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## Opening Remarks for Master Conservationist Presentations

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## Opening Remarks for Master Conservationist Presentations

September 22

It is a distinct honor for me to help recognize the 2003 Master Conservationists tonight. Tonight's event marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the program sponsored by the Omaha World-Herald and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

During the past few years, dry weather conditions in much of Nebraska and other states have tested agricultural producers as well as our soil and water conservation measures. Now it appears that the Federal government may take a proactive rather than a reactive role in helping our Nation cope with drought.

The National Drought Preparedness Act of 2003 was introduced in Congress in July and has broad support among Nebraska's Congressional delegation. This bill would create a National Office of Drought Preparedness and a National Drought Council within the U. S. Department of Agriculture. I am pleased to report that members of the National Drought Mitigation Center in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln helped draft the new act.

The legislation would "establish" a drought assistance fund for both technical and financial aid to states, tribes, local governments, watershed groups, and other entities to develop and implement drought-preparedness-plans. Assistance would be granted on a 25-75 percent local-federal "cost-sharing" agreement.

"The drought assistance fund is particularly welcome," according to Dr. Donald Wilhite, director of the National Drought Mitigation Center at UNL.

The fact that the University's Drought Mitigation Center "already" has planning and other "tools" available should facilitate implementation of certain "key-elements" of the bill when it passes. UNL and Nebraska can play "a major role" in the implementation of components <sup>of</sup> this legislation. During the months ahead, I hope you will take advantage of opportunities to emphasize the need for this important legislation when visiting with "members" of the Nebraska Congressional delegation.

"Now" let's recognize our 2003 Master Conservationists!