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Farm Bureau Legislative Conference
Tuesday, February 8, 2007
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor

Thank you for asking me to be here with you today. It's always a pleasure. First I'm really pleased to talk about my requested topic, which deals with my vision for IANR. Believe me, my vision for the future of Nebraska agriculture and my vision for the future of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources are intertwined, and very bright! That doesn't make me an oracle, of course, but it does make me enthusiastic about my topic!

Second, I'm going to talk briefly about the Governor's proposed budget for the University – not nearly as enjoyable a topic from the perspective of the future for the University of Nebraska, I readily admit, but also an extremely important topic.

Third, I want to briefly alert you to an independent study recently completed for the Institute that you'll be hearing more about in another week or so. I want you to know about it TODAY so you can watch for it! It's a study the Institute sought to provide us

valuable information for our strategic planning and our accountability processes; we got that, and with it came impressive information on the dividends Nebraska's tax dollar investment in the Institute returns to our state.

If I talk about these three things in that order, I can begin and end on exciting, positive notes, and that's always a pleasure!

So, let's begin with a vision for the future.

My vision for Nebraska's future, and IANR's key place in that future, is this: Agriculture will remain Nebraska's leading-industry. Its importance will only grow. It already has. While one in four Nebraskans depended upon agriculture in some way for their livelihood in 1990, today it's one in three. Even as the state's population grows more urban, even as the number of producers decreases while size of operations increases, Nebraska grows more dependent upon agriculture. The point here is that agriculture and all that grows from agriculture are absolutely vital to Nebraska's future.

My vision for Nebraska includes informed citizens passionate about sustaining and preserving the precious and abundant natural resources that are the base of Nebraska's wealth. Building such an informed citizenry takes education, just as it takes research to find the best ways to sustain and preserve the natural resources with which Nebraska is so truly blessed. The Institute, at work with our colleagues throughout the university and beyond, is up to both tasks.

As Nebraska's primary provider of agricultural and natural resources programs, the Institute is critical to Nebraska's future. We also have a strong role to play in a Nebraska where youth, families, individuals, and communities thrive. That, too, is part of my vision.

The blueprint for reaching this vision in the Institute is our strategic plan. That plan is based on issues Nebraskans identify in ongoing listening sessions we hold throughout Nebraska.

We have three program themes in our current strategic plan, and here's the basics of each:

First, we're going to see that Nebraska's natural resources – water, soil, wildlife, grasslands – are both preserved and sustained. That way, they can sustain our state and remain key elements in growing the future.

Second, we're going to build on our wonderfully strong heritage of agricultural expertise to help grow Nebraska's economy and keep our food supply abundant and safe. We're going to help grow the future in biosciences, a natural growth area for expansion in Nebraska.

Third, we're going to work for and with Nebraska's families and communities, as we have for years, to preserve and strengthen our society. We're intent on making Nebraska's good life even better, from our most rural communities to our most urban areas.

Of course, when I say "we," I certainly don't just mean the Institute. I mean everyone in this room, and all our partners throughout Nebraska. It takes all of us, working together, for the betterment of our state.

My vision?

UNL Extension will remain a leader in connecting Nebraskans to your tremendously valuable land-grant university. We in the Institute will lead in generating and delivering knowledge for Nebraska's growth, from value-added products to entreprenurial youth and adults, to yield increases and the biosciences.

We'll continue to lead the way in research for Nebraska, and we'll continue to lead UNL in research grant and contract funding. I'm very proud our agricultural scientists are among the most quoted scientists in the world. I'm even prouder that while they're adept at winning grants, in the Institute we don't do research simply to bring in more grant dollars. We conduct research to meet the needs of Nebraska, so you and all Nebraskans can use the knowledge gained by that research in your businesses and in your lives.

A very important part of my vision for the future encompasses you and all our other partners. That vision is that

you will support the development and distribution of knowledge. Then you will take that knowledge and, with the skill, determination, and ingenuity so reflective of Nebraskans, use it to build your own future, and lay the foundations for the next generation.

The Institute's mission is to focus research, teaching, and extension-education expertise in agriculture-and-food programs, natural resources, families, and communities to help Nebraska grow an environmentally sound, economically viable, socially responsible future. We must fulfill that mission to reach and extend our vision.

As you'd expect, education is a huge part of my vision. We will continue to provide our students a tremendous education leading to rewarding careers. We'll see continued increases in our student credit hour production, because we must. We'll see our traditional ag majors – agronomy and horticulture, animal science, and agricultural economics – grow. They must grow, and they have not been growing for the past several years. We

will add value to our traditional educational programs to meet new needs, and we will constantly assess how we can expand and grow that which we do so very well. We will provide students' knowledge and skills to meet our state's needs for a skilled work force, and to be tomorrow's leaders.

I hope you know that, historically, our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources averages over 70 percent of its graduates taking their first job in Nebraska after graduation. We're very proud of that brain gain for our state!

Our vision is highly-focused on Nebraska. Nebraska is why we're here, and Nebraska is why we'll stay here. It would be totally irresponsible, in this powerhouse agricultural state – a state where agriculture is the number one industry – if your land-grant university did not provide cutting-edge research, advanced teaching, and relevant extension education programs so vital to the industry. We are *responsible* and *responsive* to Nebraska.

That's my vision. I am happy to talk with you about it individually or collectively at any time.

