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Husker Feed Grains and Soybean Conference

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Husker Feed Grains and Soybean Conference
January 17, 2001
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and IANR Vice Chancellor

“Thank you” for inviting me to speak with you today. It is “a pleasure” to be here. I look forward to working with you in the days ahead; in fact, I look forward “to attending” this conference “in the future” and knowing many of you by name.

To start that process I'm going to leave “part of the time” you have allotted me for my presentation today as get-acquainted time, so that there will be several minutes “to visit” with at least some of you more informally, and so that we will have “the opportunity” for an interchange of information, rather than a one-sided conversation in which only I speak, and you listen. I want to listen, too. I am very interested in “what” you have to say.

As I begin today, I want to tell you that my wife Virginia and I are “delighted” to be in Nebraska.

We “slipped” into the state – literally – the week before Christmas, arriving in “the face” of a strong north wind and wind chills hitting 35 to 40 below. It was an exciting advent to our new home, driving several hours over icy, snow-packed roads, with various degrees of “white out”, and my, was Lincoln

a welcome sight when it came into view! Since our arrival we've received such heartwarming welcomes from so many gracious Nebraskans that we've already come to know what you all mean when you say, "there is no place like Nebraska."

I have had exciting times ever since our arrival, too, because I've got to tell you, these are exciting times in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and throughout the entire University of Nebraska system. Why, just last week, my 7th day on the job, I was impressed to find that I could learn so much about UNL just by reading the state's largest newspaper! There were pages and pages of information, in fact! I certainly look forward to positive and productive outcomes of discussions concerning that information.

One of the things that I find both exciting and invigorating about my new position as ^{VICE PRESIDENT &} vice chancellor of IANR is that it allows me to work with talented, dedicated people within the Institute who are strong believers, as I am, in the land-grant university mission. We take our land-grant university responsibilities to Nebraska very seriously in IANR, and we welcome opportunities to discuss the Institute's and the University's role in the lives of Nebraskans and in the success of Nebraska. We are proud of the work conducted in the Institute and of our unique statewide

mission, as well as the benefits we provide the citizens of this great state.

That does not mean, of course, that we are not constantly striving to do better. We are. It's exciting to work with professionals who challenge themselves and each other toward continually enhanced and sustained excellence.

I see as exciting any and all opportunities that arise to talk about agriculture, and the importance of agriculture to Nebraska. We realize, as you do, that more-and-more people are further-and-further removed from the land and the people who feed them, and that not everyone understands the complexities and concerns of Nebraska agriculture - today. Nor do they always understand how those complexities and concerns directly affect them. We are an educational-institution, and we welcome all opportunities to educate. We also welcome partnerships with people like you who fully understand the importance of telling agriculture's story.

We in the Institute are acutely aware that many people don't realize that when we say "agriculture" we are talking ^{ABOUT} a system. A system that stretches from the farm gate to the restaurant plate -

including every step between -- including such important issues as food safety and the development of new products that in turn provide new-jobs to help fuel Nebraska's economy. We know how important value-added research is, research such as that we're doing with soybean-based drip-oil for irrigation pumps; water-resistant starch-based packaging from corn; and the wax on the surface of sorghum grain that we're investigating as a replacement for carnauba wax which is imported from Brazil. Carnauba wax is the preferred coating for many things, from fruits and vegetables to cars and floors.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "The question is not what you look at, but what you see." In the Institute we see possibilities, and possibilities must be explored to know if they will be successful.

I ^{also} personally welcome the opportunity to visit with any folks who might have a "frozen-in-time" picture of University of Nebraska - Cooperative Extension, viewing it as if it were a Norman Rockwell portrait of some earlier age. It's exciting to take part in discussions where we can make known how extension has changed, how it is continually evolving, how much capacity it has for change, and all it has to offer Nebraskans today.

Yes, these are exciting and challenging times to work and live in Nebraska, and I am glad to be part of such times.

I was asked to tell you something today about my goals and plans for the Institute, as well as a little bit about myself, and why I chose to come to Nebraska. It seems logical when someone talks about where his new organization is going, it's also good to know where he's been.

