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## Governor's Ag Conference

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GOVERNOR'S AG CONFERENCE  
MARCH 6, 2001  
KEARNEY, NEBRASKA  
JOHN C. OWENS  
NU VICE PRESIDENT AND IANR VICE CHANCELLOR

"Thank you" for inviting me to be here with you today.

As the "new guy" on the block at the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I "welcome" every opportunity to meet and talk with Nebraska's residents. I hope to have "the opportunity" to talk with many of you here. I want to hear "your views" on the greatest challenges facing "both" agriculture and Nebraska in the coming years. I want to know "how" you think the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources can be of assistance.

I was asked "to talk with you today" about my goals as the "new" University of Nebraska Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources and Harlan Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural

Resources. To do that, I think I must begin by telling you that I am a true believer in the land-grant university mission, and a great admirer of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont Senator, Justin Smith Morrill, whose Morrill Act of 1862 "created" land-grant universities. I also am a "great admirer" of Abraham Lincoln, who signed that act into law on July 2, 1862. I consider the Morrill Act "one" of the most far-sighted and far-reaching pieces of legislation ever passed by the United States Congress.

In fact, I often "quote" the Morrill Act, and am particularly fond of the phrase "the leading object," as in "***the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, "to teach" such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts in order "to promote" the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.***"

"To promote the liberal and practical "education" of the industrial classes" - I can't tell you how many

times I've marveled at "the vision" behind that statement. In creating land-grant universities to deliver the knowledge of the university to those who "need it," the Morrill Act "democratized" higher education.

As a "firm believer" in the land-grant university mission, I am absolutely convinced that those land-grant universities that disenfranchise their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant existence. I think we always "must include" our clients in the process of helping set the direction of our research and extension education programs. And I think any land-grant university that pursues "prestige or exclusivity" to the detriment of service to "every day," ordinary people is in big trouble.

That said, I can assure you that, working with people in this room and others across the state, my goals for IANR will be "framed" by our land-grant university mission, the leading object of which, from "the time" these land-grant institutions were established to today, is "to work" with the people the university serves, and "to take" the resources of the university to

the citizens of the state. The Institute is "a partner" with Nebraska in our priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people, and communities.

Our product is "knowledge". We discover it through research and, once discovered, we "share" that new knowledge with the world. "This" is what land-grant universities do best. We provide solid, research-based "information" people "can use" to make choices and decisions in their lives.

We "transfer" that knowledge in our classrooms and in our 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. Teaching, research, and extension <sup>education</sup> are the "three" primary components of the land-grant university, and we in IANR stand firmly and squarely on them.

I need to be "clear" that I did not start my job January 2 with "a belief" that I am like a physician who has arrived at the University with a prescription for what the Institute, this University, and the State of Nebraska need to do. I'm always "leery" of out-of-state "experts" who do "that" when they arrive at a new job. There are people who come in and start talking about what needs to be done before they ever do the listening necessary to find out.

I came to Nebraska "knowing" that IANR and the University of Nebraska bring many strengths to our state. And I intend to do my "very best" to build on those strengths, and to develop others. I think it would be "presumptuous" of me, after only two months here, to pretend to talk with "precise knowledge" about all IANR needs to do, but you can be assured I am "working" to find out. Throughout the spring and summer I will be "traveling" across Nebraska, listening "carefully" to hear what you and others have to say about Nebraska's needs that you "think" the Institute can help

address. I want "to know" what you hope for Nebraska, and the dreams you believe IANR "can help" our state achieve.

When people ask me "what" I think IANR's part is in Nebraska's agriculture, I always respond that we are "partners" with it. We constantly seek ways "to meet" the needs of Nebraska agriculture, and to strengthen it. Issues facing agriculture today are complex; I wish I had easy answers, "but" I do not. What I "do have" is a true belief that it is "important" for both rural and urban Nebraskans that we find solutions to agriculture's concerns. After all, one in four Nebraska jobs is related to agriculture. What happens in rural Nebraska is important. It matters.

That importance of rural Nebraska to the state is a key reason the University has "launched" a multi-year Rural Initiative to place University resources at the "disposal" of people and communities in rural Nebraska.

I'm excited about this initiative because it steps up and expands "efforts" already under way throughout all campuses of the University to provide rural Nebraska

with "specific" programs, services, and assistance in the areas of business development and entrepreneurship, e-commerce for small businesses, expansion of distance education, telehealth and telemedicine, and value-added agriculture "focused" on rural Nebraska needs.

This Initiative is "in response" to the economic and social "challenges" facing rural Nebraska today. The University is "working" with people in rural Nebraska and Nebraska's various institutional resources "to address" what seems to be a dual-track economy, with urban counties "prospering" while rural counties' economies "suffer." We are concerned that Nebraska's "heritage" of "rich" rural and small-town environments is in jeopardy. We know very well that the university can't solve all problems, but we have great faith in the tenacity, resiliency, and determination of rural Nebraskans, and we hope that, working with you, we "all" can do "our part" to strengthen rural areas.

