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**Testimony on LB 917
Status of Nebraska Forest Service
Appropriations Committee
February 3, 2004**

PEDERSON

Good afternoon, Chairman Wehrbein and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am John Owens, and I serve as Vice President, as well as Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. "Thank you" for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you regarding Legislative Bill 917 on the Nebraska Forest Service.

We appreciate the Legislation's conclusion that the Nebraska Forest Service is "best situated" within the University of Nebraska, and we also appreciate the intent of the Legislature to appropriate to the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska from the General Fund the money necessary "to fund" the four core programs and services of the Nebraska Forest Service.

Testifying on a bill that is intended to appropriate additional monies to the University of Nebraska and the Nebraska Forest Service almost seems "awkward" after four rounds of budget cuts to the University, "especially" with a fifth round of state budget cuts looming on the horizon. It is "awkward" because other important programs within IANR, the rest of UNL, and the other campuses of the NU system have been "permanently" reduced or lost through these budget cuts. It is also awkward after we reduced state funding to the Forest Service as part of the IANR solution in "round-four" of budget cuts. Obviously, if it is the "will" of the Legislature to "maintain" all four core programs of the Nebraska Forest Service as a statewide priority, the University will do "its job" to carry out that directive. Our "only request" is that the necessary state funding "not" come at the expense of existing University programs.

As I communicated last October at the LR 141 hearing on the Forest Service, as a result of the first four rounds of budget cuts,

I had the "difficult task" of recommending the elimination of state funding for the Nebraska Forest Service. Let me assure you that it frustrated those of us at the University of Nebraska beyond measure to find ourselves required to propose cuts we "never" would have made if they were not forced upon us by our state's continuing "downturn" in cash receipts.

Because the Institute is Nebraska's "only" comprehensive program in agriculture and natural resources, any proposed cut "seriously" reduces or eliminates programs important to our constituents and to Nebraska. No matter "what" we cut within IANR, it affects all of Nebraska and particularly it affects those people and communities "outside" of Lincoln and Omaha, because of the Institute's statewide mission focusing on agriculture, natural resources, and human sciences. Many good and needed programs have been lost to these budget cuts!

Public reaction to the Nebraska Forest Service "budget cut" underscores the importance of the Nebraska Forest Service and the "disastrous" impacts the current budget situation has had on our state and the university. Through three rounds of budget cutting, we protected the Nebraska Forest Service as much as we possibly could because of the "unique" services it provides Nebraska. In those first three rounds, we cut nearly \$4 million from IANR's budget and, with round four, the total grew to \$6.5 million.

IANR takes very seriously its public service mission. The Nebraska Forest Service has highly valued programs and is "especially" responsive to its constituents. The day we announced "the cut" to the Nebraska Forest Service, we also said that we are extremely concerned about "how" that cut might affect rural fire districts, and that we would work with state government, our constituents, and others to determine "how" the fire prevention and control services and perhaps "other services" offered by the

Nebraska Forest Service, could be maintained at a reduced funding level.

Through a variety of funding sources that include: (1) the \$200,000 of new money provided by the Legislature (and we certainly thank you for your support), (2) \$250,000 of State Funds retained in the Nebraska Forest Service budget for its two tenured faculty, (3) federal funding, (4) special project funds from the NRD's, and (5) some "one-time only" funds from equipment sales and revolving funds, not only the fire prevention-and-control program, but most programs of the Nebraska Forest Service are continuing. However, the level of available funds cannot support beyond this biennium all four core-programs of the Nebraska Forest Service.

To maintain the current level of core programs of the Nebraska Forest Service *as specified in LB917* will require, at a minimum, an influx of an additional \$592,000 of General Funds above the current \$450,000

appropriation. We wish there were adequate funding available within the University, but there is not. To provide these funds out of existing University resources would require the reduction or elimination of other programs that provide valuable teaching, research, extension education, or service opportunities to the State of Nebraska.

Again, "thank you" for the opportunity to address the committee. I would be pleased to respond to questions.