Actually, there were three things that drew me away from New Mexico State University and a job I thoroughly enjoyed. The *first* is the high-achieving and invigorating faculty and students in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Some of those students might be your own sons and daughters or your grandsons and granddaughters, and they are wonderful young people. I was so impressed with the students, faculty, and staff I met when I interviewed here. It was – and it is – both energizing and delightful to talk with them and to learn of their productive activities and their many accomplishments.

Looking at these people – these students who are your children, and your neighbors' children, and all the other young people who make up our student body, and looking at our dedicated, talented and productive faculty and staff members, I saw the future of the University of Nebraska,

and I wanted to be part of that future.

Second, I was drawn here by the tremendous support the University of Nebraska and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources receive from the citizens of Nebraska. When you hold us responsible to accomplish those things you need your University to do for Nebraska, you demonstrate just how much you believe this is *Nebraska's* University. That delights me, because I agree with you. This University does indeed belong to each of you, and to your neighbors, and to all the people across our state.

As a firm believer in the land-grant university mission, I know that land-grant universities exist to serve the people of each state, both on campus and in each state's communities and counties. In that way, each state's residents can access the riches of science and technology available through the university to enhance their personal and professional lives. Your strong support of this University indicates Nebraska believes that, too. Your strong support also indicates that you value all the University can offer Nebraska's residents to help improve and strengthen their own communities and their individual and family lives.

The citizens of Nebraska certainly recognized the importance of the University to agriculture and natural resources in the original, far-sighted creation of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources over 25 years ago. That importance is reaffirmed in your continued support for the Institute and the University today. The structure of the Institute and the fact that the Vice Chancellor of the Institute also is a Vice President in the University of Nebraska system was especially appealing to me as I considered coming here. I want you to know that I will work hard to ensure that the Institute continues to well-serve Nebraska's residents, and to remain a key component of the University of Nebraska system.

Be assured that I will champion the causes of agriculture, natural resources, and human resources for all of Nebraska. We in IANR take very seriously our responsibility to be a good, helpful, and trusted partner with Nebraska.

The *third* reason I came to Nebraska is that agriculture, natural resources, and human resources are absolutely critical to the success and prosperity of this state. This position provides me with the opportunity to again be more involved directly in agriculture. This is sort of a return to my academic and professional roots. I consider my time spent in

agricultural and family and consumer science activities to be some of the most rewarding years of my career. I've certainly enjoyed the opportunities and challenges of university-wide academic administration; however, it's a distinct pleasure to once again be more-closely aligned with people in agriculture and related areas. Especially when I find myself working at a University which I've held in the highest regard since my years as a faculty member at Iowa State.

My regard for the University of Nebraska and the Institute was only strengthened when Irv Omtvedt, IANR's former vice president and vice chancellor, became Chair of the Board on Agriculture for the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges in 1997. I'd been elected to that same position in 1995, and by working so closely with Irv through the land-grant university national organization, I developed a deep professional respect for him and, by association, an even deeper-respect for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska.

I know that the Institute has been in exceptionally good hands with Irv at the helm, and then with Edna McBreen serving as Interim Vice President and Vice Chancellor between Irv's retirement and my arrival.

It's both a privilege and an honor to follow such class acts.

As to a little bit about my background, let me give you a quick rundown:

My wife Virginia and I both were born and reared on the High Plains of Texas in the agricultural community of Plainview which has prided itself for decades as being the county seat of the most agriculturally-productive county in Texas. Both of our mothers still live there and, as a matter of fact, my mom still farms there - although with today's commodity prices, she can hardly-afford to leave the county!

