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IANR PROGRAM SUPPORT: RESULTS FROM THE NEBRASKA RURAL POLL

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This project was conducted in cooperation with the
Partnership for Rural Nebraska, the Center for Rural Revitalization,
and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources

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IANR Program Support: Results From the Nebraska Rural Poll

Executive Summary

This working paper presents findings from the first annual Nebraska Rural Poll. The study is based on 1,971 responses from households in the 87 nonmetropolitan counties in the state. The objectives of this paper are to provide information on how rural Nebraskans perceive the importance of various programs funded by the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR).

The survey questions about IANR programs were included as a separate one page insert that was included in the large Rural Poll survey booklet. Because the IANR questions were marked "optional," one must be cautious in drawing definitive conclusions from the responses. It is also important to emphasize that the Nebraska Rural Poll was conducted in March of 1996, and only represents people's perceptions and opinions as of a specific point in time. Refer to Table 1 in the appendix for the specific questions asked.

The most recent IANR Strategic Plan included 17 specific programmatic thrusts. The respondent was asked to indicate how important he/she felt it was for IANR faculty and staff to be addressing each of these 17 programmatic thrusts (a five-point scale was used ranging from "extremely important" to "not important"). In none of the 17 cases did a large proportion of the respondents indicate an item was "not important." However, there was considerable variation in the proportion of the respondents indicating that an item was "extremely important." The 17 items in rank order priority according to the proportion of the respondents indicating the item was "extremely important" follow.

1. (56.8%*) Enhance the development of basic life skills among Nebraska's children, youth, and adults
2. (51.4%*) Improve food safety and food quality
3. (46.7%*) Reduce soil erosion and improve water quality by developing improved management practices
4. (40.3%*) Contribute to improved human nutrition and health
5. (39.4%*) Provide a scientific basis for developing land and water use policies and practices of importance to Nebraska
6. (38.9%*) Enhance environmental quality and improve the sustainability of resource systems
7. (37.6%*) Provide programs to enhance the development of new businesses

8. (34.9%*) Enhance the value-added processing of agricultural commodities and waste materials
9. (33.5%*) Improve plant and animal health through integrated pest management and other sustainable practices
10. (32.0%*) Partnership with others to improve the resiliency of families and the viability of communities
11. (28.6%*) Develop profitable and sustainable plant and animal systems
12. (28.6%*) Contribute to commodity and product marketing and economic development
13. (26.4%*) Emphasize leadership development programs
14. (24.7%*) Develop ecosystem improvement programs consistent with enhanced biodiversity
15. (23.4%*) Create education programs that address the integration of resource needs with the carrying capacity of natural resource systems
16. (21.1%*) Enhance the understanding of plant and animal biology fundamentals
17. (17.1%*) Provide programs to enhance rural and urban landscapes

* Percent indicating the item was "extremely important" after excluding those who did not understand what the programmatic thrust meant. Extremely important was defined to include those who circled item "1" on the five-point response scale.

Other selected findings follow:

- For most of the 17 programmatic thrusts, a smaller proportion of farmers than non-farmers thought the item was "important*"
- With one exception, a larger proportion of respondents living in town in comparison to out of town felt each programmatic thrust was "important*"
- A higher proportion of respondents with low to moderate incomes felt "enhancing basic life skills" was "important*" compared to those with higher incomes
- A smaller proportion of respondents with lower educational levels felt the IANR programmatic thrusts were "important*" in comparison to those with higher eduational levels
- No major and systematic differences were detected in response patterns between regions of the state, and among age groups
- Nearly one-fourth of the respondents simply did not understand one of the programmatic thrusts: "Develop ecosystem improvements consistent with enhanced biodiversity"
- A higher proportion of both women and individuals with lower incomes indicated they "did not understand" the programmatic thrust (although the proportions were relatively small)

* "Important" was defined to include those who circled "1" and "2" on the five-point response scale

Methodology

This study is based on 1,971 responses from Nebraskans living in non-metropolitan counties in Nebraska. A self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 6,200 randomly selected households. Metropolitan counties not included in the sample were the six Nebraska counties that are part of the Omaha, Lincoln, and Sioux City metropolitan areas. All of the other 87 counties in the state were sampled. The main 14 page questionnaire included questions pertaining to well-being, access to services, environment, public policy issues, and employment. This study will report only on the *optional* IANR survey that focused on specific IANR initiatives and programs. A 45% response rate was achieved using the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) for the entire Rural Poll. The response rate for the IANR optional questionnaire was 32 percent. The sequence of steps in the survey process were:

1. A "pre-notification" letter was sent first. This letter requested participation in the study, and was signed by the Governor of Nebraska and the President of the University of Nebraska.

2. The survey was mailed with an informational letter about seven days subsequent to the "pre-notification" letter being sent. The letter was signed by the project director.

