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Congressional staff dinner /reception

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Congressional staff dinner/reception
August 7, 2002
Cornhusker Hotel
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and Harlan Vice Chancellor, IANR

It is my very real pleasure to welcome you here tonight. We are so pleased to have this opportunity to talk with you about Nebraska agriculture and natural resources, and the work we in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources do as partners with Nebraska. We welcome your insights and your help in doing all we can to strengthen our efforts on behalf of Nebraska, where one in four people depends on agriculture for employment.

That number underscores the importance of Nebraska's agricultural farm gate to consumer plate industry, as well as the importance of the work we conduct in IANR.

One in four Nebraskans depends upon agriculture for employment. To say nothing of those who depend upon us to continually help provide a safe, abundant, affordable food supply. And to help sustain viable communities and families. And to help provide a healthy environment with clean, safe water, air and soil, not only for us today, but also for

future generations.

We all know that any industry that accounts for one in four jobs is important to its home state, and we also know that *this* industry - agriculture - is vital to the nation, as well. Not only do we produce food, vital to survival, but we produce *affordable* food, vital to the nation's economy. We live in a country that can sustain its own population - the 2002 Nebraska Agriculture Fact Card tells us one American farmer/rancher produces enough food for 129 people - 95 in the United States and 34 abroad. Only a short-sighted or misguided nation would take lightly its resources to feed its citizens, should it one day find food imports held hostage through war, terrorism, or economic boycott. Thankfully, we are not that.

When someone seems to underrate agriculture's importance in Nebraska - and it does happen - I suggest they take a trip starting at the westernmost edge of Omaha and driving west all the way past Chimney Rock to the Wyoming border. Make that trip and you see agriculture, a sampling of which we'll see on our way to our Southeast Research and Extension Center tomorrow. Between here and the Wyoming boarder lie miles and miles of farming and grazing land. That fact card I mentioned earlier tells us that 96 percent of Nebraska's total land area is in the 46.4

million acres that comprise Nebraska's farms and ranches, and there are nearly 24,000 miles of rivers and streams that add to our state's bountiful natural resources.

Sadly, these days those rivers and streams, like our crops, show the dreadful distress of the terrible drought gripping Nebraska - a drought now expected to have a \$1.4 billion impact on the state's economy, a drought our experts say is deepening and intensifying across Nebraska's Panhandle and southeastern and south central parts of the state.

To give you an idea of what drought means to many Nebraskans, I'd like to quote from an article by one of the farm writers in the state, Lori Potter at the Kearney Hub:

"...Drought is a thief that embraces many forms, all intent on destruction. Drought steals the livelihoods of dryland farmers and livestock producers who rely on nature's balance of plants, nutrients and water. It robs bushels and profits from irrigators just as surely as if someone had picked their pockets. It saps the very fiber of people and beasts trying to survive in a world of dust and dying plants. It sucks streams dry like a straw draining a glass of water. Drought is a swindler that uses the old bait-and-switch ploy. It turns potential rain clouds into frauds. It disguises rain by locking it inside softball-size hail or turning it

into oppressive humidity that puts more moisture on a farmer's shirt than in his soil. It plays other cruel games. Sometimes it eases its viselike grip just enough to allow rain to fall on one field, but not on the field across the road...

Drought feeds on fears. Will the water last? Will the well keep pumping? Will the river go dry? ... Drought uses sleight of hand. Over time, it exploits the sun's heat and relentless winds to drain the vigor from pastures and grain fields, until they all are smothered to death and transformed into ugly tan carpets. It toys with human sanity. Each new, dry day is like a harassing phone call from a stalker. Yet the thefts, harassing, and homicides by drought go unpunished. Drought can't be locked away to end its terror. It is forever free to return to the scenes of its crimes."

One of our climatologists at the National Drought Mitigation Center at the Institute tells us the U.S. Drought Monitor map shows a large portion of western and southwestern Nebraska in an exceptional drought, and most of the state in extreme drought. These are extremely trying times.

Nebraska faces other challenges, as well. Like more than 40 other states in the union, Nebraska is struggling with a continuing revenue

shortfall affecting all of state government, including those of us here at the university. Right now our Legislature is meeting in special session at the call of the governor to cut the state's budget. Those of us at the university and certainly here in the Institute are constantly seeking alternative funding to finance the research, teaching, and extension education programs so important to the future of agriculture and natural resources for this state and this nation. With the state's economic difficulties expected to continue for several years, we know the importance of that will only grow.

Again, we are so very happy to have you with us. We welcome your questions and comments tonight, with our presentations on the North Central Initiative on Small Farm Profitability, and on Risk Management Programming, and tomorrow, at the South Central Research and Extension Center Field Day. Thank you for coming. We look forward to our opportunities to learn your concerns and interests, and to share with you the exciting work that is occurring in the Institute for agriculture, natural resources, and Nebraska.

Thank you.

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