My maternal great-grandfather, Heinrich Englebrecht, immigrated from Germany just as the Civil War broke out. He left Germany to escape military conscription and, with remarkably bad timing, was sworn, under gunpoint, into the confederacy immediately after landing at the port of Galveston. So much for avoiding military conscription in my family! After the civil war, he began farming and accumulated land both in Central Texas where he lived and on the High Plains where no one in his family was willing to live! Those farms still exist today. As a matter of fact, my mom and her two surviving sisters sold that original High Plains farm in February, and some of my cousins sold a portion of the Central Texas

farm of my great-grandfather that same month to a fellow who has been in the news a lot recently." My great-grandfather's farm is now known as President-elect George W. Bush's "Texas Ranch" near Crawford!

*Colin Seaman
Tom Osborn*

I earned my baccalaureate degree in biology at West Texas State University, now Texas A&M University at Canyon, and my master's degree in entomology at Texas Tech. My doctorate in entomology is from Iowa State University, and I began my career as an assistant professor there in the Department of Zoology and Entomology which, at the time, was the largest academic department on that campus.

I also served as an associate professor of entomology at Texas Tech and as an entomologist for Pioneer Hi-Bred International before going to New Mexico State University, where I became a full professor. I then served as academic-department-head of the Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology, and in 1985 became Dean and Chief Administrative Officer of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, and the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station.

I did that work for 12 exciting years until, in 1997, I became NMSU's Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, a position I

held until coming here. In fact, I literally "walked off the stage" at the Pan American Center following New Mexico State University's December 16th commencement, got into the car, and Virginia and I started our trip toward Nebraska, with a quick overnight stop along the way to winterize our cabin in the mountain village of Ruidoso in New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains.

As Executive Vice President at New Mexico State University, New Mexico's land-grant university, I served as the Chief Academic Officer of a 23,818 student Carnegie Research I University with 15,449 students on the main campus and the other students on "four" branch campuses. I was responsible for "the administration" of NMSU's academic colleges and schools and for "the coordination" of all divisions of the university. All academic deans and all vice presidents, except the Vice President for University Advancement, reported "directly" to me.

It was an exciting, challenging job, and I certainly enjoyed it. I had become the longest-serving administrator at New Mexico State University, having served in academic-administrative roles since 1984, when I became a department head. I even had the opportunity "to serve" as NMSU's acting president.

I was fortunate enough to experience "virtually" every academic and administrative job "possible" at NMSU, from untenured faculty member to full professor to faculty senator to "each" of the academic administrative positions on that campus.

I knew the ropes, and I certainly was comfortable there. We had a new president from Utah and I liked him. He's the person I supported for the presidency.

But then I received inquiries about this position in Nebraska. I had reached a point in my professional life where I could consider "some other" possibilities and pursue other opportunities, and I could afford to be "highly selective" about what I considered. As I explored the possibilities, the challenges, and the opportunities awaiting the next University of Nebraska ^{Vice President and} Vice Chancellor for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, it was "clear" this was something I wanted to do.

So I was delighted to receive a phone call from President Dennis Smith and Interim Chancellor Harvey Perlman offering me the job of Vice President and Vice Chancellor, which I accepted. I also was delighted and "humbled" in December when New Mexico State University and its Board of Regents "conferred upon me" the title of Executive Vice President

Emeritus, only the second time in the history of that university for that emeritus status to be awarded.

I am absolutely delighted to be at the University of Nebraska. I am excited by all we can do, working together, to fulfill the Institute's vision to be, "the premier provider of educational, research, and outreach programs essential for shaping Nebraska's future as a leader in the 21st Century in the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources."

I am excited about that because I know what it means for all of us, and for this state, when we fulfill that vision. And I am optimistic about what we can do, working together, for Nebraska.

Those of you familiar with the Institute's vision know "IANR is dedicated to providing the highest quality programs that are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially responsible, and scientifically appropriate."

I am pleased to be part of that vision.

Our product is knowledge. We discover it - our Agricultural Research Division reminds us that they are pioneering the future, and that truly is what research is all about. Pioneering. Discovery. That

"eureka" moment when something new is found and known that never was known before.

Once discovered, we share our new knowledge with the world.

This is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, unbiased, research-based information people can use to make choices and decisions in their lives.