3. A reminder postcard was sent to the entire sample approximately seven days after the survey (step #2) had been sent.

4. Those who had not responded within approximately 14 days of the original mailing were then sent a replacement questionnaire.

Findings

A large amount of data was generated from the Rural Poll and the IANR initiative survey and is reflected in the subsequent tables and figures. Only selected comments will be made on the data presented. The reader is encouraged to study the tables to draw additional conclusions and insights.

Overall, respondents believed that the enhancement of life skills among Nebraska's children, youth, and adults was extremely important. Nearly fifty-six percent felt this was extremely important. Improving the safety and quality of food was also extremely important, with fifty-one percent of respondents answering as such. Reducing erosion and improving water quality, contributing to improved human health, and developing land and water use policies important to Nebraska rounded out the top five initiatives respondents believed to be extremely important.

On the other hand, only 17% of respondents believed that programs to enhance landscapes was extremely important. Enhancing the understanding of plant and animal biology and education programs addressing carrying capacity were also not considered extremely important by a majority of the respondents.

Community Population

Town size played a significant role in the attitudes of rural Nebraskans. Sixty-one percent of those living in towns of less than 100 people believed that improved human nutrition and health was important, compared to 75% of those living in towns of 10,000 or more people. Providing programs to enhance the development of new businesses was important to larger communities, while 17% of those living in towns of less than 100 people thought it was not important. Respondents in smaller towns were more likely to believe that land and water use policies important to Nebraska were not important, compared to those residing in larger towns. Again, smaller towns believed the enhancement of biodiversity was not important compared to large towns (23% to 8%).

Gender

Men and women weren't very different in their responses in most areas. Women were more likely to not understand each initiative than men. However, in all cases but three, men were more likely to express no opinion compared to women. The contribution to improve human nutrition and health showed a slightly higher difference in opinion compared to other initiatives. Eighty-one percent of the women thought this was important, while only sixty-eight percent of the men thought it was important.

Income and Age

There weren't any marked differences in opinion among age groups. However, older respondents and respondents with lower levels of income were more likely to not understand the initiatives. Thirteen percent of those with an income of $75,000 or greater thought that the development of basic life skills among Nebraska's children, youth, and adults was not important, compared to only 2% of those earning less than $10,000 annual income. In most other cases, respondents with higher levels of income (greater than $75,000) were more likely to say these initiatives were not important.

Occupation and Place of Residence

Once again, there weren't any major or systematic differences in opinion between respondents of different occupations or places of residence. The respondents working in lower occupation levels were more likely to not understand the questions asked. Farmers were more likely to say the initiatives were not important compared to other occupation classes. Respondents living in town were more likely to believe the initiatives were important, while those living outside of town were more likely to say the initiatives were unimportant.

Education Level

Respondents with lower levels of educational attainment were much more likely to not understand the initiatives. They were also more likely to say that the initiatives were not important compared to those with higher educations. Seventy-eight percent of respondents with Graduate or Professional degrees thought that developing land and water use policies and practices important to Nebraska was important, compared to only 58% of those with less than a ninth grade education. 46% of those with less than a ninth grade education believed that contribution to commodity and plant marketing and economic development was important, while around 69% of those with Bachelor degrees or higher thought it was important.

Table 1 of the appendix presents the responses from all respondents filling out the questionnaire. Table 2 in the appendix provides a breakdown of responses by category. "Important" represents those respondents answering extremely important or important (1 or 2 on a five-point response scale). "No Opinion" represents those who answered a "3" in a range of 1 to 5. "Not Important" represents those who answered extremely not important or not important (4 or 5 on a five-point response scale).

Table 1. Overall Percent Response to IANR Programmatic Thrusts

(Numbers in parentheses are actual n's.)

I. STRENGTHEN THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES AND CONTRIBUTE TO COMMUNITY VIABILITY

	Don't Understand 0	Extremely Important 1	2	No Opinion 3	4	Not Important 5
a. Enhance the development of basic life skills among Nebraska's children, youth, and adults	2.3 (45)	55.5 (1078)	26.8 (520)	10.0 (195)	2.8 (54)	2.6 (51)
b. Contribute to improved human nutrition and health	1.5 (30)	39.6 (770)	32.2 (625)	18.9 (367)	4.9 (95)	2.9 (56)
c. Provide programs to enhance the development of new businesses	1.3 (26)	37.1 (721)	33.7 (654)	19.8 (385)	4.7 (92)	3.4 (65)
d. Emphasize leadership development programs	2.3 (45)	25.8 (499)	34.4 (666)	25.8 (499)	7.8 (151)	3.9 (75)
e. Partnership with others to improve the resiliency of families and the viability of communities	7.8 (150)	29.5 (569)	33.6 (649)	20.4 (393)	4.8 (93)	3.9 (76)