Right now we're doing "our best" at the University to answer calls to help rural communities' businesses, families, farms, ranches, and local institutions "find"



solutions - and we in IANR are in the midst of that, let me assure you - but we need to do "more" and to move "faster" than our already stretched-thin resources allow. You know, as I do, that there is "much work" to do.

To further what the university "already" is doing, the first specific program "thrust" of the University's Rural Initiative is a public service/engagement piece "included" in the University's budget request to the legislature for the next two years. Funding for that public service/engagement work is "one" of the University's "three priorities" this biennium, in addition to "needed funds" for salaries and restoration of the university's health insurance trust fund. If the legislature "approves" that public service/engagement request, it will "fund" three endeavors. The first "focuses" on rural economic-viability and - entrepreneurship "through connectivity"; the second on building on a "proven-track" record in health care; and the third on "collaboration" with K-12 education.

We in the Institute "already" are at work on efforts to focus on "rural" economic viability and -

entrepreneurship through connectivity. Additional funding requested in this year's biennium budget would place four new full-time University faculty at our Research and Extension Centers across the state to serve as resource providers, educators, and facilitators, and as "point persons" for rural economic development for communities and businesses. Small and medium-sized farms are considered part of the business community.

A fifth new faculty member in IANR in Lincoln would work with those at the Research and Extension Centers. This person will focus on enhancing the viability of small and medium-sized farms and ranches with emphasis on family farms.

Our "entrepreneurship through connectivity" endeavor would expand our existing Technologies Across Nebraska work, which is an outgrowth of a research study requested by Senators Bromm and Wickersham, in support of discussions taking place around the study resolution LR330 in the 2000 legislative session. It would add four new Cooperative Extension educators

specifically skilled in the areas of information technologies and community education to eight extension educators whose responsibilities <sup>“</sup>already<sup>”</sup> have been shifted to work in this area. The goal is to help <sup>“</sup>overcome<sup>”</sup> the digital divide rural communities <sup>“</sup>face<sup>”</sup> by providing communities <sup>“</sup>with opportunities<sup>”</sup> to study advanced telecommunications options and <sup>TO</sup> determine and implement those that <sup>“</sup>best<sup>”</sup> meet their needs. We also would like to help grow knowledge, skills, and abilities <sup>“</sup>necessary<sup>”</sup> for individuals and businesses to make the most of their communities' telecommunications connections. Existing and new staff <sup>“</sup>will partner<sup>”</sup> with agencies to provide a local leadership role in <sup>“</sup>assisting<sup>”</sup> communities.

To address the critical need for high quality, <sup>“</sup>accessible<sup>”</sup> health care in Nebraska's rural communities, the "building on a proven record in health care" <sup>“</sup>endeavor<sup>”</sup> would add six new physician residencies in Scottsbluff and North Platte, and two in the Lincoln Medical Educational Foundation. The University of Nebraska Medical Center has <sup>“</sup>the most graduates<sup>”</sup> of rural

residencies of any similar program in the nation; its Primary Care Rural Training Track offers students experiences living and practicing in rural areas.

Because we in the University think enhanced collaboration between NU teacher-education colleges and K-12 schools is key in continuing to make certain that Nebraskans are well-served by their K-12 schools, the third endeavor of the public service/engagement proposal requests funds to enhance existing collaborative efforts and to add several programs, including such things as a mentoring program in which "Master Teachers" assist beginning teachers, and support for the School at the Center Program, working with 25 rural Nebraska communities to enhance education quality.

The University is requesting \$750,000 in each year of the biennium to address these rural Nebraska needs. As I said earlier, we already are at work on these issues, in the land-grant university tradition of being of service to our state, but our resources are stretched so thin. We cannot begin to meet all the

requests for help NOW, the need is so great.

Senator Cap Dierks has introduced LB588 in this legislative session to create the Rural Initiative Act stating a legislative intent to appropriate funds to the university for this purpose and putting the Legislature on record as supporting university involvement in improving the economic and social viability of rural Nebraska.

I understand that one of the topics for this conference is retaining young farmers, and that is certainly a concern for us across Nebraska and at the University. In IANR we are concerned with helping young farmers and ranchers get started; we all know the realities that beginning farmers and ranchers face major financial obstacles today unless they have a farming/ranching relative willing to work with them, or other <sup>significant</sup> financial backing.

A little over a year ago now University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, which is a key part of IANR, started a Beginning Farmer Program designed to help potential-producers decide if farming and ranching is

"right" for them. The program provides participants with cash flow and financing information so they can explore the realities of their situation before making financial investments.