We transfer that knowledge in our classrooms and teaching laboratories, along with the learning and living skills that help people apply knowledge and build on it so they can participate in lifelong learning, and so they can be "responsible" community, state, national, and world citizens. We also transfer that knowledge in another way when we extend knowledge to Nebraskans through our statewide extension education programs. I consider Cooperative Extension to be the most effective "out-of-the-classroom" educational enterprise ever devised. Extension education is "a key component" of the land-grant university mission.

When you ask me what my goals and plans are for IANR, I need to make it clear that I have not come to Nebraska feeling like a physician who believes the Institute or the University "needs" a new prescription or

"heroic intervention." I do know "without doubt" that IANR, UNL, and the entire University system "bring this state" invaluable strengths. Working with IANR's dedicated administrators, faculty and staff, others within the University, and "all" our partners throughout Nebraska, I intend "to build" on those strengths. Working together, I think we can "increase" those strengths, and discover-and-grow "new ones" to meet the needs of Nebraska in the future.

This "early" in my tenure here I do not claim to know "exactly" what the Institute, nor the University, should "focus-on" either short- or long-term. I do, however, intend to find out.

In the next few months, I will be traveling "throughout Nebraska," eager to meet and discuss with as many of you and other Nebraskans as I can, "the needs" you identify as "work" for the Institute. I want to know this state's people, its culture, its hopes, its dreams, and its needs. I want "to work" with the many talented people within the Institute and within the University of Nebraska, as well as those "outside" the University system, to "help" meet those needs and to help make Nebraska's hopes and dreams come true.

We are fortunate in IANR to have a strategic plan already in place as

“a guide to the future, and I am blessed to follow into this job some people who were far-sighted enough to initiate this strategic planning.

Input to determine IANR’s priority programs and operational needs outlined in that strategic plan was solicited at some 25 listening sessions across the entire state of Nebraska. More than 700 stakeholders, students, faculty, and staff contributed their views, which are reflected in three key program themes:

*“*To enhance economically viable and sustainable food and biomass systems;*

**To improve natural resources management and promote environmental-quality; and*

**To strengthen the quality of life of individuals and families and contribute to community viability.”*

I am pleased that the input of so many people was solicited before the Institute’s strategic plan was finalized. I think gathering that degree of input represents a significant investment in the future.

I also think it demonstrates the Institute’s dedication to meeting Nebraska’s needs. It emphasizes the importance we place on our local partners all across the state. It shows a clear understanding of our

land-grant university mission.

Land-grant universities and colleges of agriculture have been the topic of a great deal of study in the past few years – in fact, I can count at least 20 recent studies in the broad area of land-grant universities, agriculture, and related areas. Some of them carry titles such as, “Rethinking the Outlook of Colleges Whose Roots have been in Agriculture,” and “Challenges Confronting Agricultural Research at Land-Grant Universities.”

As I’ve read and participated in those studies, I’ve concluded that it is when land-grant universities “move away” from the precepts of the Morrill Act that they drift into trouble.

When a land-grant university’s service to everyday, “ordinary people” gives way to pursuit of prestige or exclusivity, the land-grant university is in trouble. When clients are “excluded” from the process of helping set the direction of experiment station research and extension-education- programs, land-grant universities are in trouble. I am a firm believer that land-grant universities that disenfranchise their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant existence.

That’s “why” I think it is so important that those of us who wish to

successfully address the future of land-grant universities must embrace new needs and new audiences while meeting the needs and maintaining the support of those with whom we've traditionally worked.

We must identify and meet our state's needs – something land-grant universities are positioned to do better than any other institution. We must further the understanding between our new and our traditional audiences, and we must respond to the concerns of each.

If we in the Institute are to fulfill our vision, we must be responsive to both traditional and new audiences in relevant ways that contribute to the future of Nebraska's citizens and the state in our focus areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources.

These are exciting, challenging times in research, teaching, and extension education at the University of Nebraska and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. So much is being done, and there is yet so much to do. I look forward to being part of all of it with high anticipation and a great deal of enthusiasm. I certainly look forward to working with each of you.

Thank you!