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Lincoln Downtown Rotary Club

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LINCOLN DOWNTOWN ROTARY CLUB

June 5, 2001

Dr. John C. Owens

NU Vice President and Harlan IANR Vice Chancellor

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to be here with you today.

One of the things I'm enjoying most in my new position as University of Nebraska Vice President of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Harlan Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources is meeting the people who live in this state, in urban and rural areas, from Scottsbluff to Omaha, from Lincoln to Curtis, and at any number of towns – north, south, east, west – in between.

I enjoy Nebraska's people. In fact, "people" are one of the "main reasons" I'm here. When I interviewed for my position I was so impressed with "the quality" of the students and faculty I met that I became enthusiastic about "the possibilities" I saw in Nebraska. And, ever since my wife Virginia and I literally "slid" into the state on a cold, snowy day last December, my enthusiasm for Nebraska's people has only increased. We've received "warm-welcome" after warm-welcome in our first months here, and we have encountered "person after person" with genuine "concern-and-caring" for what they do, for their communities, and for this state. Nebraska's people certainly are "the key" asset that Nebraska has.

Being a high plains person myself – Virginia and I grew up on the High

Plains of Texas – I sometimes “wonder” if there isn’t “something” about growing up in wide open spaces that just “naturally” makes us look toward horizons, whether those are physical horizons, where barns and homesteads stand, or figurative horizons of new ideas and new possibilities.

Our Agricultural Research Division likes to say our researchers are pioneering the future. Sometimes I think “I glimpse” the excitement and vision of a pioneering spirit passed down through generations in many of the Nebraska residents I meet. One thing I know – this is a good place to be, and I am happy to be here.

In the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources we “focus” on the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources. We discover “knowledge” through research. We transfer that new knowledge in our classrooms and teaching laboratories, along with the learning and living skills that help people “apply knowledge” so they can be responsible community, state, national, and world citizens. We also transfer it through our statewide extension education program, which is “a vital part” of our land-grant university mission.

When I say our “focus areas” are food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources, I need “to be clear” that we define those terms broadly. To us, agriculture is “everything” from field to table – from preparing

the ground and planting seeds to consumer safety and satisfaction when the consumer has finished dining, and to new products developed from the commodities grown in our state. When we speak of "human resources" we are talking about individuals, families, and communities, and everything from research and programs for children and adults to facilitating "cooperation" among communities to reach their own regional goals. Our work is diverse, exciting, and important to this state. With one of every four "Nebraska jobs" related in some way to agriculture, we know of its importance to Nebraska's success.

I'm just entering my "sixth month" as ^{the} new guy on the block here, and in the past five months I've spent a great deal of time "visiting" with a number of Nebraska residents, learning as much as I can about the needs of the state and its people, and the dreams "they dream" for themselves and for Nebraska. I look forward to visiting with you today to learn more. I want to know "what-you-think" are the greatest challenges facing agriculture, natural resources, and people in Nebraska "now," and in the coming years. I want to know "what" your dreams are for this state. I want to know "how" you think the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources "can assist" in helping Nebraska meet its needs and realize its dreams.

Because I'm always "leery" of out-of-state "experts" who arrive at a place and "start talking" about what needs to be done before they ever do the listening "necessary"

"to find out, I try very hard not to be "one of those people." That's why I'm spending so much time "hearing" what people have to say in these early days of my time here, and "why I will go right on "listening" in the months to come. I am a "true-believer" in the land-grant university mission "to work" with the people the university serves and "to take" the resources of the university to the residents of the state. I think we always must include our constituents in the process of "helping set" the direction of our research and extension education programs, and we must remember that "people" are looking to us to be of service to Nebraska.

That said, I'd like to talk a bit today "about the various ways the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources "already" is of service to Nebraska. In the time we have I can provide "only" a few of the many examples that illustrate "the value" and "diversity" of the work we do, but I would be glad to come back another time to tell you more.

There is "so much" work done within IANR that enhances individual lives, communities, and the economy, and "both" the volume and diversity of "what" we do can make it difficult for any one person to be familiar with it all. That's "why" it always is a pleasure for me to have "opportunities" such as this one "to talk" about our contributions to Nebraska and its residents, as well as to the nation and, indeed, the world.

For example, we know Americans eat half of all meals away from home, so assuring food safety in places like restaurants, schools, ~~and nursing homes~~ ^{ROTAry CLUBS} is a big job. It's also the goal of ServSafe, a program University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension conducts in cooperation with state agencies and the Nebraska Restaurant Association.

About 6,000 restaurant managers have learned safe food-handling procedures through the program since 1994, and it's estimated that each trained manager, in turn, teaches food safety information to another 15 people, extending extension's efforts. Preventing food-borne illness is important to us all.

Our Cooperative Extension nutrition programs reach a broad spectrum of Nebraska residents, from refugee families in Lincoln to long-time Nebraskans in rural areas. Extension helps low-resource clients improve how they budget, shop, and what they eat, which boosts their self-sufficiency.

In the ^{Federal} fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2000, over 7,300 families, 7,200 youth, and 1,100 older adults participated in these programs. The state's program was one of three nationwide to receive a National Food Stamp Program/USDA Excellence in Nutrition Education Award in 2000.

Our food scientists have also developed rapid, accurate tests that are helping the food industry protect people with food allergies. An IANR team devised fast,

accurate tests food processors can use in their plants 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 already are in the works.

Every year head lice infestations force children to miss school and parents to miss work while the condition is treated. If an ineffective treatment is used, the problem persists. NU Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County teamed with Lincoln Public Schools, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and the Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department to provide education on effective head lice treatments.

In 2000, just one year after implementing changes based on this effort, Lincoln Public Schools reported a 70 percent decrease in head lice cases. The Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department had nearly 60 percent fewer cases reported, and public health nurses made 60 percent fewer home visits.

Out in the agricultural fields, wheat varieties developed by our wheat breeders provide Nebraska growers with improved wheats that perform well and offer the 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 with the 1960s. These improved varieties are worth "roughly" \$31 million to \$37 million annually to Nebraska producers based on "increased-yield" alone. Consumers benefit, too. 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.

Another way "our-work" economically aids the state – and also helps some people reach their dreams – is through our "Food Processing Center." The Center offers technical and marketing and business "development-assistance" to entrepreneurs, as well as to "established" food processing firms. This has helped Nebraska's food processing industry grow from 220 food processing businesses when the center opened in 1983 to nearly 400 today. Center officials estimate its programs and services "add" about \$12.5 million of economic value to Nebraska's economy "annually." One company manager said the center's expertise helped his company increase sales by \$250,000, reduce operating costs by 7 percent, create 12 new jobs, and invest \$100,000 in new capital projects.

On the "natural resources" front, we know that excessive algae growth can ruin sandpit lakes for recreation, contribute to fish kills, and leave the lakes "unattractive" and "foul-smelling." Our researchers have developed a non-toxic aluminum sulfate

treatment that reduces algae growth by nearly two-thirds. The solution binds with phosphorous, a key nutrient for algae, pulls it to the lake bottom, and forms a barrier against more nutrients coming into the lake. The process is easy to apply and it doesn't kill fish or other organisms. While it's initially more expensive than the traditional treatment of copper sulfate, which can kill fish and other aquatic organisms along with algae, one application of aluminum sulfate can be as effective as five to seven conventional copper sulfate treatments.

You see the diversity of the work we do in these examples; there are so many more I'd like to share, did time permit – examples of what we're doing all across the state to enhance lives and enrich the economy. We in the Institute see ourselves as partners with Nebraska, and we continually strive to be the best partners we can be. Thank you.

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