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Sorghum Research Meeting

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Sorghum Research Meeting
Tuesday, June 11, 2002
East Campus Union, UNL East Campus
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and Harlan Vice Chancellor, IANR

It is my pleasure to welcome you to East Campus this morning, and I thank you for inviting me to be here with you. I am pleased that we have this opportunity to come together to exchange information and ideas, to update on what's happening now, and to look to the future. It is important that we make and take advantage of such opportunities to communicate with each other, to learn each others' views, and to work with each other toward our common goals. I want to personally thank the people who have worked to organize this meeting and to put this morning's agenda together.

I also want to thank the Nebraska Gain Sorghum Board for your ongoing support, and your interest in our work here in the Institute. We have appreciated working with you in the past, and we look forward to working with you in the future. We all of us face challenging times here in Nebraska, with our challenges ranging from the climatic – drought, in some parts of the state – to the financial, as Nebraska continues to struggle with state revenue shortfalls. Those of us involved in agriculture, of course, know well the correlation between the weather and our finances.

My observation is that in challenging times, communication, always important, grows even more so, as the tensions of the times can lead to misunderstandings and misinformation, confusion, and disappointments. That is why I am so pleased we all can be here today to talk with each other – we must be very sure that we keep our lines of communication open. Discussions such as these we'll have today help us do that. And to facilitate our discussions, I plan to leave room at the end of my remarks to provide time for an exchange of ideas to start us talking.

Certainly one of the challenges that faces the Nebraska Grain Sorghum Board is the decline in grain sorghum acres that we've seen since 1985. In 1985 there were 2,100,000 acres planted to grain sorghum in Nebraska, while in 2001 there were 550,000 acres planted, a drop of 1.5 million acres. I know you can catalog the reasons for that decline much better than I can, and I know they are causes for concern. I also know that the decline in sorghum production has meant a decline in check-off income, which has meant budget cuts for the board.

I'm sorry to say budget cuts are unhappily familiar for those of us at the university, also. I mentioned earlier that the state's economic downturn, as state revenues continue to fall well below projections, is a challenge for all of us in Nebraska. Certainly it is a huge challenge for the university, as the governor

\$20mil - NU
\$10mil - UNL
21% = IARR

ponders calling a legislative special session this summer to make yet a third round of cuts in the fiscal year 2003 budget.

The current 3.5 percent cut from the university's budget for fiscal year 2003 – 2.5 percent of which was cut in the Legislature's special session in October and 1 percent in the regular session that ended in April – has meant a \$9.8 million budget cut at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Of that \$9.8 million, \$1,914,969, or nearly \$2 million, came from the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Cutting nearly \$2 million from the Institute's budget has been a gut-wrenching, sleep-losing experience. We are not cutting "fat" here. I think some people hold the comfortable belief that fat is plentiful at any large institution, but in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources we are not cutting fat. We are cutting nearly \$2 million of muscle and bone, losing worthwhile positions and programs that provide a return on investment for Nebraska. Of course removing nearly \$2 million from the Institute's budget directly affects what we can do in teaching, research, and extension education. But because the university is an important economic driver in Nebraska, if we use even a conservative economic multiplier of 3, removing nearly \$2 million from the Institute's budget also removes nearly \$6 million of economic activity from Nebraska's economy.

Since last October we've had to make extremely hard decisions in the

Institute, struggling to find the least bad from a list of bad choices to cut that nearly \$2 million from our budget. We don't think there's a single good cut on our list of permanent reductions, because we know each cut diminishes the work our faculty and staff can do now and in the future for this state. In making our least bad of a list of bad choices, we've sought what we believe will have the least long-term damage for our constituents, the state, the Institute and the university.

