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Moving Ahead in Lean Times: Nebraska Ag Relations Council

John Owens

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, jowens2@unl.edu

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Moving Ahead in Lean Times
Nebraska Ag Relations Council
East Campus Union
March 26, 2004
John Owens
NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor

One day a rancher's prize bull was "missing" from the section of his land the railroad passed through. He filed suit against the railroad, wanting only to be paid a "fair-price" of the bull. A big-city lawyer arrived in the rancher's "small-town" to represent the railroad in the case and quickly "cornered" the rancher, pressuring him to settle out of court.

"I don't think you want to do that," the rancher said, but the lawyer was adamant, pouring all he had into high-powered persuasion, a skill for which he was known and in which he took pride. Finally, the rancher agreed to take "half" of what he'd originally asked in his suit. As they shook hands on it, the rancher looked the lawyer straight in the eye, his gaze keen, and said, "Now, you're sure you want to do this. Because we could go ahead with this hearing, and I could say what I came here to say."

The lawyer was sure. He was very sure. His foot did an impatient jig as he affirmed his sureness.

After the rancher signed the release and took the check, the lawyer couldn't resist "gloating" over his success. "You know, I hate to tell you this, old fellow," the lawyer said, "but I put one over on you there. I couldn't have won this case. The engineer was asleep and the fireman was in the caboose when the train went through your ranch that day. I didn't have one witness to put on the stand. I bluffed you!"

The old rancher nodded his head as he replied. "Well, I'll tell you, young feller," the rancher agreed, "I was a little worried about winning the case myself, seeing as how that durn bull wandered home early this morning."

Sometimes, things are not what they seem. Sometimes things change. Certainly, Nebraska's economic-crisis these past two years has "forced" changes in our state, in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and throughout the entire University of Nebraska - "changes" none of us wanted to make.

Fifty million dollars are gone from the university's budget in four rounds of budget cutting. "Permanently gone." About half were cut from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln budget, and of that amount, 27 percent, or \$6.5 million, has been permanently-
cut from the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources' budget.

Good programs are gone. Programs that provided benefit to Nebraska. Programs that are "very-hard" for us and for Nebraskans to see go away. Here in the Institute, we've been forced to convert "one" research-and-extension-center into a research-and-demonstration farm, close two "satellite" veterinary-diagnostic-laboratories, and to discontinue funding for other-programs important to Nebraska and its citizens, often "the only" programs of their kind offered in our state. Good people doing good work have lost their jobs. Consequences of these decisions will echo down the years.

From the first round of budget cuts, we have said we made the decisions we made because any other decisions would be

even worse. Sadly, round after round of budget cutting has proved that statement to be correct. With each round we have cut nearer and nearer the central core of our programming.

Because undergraduate teaching is, by legislative and regent mandate, the first-mission of the university, those programs must be our first priority. If there has been any silver lining in this budget cutting at all – and believe me, a person has to look a long ways to find one – but if there has been any silver lining for those of us in the Institute who have agonized over the cuts we have been forced to make, and borne the anger and frustration of those affected by them, that silver lining is that the outcry these cuts provoked shows that we have been on-target with our land-grant university mission and in tune with the citizens of our state in providing needed programs.

People do not miss what is not of value to them. Our programs are missed. People are vehement about that. We wish we never were forced into these cuts, but we were. Through strategic planning, the Institute has long-made efficient and—

effective use of its resources. That's the good news. The bad news is, when you already run a lean operation, every dollar that is cut matters. When \$6.5 million is gone in four rounds of budget cutting, the programs and people those dollars supported are gone, too. ***There is no other option.***

Now we are waiting to see what this fifth round of state budget cuts will mean to Nebraska and its land-grant university. The Appropriations Committee has recommended a 1/2 percent cut to the university budget. We will see what floor debate brings within the next few days. The Legislature has, in past rounds of budget cutting, lowered the cuts the governor wanted to assess the university. In this current round, the Appropriations Committee and the governor agree on the 1/2 percent cut. Nebraska's legislators, realizing the importance of Nebraska's university to our state, have worked to minimize as best they could the hurt to Nebraska caused by university cuts. We are both cognizant and appreciative of that, knowing that the Legislature has struggled mightily for over two years now to steer

the ship of state safely through these extremely-rough-waters. I certainly thank the senators for their continuing work to thoughtfully guide and protect Nebraska as much as possible in these tough times. They have a tremendously difficult job, and they have stepped up to do it.