Now, on to my second topic, also of key importance to Nebraska's future – Governor Heineman's biennium budget proposal for the university.

President Milliken expressed his deep disappointment in the governor's proposal when it was announced in January, saying, and I quote, "At a time when higher education is more important than ever for individual-economic-opportunity as well as state competitiveness, Nebraska risks taking a big step backwards. ...funding higher education at a level that would almost certainly restrict access and require a combination of significant tuition increases and major cuts to programs cannot be good for our state's future."

I will briefly describe some of the key differences between the Governor's proposed budget and the budget requested of the Legislature by the Board of Regents.

The university requested a 6.5 percent budget increase from the state in FY08 and a 4 percent increase in FY09, excluding faculty salaries. The governor proposed a 1.1 percent budget

increase for the university in the first year of the biennium, and a 2.2 percent increase in the second year.

Now, just this week newspapers reported, statewide, that the Appropriations Committee tentatively agreed to look at increasing state support for the university by 4.2 percent in each of the next two years, and that is encouraging to us, even though it falls significantly short of the Regents' request. We know, of course, that there is a long way yet to go before a final vote puts any budget into action.

To put the amounts into perspective, the total amount the governor recommended for year one barely funds a one percent salary increase. Funding for health insurance, utilities, programs of excellence, and other needs will have to come from tuition dollars and program cuts.

You know, as I do, how difficult program cuts were in the Institute during the state's recent budget crisis. The idea of cutting further is nightmarish to me, and I hope to you. So is the idea of significant tuition hikes, which are a direct hit on our

students and their families. We have been working hard to keep education affordable at the university. Access and affordability for students and families will suffer under this proposed budget.

The governor recommended no funding for the University's Greater Nebraska Project or the Programs of Excellence requests. The Greater Nebraska Project is a one-time request to enhance or replace old facilities that don't meet today's research and teaching needs at research and education sites near Sidney, Concord, and Mead. We need those buildings to do the work that keeps Nebraska agriculture competitive in the global economy in which Nebraska must operate.

The Programs of Excellence request, for $3 million per year for the next two years, contains funds for critical expertise we need in water and plant sciences, bioenergy and agricultural biotechnology, veterinary medicine, meat science, food processing, and more. This work is so very important to Nebraska's future.

I doubt many people realize how much the university's

share of the state budget has shrunk in the past two decades. In FY89, NU's share of the state budget was 21.9 percent. This year it's 14.4 percent. If the Governor's budget passes, it will be 13.8 percent in FY09. Remember, it was 21.9 percent back in 1989.

Yet the research and education needs of our state simply do not shrink. They grow. And they grow for very good reasons.

Interestingly, our neighbor to the south passed the Kansas Economic Growth Act to in 2004 to advance that state's bioscience industry and research base. Biosciences offer tremendous growth potential for Nebraska, but only if we can develop the research and education necessary to advance and support them here.

Kansas's anticipated investment over 10 years is $500 million in state funds to drive research and commercialization. The act provides state matching funds for federal research grants, in effect doubling the state's research potential.

Up in Michigan, they've made a 20-year, *$1 billion* commitment from tobacco settlement money to energize the life

sciences industry along the Michigan Life Sciences Corridor, a 125-mile stretch between Grand Rapids and Detroit. In its first six years, this initiative is credited with creating more than 100 life sciences companies in the state.

And, in my old stomping grounds, New Mexico, Governor Richardson's 2007 budget requests are intended to increase access to public universities with a $50 million investment to expand a program that helps college students through need-based funding, and a proposed state tax credit equal to 25 percent of federal tax credits to assist with tuition and fees. The New Mexico budget request includes $10 million in endowments for professorships at the state's institutions, targeting departments that foster growth in priority fields. Their governor also proposed funds to recruit nationally recognized scientists, and to construct an entirely state-funded research facility.

These and other states are making clear-sighted, strategic investments in higher education to build their states successful futures. What about Nebraska?

Kansas 2.7 million
Michigan 10.1 million
New Mexico 1.9 million
Nebraska 1.9 million

I'm sure it comes as no surprise to you that I think land-grant universities, with their research, teaching, and extension-education programs, are needed even more now than they were when they came into being back in 1862. You might think I'm biased in that regard – and you'd be right! But the impartial organization I mentioned earlier, the one that has taken an in-depth look at the Institute for us, reached the same conclusion. We went into this study seeking strategic planning and accountability information. We got that, and more, including solid confirmation of the facts that: Higher education *is* an investment in Nebraska's future; and, the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources has a proud history of returning Nebraska's investment ***with interest!***

And, do we ever make a great return back to Nebraska! This study, which I so look forward to sharing with you and all Nebraskans shortly, gives a clear picture both of agriculture's value to Nebraska, and of the phenomenal return on investment Nebraska receives for the state tax dollars you, as Nebraskans, invest with us.

Research, teaching, and extension education really *are* investments for Nebraska. They pay huge dividends in savings Nebraskans receive through best management practices, in profits from new products, and in value-added dollars for traditional products, as well as in a well-equipped work force.

We in the Institute are proud to do all of this with and for Nebraska. We're proud of our long-tradition of major accomplishments for our state. We are partners with Nebraska, and we take our partnerships very seriously. We value and honor them.

Thank you for having me here with you today. If there is time, I would be happy to take any questions. Thank you.