the Academic Planning Committee, and others present, I appear before the committee this afternoon to speak about a "vertical cut" proposed for the West Central Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, a cut we in the Institute would not choose to make unless forced by circumstances to do so.

After three rounds of budget cutting there are no budget cuts we can make that will not adversely affect someone, somewhere. Whatever cuts we make, worthwhile programs are gone, our constituents are less well-served, and someone affected will think we should have cut something else. We are recommending these cuts because, in our best judgment, the alternatives are worse.

In the past year legislative action has cut the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resource's budget nearly $4 million – $2,028,767 following the most recent special session. Funding for "vital programming" across our state is permanently gone.

The North Platte Veterinary-Diagnostic-Laboratory is a worthwhile program, and in our last round of cuts we were able to spare this laboratory, even as, with
much regret, we closed a similar laboratory in Scottsbluff. Had we faced no more than the first two rounds of legislatively mandated budget cuts, we would not be here today.

Those of us who must make the final budget-cutting recommendations within IANR and at the university have done our very best to carefully weigh all programs offered by the Institute. We have looked at a large number of different scenarios, seeking ways we can best meet as many of Nebraska's needs as possible with our permanently reduced funding. Some of those needs we must meet differently than we did before, as is the case with the West Central Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, which is a $211,370 cut in which one tenure-track and 2.5 FTE staff positions are proposed to be eliminated. In our best judgment, vertical cuts are a better long-term solution than across-the-board cuts which some persons have suggested as an alternative to what we have come to term “Round 3” of the Legislative budget cuts. Our vertical budget-cutting proposals are we think will do the least permanent long-term damage to Nebraska, to our constituents, to IANR, and to the university overall. Closing this laboratory diminishes the Nebraska Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory System; however, we still can provide veterinary-diagnostic-services through the Veterinary Diagnostic Center in Lincoln.
Nebraska has been especially fortunate in the past to have a Nebraska Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory System, with satellite laboratories in North Platte and Scottsbluff and the full-service Veterinary Diagnostic Center in Lincoln.

Traditionally, our laboratories outside Lincoln have offered a limited-scope of services, with more sophisticated testing referred to the full-service Veterinary Diagnostic Center in Lincoln. Most of the states surrounding Nebraska have only one such laboratory – Kansas, Wyoming, Iowa, South Dakota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Minnesota.

Closing the West Central Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory clearly diminishes the Nebraska Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory System, due to overall reductions in staff and personnel, but work will go on. The West Central Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory does not conduct any unique tests not conducted by the Veterinary Diagnostic Center in Lincoln. The location of the North Platte laboratory is a true convenience that will be missed by those in the surrounding community; however, essential veterinary diagnostic services still will be available in Nebraska.

The Institute’s Deans and the Head of the Department of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences currently are investigating different ways in which IANR can offer programs in veterinary extension education. We anticipate establishing a
veterinary extension advisory committee in the West Central region, similar to what we’ve established in the Panhandle region, where the committee is composed of three veterinary practitioners, faculty in the Panhandle district, and Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences Department Head, Dr. Jack Schmitz. Through this advisory committee, it will be possible to coordinate the Cooperative Extension education programming and activities of the extension veterinarians in Lincoln and Clay Center, as well as other Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences faculty.

The Panhandle Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory closed at the end of June 2002. I’ve been asked how that affected the West Central laboratory. From July through September 2001 the laboratory at North Platte received 120 cases and from July through September 2002, it received 244 cases. While that is a doubling of cases, the total case load is still very low, an average of 81.33 cases per month, even with the increase. Part of that increase is due to an increase in the number of forage samples tested for nitrate, due to the drought conditions. These data don’t seem to provide a strong debating point either against or for closing the laboratory.

Two other budget cuts affect university work conducted at West Central – we are proposing eliminating a vacant family life position, which never has been filled and for which a search did not produce a suitable candidate. We have been university partners with the University of Nebraska-Kearney and the now-eliminated
Division of Continuing Studies in funding the Learning Center at North Platte, and all partners agree in terminating the funding for the Center, which has no classroom students registered this semester.

Even after these three cuts, the West Central Research and Extension Center, a mainstay in the Nebraska research and extension system as the oldest of our centers, remains the best-funded with a general budget of $4,543,607.

As I mentioned yesterday when I spoke about the proposed closure of the South Central Research and Extension Center, we cannot make cuts of this magnitude and continue all the work our faculty and staff have conducted before. When funding is permanently gone, there is no way to continue all the programs the Legislature once funded. In making our proposals in the Institute we have looked hard at where we can cut and still preserve some – and I emphasize some, not all – of the work done, but in another manner.

I want to be very clear today, as I was yesterday, that in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources we do not make decisions about our budget cuts based on whether a program is located in Lincoln or outside Lincoln, a question that has been raised. We make cut-proposals based on what we think will do the least long-term damage to Nebraska, to our constituents, to IANR, and to the university. We make cut-recommendations based on what important needs we can continue to
meet, even if we are forced to meet those needs in different ways. We make cut proposals based on how we can best protect the 'very core' of our programming, so we’ll have that core to build on when better times return – as they will. We do that because we think that approach is of the most long-term benefit to ALL Nebraskans.

These days I hear from people that they understand the difficulty we face in making cuts to balance our budget, but – . Everyone wants us to cut something that doesn’t affect them. The fact of the matter is, every cut we make affects someone. In fact, every cut we make affects every one of us, because these cuts affect Nebraska’s future.

I think everyone here today realizes the dismantling we’ve experienced of the valued university programs as the result of three legislatively-mandated budget cuts in less than a year hurts down to the bone. I am frustrated by what we might face in January, when the Governor and Legislature next meet to set our state’s budget. We hear constantly that more budget cuts will occur in the Legislature’s regular session. When I think about how painful the cuts we already have endured have been, I am deeply concerned for what yet additional cuts would mean to this university, and to our state.

These cuts affect every one of us. These cuts affect Nebraska’s future. I hope in the next several months that concerned citizens and public officials will take
the opportunity to reflect on what Nebraska needs and what Nebraska wants its university to be, as well as what Nebraska is willing to do to support that university. There are tough decisions ahead for all of us and I hope that working together we can find solutions that are in the overall long-term best interest of all Nebraskans.

Thank you.