I cannot stand before you today and talk only of the agony of these tough times, however. To do that would be an injustice to the people of Nebraska and to the IANR community, which continues each-day to go about its work for our state. Our diminished budget means we no longer can do everything we did. We will, however, do everything we are able to do. I am very, very proud of the way members of the IANR community have continued their dedicated work on behalf of Nebraska and Nebraskans. While it would be irresponsible to ignore the losses suffered through budget cuts in talking with you today, it would be even more irresponsible not to talk about the good, strong work that is benefitting Nebraska. There is good news, and good news, always a pleasure to talk about, becomes even more pleasurable in times like these.

Good news such as this: In August last year we broke ground for a new education center and laboratory at the Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory.

Last September we announced a \$1.8 million grant from the National Science Foundation to study our Nebraska Sandhills ecosystem. And in a September Institute newsletter, I noted our Cooperative Extension faculty earned grants exceeding \$10 million in the past year.

In fiscal year 2003, our Agricultural Research Division— faculty obtained \$31.6 million in grants and contracts. We are very fortunate to have such accomplished scientists who work hard to win grants necessary to fund research to benefit this state. “Interestingly,” in these troubled economic times, federal appropriations may have become a more reliable source of funding than state funds. And we know that even when the Nebraska economy turns around, the university will be competing for state funds with other programs, such as aid to individuals, and especially Medicaid, that are huge and growing “competitors” for each state dollar.

It is good news that everyone necessary has signed the agreement establishing the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit here, and we have a national search under way for a leader to head the new unit. I am excited about the strengths and opportunities this new addition can bring us.

Other good news: *Meat and Poultry* magazine ranked us fourth in its annual rankings, up from sixth, citing our Food Processing Center and work by food and animal scientists as specific strengths.

That same Food Processing Center last year celebrated 20 years of assisting Nebraska's food industry. The center has worked closely with the food industry to increase the number of food processing businesses in the state from 220 in 1983 to 350 today.

We were extremely pleased in February to receive word that our new Professional Golf Management program has received accreditation from the Professional Golfers Association. The Professional Golf Management program grows out of the Institute's long tradition of excellence in turf science, and we look

to it to add to our student enrollment numbers in the years ahead. Developing new programs to meet the needs and interests of a changing society helps us strengthen the resources needed to maintain our traditional programs. When we can build on the strengths of those traditional programs to offer new programs that enlarge our recruitment base, there is increased support for all we do.

Plant Pathologist James Van Etten was elected to membership in the highly prestigious National Academy of Sciences, certainly a piece of very good news. Being named to the Academy is one of the highest honors ever accorded a U.S. scientist. It does us proud to know that every University of Nebraska professor who has ever received that high honor has worked in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Recent College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources graduate Chris Gustafson is studying in Italy this year as a Fulbright Scholar. The Associated Students of the University of Nebraska president this school year was Kyle Arganbright, an agricultural economics student in our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

Ron Hanson, who teaches agricultural economics in our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, was one of only two national USDA Food and Agriculture Sciences Excellence in Teaching Award winner's last November. Also last November, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Specialist John DeFrain received the Early Career Achievement Award at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations. All pieces of good news.

While the budget has been tight, we have, through careful planning, managed to release positions in high-priority areas. We have a new water engineer on board, and we are conducting a search for the new head of Biological Systems Engineering. We released several tenure-track positions, and opened several extension educator positions. We were pleased to release equipment-money last year after freezing the budget-equipment-line for two years as we struggled to deal with budget cuts. There are equipment needs that must be met if programs are to do what is needed.