II. IMPROVE NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND ENHANCE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

f. Provide a scientific basis for developing land and water use policies and practices of importance to Nebraska	3.8 (73)	37.9 (735)	32.8 (636)	17.7 (342)	4.2 (81)	3.7 (71)
g. Enhance environmental quality and improve the sustainability of resource systems	4.8 (92)	37.0 (717)	32.9 (636)	18.2 (353)	4.1 (80)	3.0 (58)
h. Create education programs that address the integration of resource needs with the carrying capacity of natural resource systems	9.5 (183)	21.2 (409)	35.6 (687)	24.5 (472)	5.9 (113)	3.4 (65)
i. Reduce soil erosion and improve water quality by developing improved management practices	1.2 (24)	46.1 (899)	34.5 (673)	13.1 (255)	3.0 (59)	2.1 (41)

Table 1 (cont'd). Overall Percent Response to IANR Programmatic Thrusts

(Numbers in parentheses are actual n's.)

	Don't Understand 0	Extremely Important 1	2	No Opinion 3	4	Not Important 5
j. Develop ecosystem improvement programs consistent with enhanced biodiversity	24.3 (467)	18.7 (360)	26.8 (516)	20.9 (402)	5.3 (101)	4.1 (78)
k. Provide programs to enhance rural and urban landscapes	1.9 (37)	16.8 (326)	25.2 (488)	29.0 (563)	16.4 (318)	10.7 (208)
III. ENHANCE ECONOMICALLY VIABLE AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND BIOMASS SYSTEMS						
l. Develop profitable and sustainable plant and animal systems	7.7 (148)	26.4 (509)	34.7 (669)	23.3 (449)	4.7 (91)	3.2 (61)
m. Enhance the value-added processing of agricultural commodities and waste materials	7.5 (145)	32.2 (622)	35.2 (679)	19.4 (375)	4.2 (81)	1.4 (27)
n. Improve food safety and food quality	0.7 (14)	51.0 (992)	32.1 (624)	11.9 (231)	2.6 (50)	1.7 (33)
o. Improve plant and animal health through integrated pest management and other sustainable practices	2.5 (49)	32.7 (634)	39.4 (765)	18.7 (363)	4.2 (82)	2.4 (47)
p. Contribute to commodity and product marketing and economic development	4.9 (95)	27.2 (526)	34.9 (676)	22.1 (428)	7.3 (142)	3.6 (70)
q. Enhance the understanding of plant and animal biology fundamentals	5.3 (103)	19.9 (386)	30.4 (589)	30.6 (592)	9.5 (183)	4.3 (84)

IANR Questionnaire Voluntary Respondent Comments

Anything to assist ranch families who so desperately need markets and lower property tax.

You do a very good job. It does seem that the government places tend to have/develop/originate an awfully lot of "self-help" programs.

Please continue to bring new knowledge, practices, and techniques to us through the extension home study courses. I would also like to see more courses available on satellite.

You're not needed!

The farm I paid top dollar for - deed states I own all water underneath - stay out of my business!

If we use chemicals and farms wisely and efficiently like most farmers and ranchers do, they will take care of most problems.

If this means add more people to be paid for out of taxes, forget it! If all things require more Federal laws and enforcement we are better off without them. Quit giving all of the help to the big landowners. Help the little operator. We used to live without chemicals and poisons. Why can't we now?

Stupid survey! How can anyone not want these improved?

You have asked questions that I do not have enough information on in order to give you an honest answer. Most of these questions do not talk about costs, results, etc...

Who is going to pay for all these services--local, state, government? By more taxes to be paid by people like myself.

Provide information - not policy!

Mother Earth does a lot to overcome man's habits or follies.

How much does the taxpayer have to subsidize for these programs? Who wants to eat this food with all the preservatives and other junk in it anyway. I don't know how my inlaws, parents, and grandparents lived as long as they did without all this junk in their food. They only lived till they were in their 70s and 80s and one till she was 101! Of course, she lived in South Dakota.

A note to UNL - I think all the issues are important to a degree. But can we afford such. We certainly have paid our dues to UNL and have never received anything worthwhile. Yes, I have attended many of your meetings, a waste of good time and taxpayers' money!

Some of your "new english" turns off old fogeys like myself!!

Don't revitalize too much because we know the taxpayer pays for everything. Why is the state changing Highway 77 from Swedeburg to Wahoo and taking away all our land and all our taxes for the country? Too much waste all over.

My linguistic skills are above average, but this is ridiculous! This sheet is impossible to evaluate with any certainty because of the obscure or evasive wording. Any results will be highly suspect!

Most important - provide jobs that American born citizens will accept.