The program coordinator also works with producers carrying financial burdens, and retiring producers doing pre-estate planning. In his first year he worked with about 200 families, nearly half of whom were trying to get started.

That tells me there are young people who want to farm. When we look at the statistics - in 1997 Nebraska had about 5,500 producers under age 35 and nearly 12,400 over age 65 - we know we must find ways this state can help young potential-farmers and ranchers grow to take the places of those retiring, and to help keep Nebraska agriculture strong.

Talking about young farmers and ranchers always seems to make me think, too, of those who have been at the business a long time. For those of you here today who have been farming or ranching for 30, 40, or even 50 years, I want to say "thank you." Thank you for all

you've done over the years "to feed" this state, our nation, and the world, and thank you for your many contributions to "your" communities and to Nebraska.

I mentioned to you earlier that I see IANR as a partner with agriculture and a partner with Nebraska, and I'd like "to end my talk" this morning with just a few examples of "some" of the ways "I think" that partnership has helped and will-help agriculture in this state for years to come.

I just "spoke" about those of you who have been farming or ranching for a long time. Well, if you've been a wheat farmer in Nebraska for more than 40 years, you very likely know that varieties developed through our "wheat-breeding-program" provide Nebraska growers with improved wheats that perform well in the field and "offer" those quality characteristics millers and bakers "demand." Nebraska-developed hard red winter wheat varieties are planted on roughly "three-fourths" of the state's wheat acres. These varieties have increased Nebraska's "annual yields" by 19 percent compared to the 1960s, and these "improved-varieties" are worth roughly

\$31 million to \$37 million annually to Nebraska producers, based on increased yield alone. Consumers benefit, also. Yield improvement in these varieties means Nebraska wheat-growers can feed nearly 5 million more Americans a year than they did on the same acreage in the 1960s.

Forty years ago when we talked about maps we likely were thinking about finding the best roads from here to Denver, or Omaha, or Kansas City. Yet some of today's most interesting maps chart the molecular-world of genes, DNA, and chromosomes. An IANR soybean geneticist and colleagues created the first comprehensive genetic map of all 20 soybean chromosomes. The team developed one of the three populations used to construct the soybean map, which contains more than 1,800 genetic-markers identifying critical-chromosome-segments. The genetic map speeds the plant breeding process by enabling scientists to target and harness specific genes responsible for key traits such as yield, disease resistance, or high protein content. The map also is helping scientists



"better understand" which genes "govern" specific traits.

In other research, capitalizing on cattle's "natural curiosity," our scientists devised a simple, effective, economical way "to test" pens of cattle for the bacterium, *E. coli* 0157:H7, "without" handling individual animals. They hang "pieces of rope" around a pen, which cattle soon chew or lick, leaving "traces" of the organisms they're carrying. Laboratory tests of the ropes detect *E. coli* 0157:H7. The team is "refining" the "rope test" as a research tool and using it to identify "strategies" producers can use to control the bacterium in feedlots. This work is "part" of ongoing IANR on-farm food safety research "to control" the dangerous bacterium on farms, ranches, and feedlots "to reduce" chances of it reaching consumers.

Another example: If European corn borers begin developing resistance to Bt corn, which produces an insecticide "toxic" to this major corn pest, our entomologists "are likely" to spot it first. An IANR scientist developed tests to detect changes in corn borer's "susceptibility" to Bt toxins. He uses it to

annually "check" corn borer populations throughout U.S. corn-growing regions. He has seen "no changes" in the six years since Bt corn has been registered, but he'll keep checking. His laboratory is responsible for "assessing" and keeping records on corn borer Bt susceptibility "nationwide". The goal is to "spot" potential changes before resistance becomes widespread. The monitoring and early detection of potential susceptibility changes are "vital" to resistance management strategies designed "to preserve" Bt's effectiveness.

On another front, rapid, accurate "tests" developed by our food scientists are helping the food industry "protect people" with food allergies. An IANR team devised fast, accurate tests food processors "can use" in their production facilities "to detect" even minute "traces" of allergenic foods in processed foods or on equipment. Tests for egg, peanut, and milk have been "commercialized" by a Michigan company that markets the tests to the food industry under a university license agreement. Tests for "other" food allergens to help

protect "allergic consumers" are in the works.

One "other thing" I'd like you to know. We hear a "great deal" about a brain drain in this state as young people "move away" to take jobs. We're pleased in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, part of the Institute, to talk about "a brain gain." Over 70 percent of the students who responded to a UNL Career Services survey "stayed" in this state after graduation, becoming contributing members of their communities.

We work "hard" in the Institute to be a good partner to Nebraska's agriculture, and a good partner to Nebraska, and I look forward with much anticipation and a great deal of enthusiasm to working with you in the future. Thank you.