We have cut positions. We have pinned our hopes on grant funding to support positions. We have been part of reorganization. In this last round of cuts those of us who must make these decisions in the Institute faced the very frustrating conclusion that we had to look at vertical cuts, because we reluctantly realized that if we continued to bleed all programs the same we'd weaken the Institute beyond its capacity to provide the quality expected of us. In the end we made the extremely painful decision to make a vertical cut and close the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab at the Panhandle Research and Extension Center. In doing that we look to the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory System, with our two remaining labs in Lincoln and North Platte, to provide the laboratory tests needed by those in the Panhandle, and to our Cooperative Extension Division to provide Panhandle veterinarians and producers with extension education to meet their needs. This has been a very painful cut, both for us and for our constituents in the Panhandle, and it is not a cut

we wished to make. It is a cut we felt was forced upon us.

Now, with state revenues for March and April below forecasts, and the word that May revenues don't look good, it appears more challenges are on our horizon. We're reading that the question isn't "if" there will be a special session, the question is "when." We in the Institute and at the university see this as an extremely serious situation, because we know further budget cuts will further damage what we can do for Nebraska. I feel I would be remiss in my position as Harlan Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources and vice president of agriculture and natural resources at the University of Nebraska if I did not speak straightforwardly with you about it. I urge you to make your own concerns about this situation known should another special budget-cutting session occur.

Barbara Kliment, executive director of the Nebraska Grain Sorghum Board, has told me that throughout today's presentations and group discussion the board wishes to address these questions:

*"*What is the current status of sorghum research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Agricultural Research Service and the National Grain Sorghum Producers Association?"*

*"*What are the future plans, goals and commitments to sorghum research?"*

*"*What are the priority areas for sorghum research – today and tomorrow?"*

***What resources currently are available for sorghum research?*

***What additional resources are needed and how can we work together to secure those resources?*

***What are recommendations/suggestions for greater communication, coordination and collaboration for sorghum research and extension?"*

These are good, thoughtful questions, and I think they provide a solid base for this morning's presentations and discussion. I know Dr. Ken Vogel, with the USDA-Agricultural Research Service; Dr. Jeff Dahlberg, research director of the National Grain Sorghum Producers; and Jack Nagel, chairman of the Nebraska Grain Sorghum Board research committee, are on your program later this morning, as are several of our IANR faculty, and I am sure they will provide a great deal of solid, interesting information.

I mentioned earlier that I'm aware of the decrease in grain sorghum acres in Nebraska in the past decade. In Nuckolls County, however, we're seeing something different, and I thought I'd talk about that a little bit today.

In 1997, Roger Elmore, an IANR agronomist at our South Central Research and Extension Center in Clay Center, and Steve Melvin, NU Cooperative Extension educator in Nuckolls County, combined dryland corn and sorghum hybrid trials in a single location, providing a replicated comparison of how the two crops performed.

This is a comparison that we didn't have previously. From 1997-2001, sorghum showed an eight bushel/acre advantage over corn in those Nuckolls County hybrid trials.

In 1999, sorghum acres began to increase in Nuckolls County, the only county in the state not to lose sorghum acres that year. In 2000, Nuckolls County sorghum acreage increased 25 percent, and sorghum acreage in the adjoining counties to the east and west also increased, while most sorghum-producing counties in the state continued to decrease. IANR faculty involved say they hypothesize that producers had responded to improvement in dryland corn hybrids and weather favorable to corn, but hadn't seen valid side-by-side comparisons of dryland grain sorghum and corn until IANR's comparisons were established.

I also want to note today that while we've seen a change in the emphasis of our sorghum research in agronomy and horticulture, due to faculty retirements and new hires during the last five years, we currently have more agronomy faculty involved in sorghum research and extension education than we did in 1997. We have entomologists and plant pathologists involved in grain sorghum research, as well.

Two of our faculty were successful in obtaining a new 5-year INTSORMIL grant to expand our research on nutrient management issues, and our work continues

on an existing INTSORMIL grant evaluating sorghum and pearl millet for diversification of wheat-fallow systems in western Nebraska.

I know you'll be hearing about much more of our scientists' fine work in the next couple hours, and I'm going to end my remarks now so the exchange of ideas and information can begin. I'll look to my colleagues from IANR to join in those discussions and to answer questions, because they are the experts. Once again, I thank the Nebraska Sorghum Board for your support, and we look forward to working with you and with Nebraska's sorghum growers in the future.

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