When word went out in October on the excellent, excellent research done here to show a new vaccine and a beneficial

bacterial feed additive each significantly reduced *E. coli* 1057:H7 in feedlot cattle, it garnered significant interest and attention worldwide. This is tremendous work of which we all can be especially proud. It is just one very fine example of the valuable work being done everyday in the Institute.

As I said earlier, I am very proud of the disciplined and dedicated way our IANR community continues to go about its work for Nebraska. All of this is good news.

Throughout the past year, the Institute conducted over 30 listening sessions across Nebraska in preparation for "updating" our strategic plan. Whether these "listening sessions" were held in the north, south, east, or westernmost regions of Nebraska, whether they were in rural or urban communities, we heard two themes emerge in every session. Nebraskans told us they are concerned about 1) economic development and community vitality, and 2) about water, both quantity and quality.

These areas already are under study in the Institute, and we will be focusing "even more" effort and resources on them in the future, in response to Nebraskans' concerns. We welcome additional partnerships as we work for the growth, prosperity, and quality-of-life of our state.

I have another story for you today, illustrative of another area in which we welcome, encourage, and need your partnership. It seems the Monday Afternoon Club, an organization of well-to-do "city-women", one day decided that their next month's meeting would be a visit to a dairy farm. Most of them lived in the city all their lives, and had never made a farm visit. When the day came for their "monthly-meeting" they all boarded a chartered bus and enjoyed the view as city streets turned into rolling countryside.

When they arrived at the dairy they were greeted by the farmer, who invited them to look around and ask him any questions they might have. One woman stepped into a big building and saw something she thought quite remarkable. The farmer walked by the door to the building just then, and she called him in.

"Sir," she asked. "Why doesn't that cow have any horns?"

The farmer's eyes followed her pointing finger, then he took a deep breath before beginning, in the most patient tone "ever-[^]heard", "Well, ma'am, cattle with horns can do a lot of damage, so we often try to remove them, or at least keep them trimmed. Sometimes when calves are small, we put something "on" where

their horns would grow in, and that stops them. Some breeds of cattle never do grow horns. But [“]the-reason[”] the particular cow you’re looking at doesn’t have horns, ma’am, is because – it’s a horse.”

OK. Maybe it usually isn’t that bad. But folks, ag education, and the education on the importance of agriculture in people’s lives, are [“]real-needs[”] for agriculture today, and we welcome and need your partnership helping educate our citizens about Nebraska agriculture. Nebraska is a powerhouse agricultural state, yet today you can find too many people in Nebraska who do not know or understand the importance of agriculture in our state’s economy or in their own lives. I’ve had people say to me “agriculture just isn’t important anymore.” I always reply, “Well, no.... not unless you eat.” Then I launch from there.

Of course agriculture is important today. Agriculture is vital to our very survival. As long as people eat, agriculture is important.

I work with someone who has a statewide billboard series for agriculture developed in her mind. One billboard would show a steak sizzling on the grill. Tagline copy would read: “You’re welcome.” It would be signed, “Nebraska farmers.” A second

billboard would show "hands" holding a loaf of bread, fresh from the oven. Tagline copy: "You're welcome. Nebraska farmers." A third would show a family sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner, the table laden with a bounty of food. Tagline copy: "You're welcome. Nebraska farmers."

There are more in her series, just as there are many more ideas of what can be done to increase knowledge of the importance of agriculture in individual's lives – many, many, many more. The thing is, we need to be getting these messages of the importance of agriculture out continually. We need to not be waiting for someone else to do it. We – all of us – need to be working-together to tell the proud story of the importance of agriculture in everyone's life. When is the last time you told that story to someone who didn't already know it?

Another area in which we need your partnership is in encouraging young-people to enter careers in agriculture and natural resources. There are any number of important, vital, well-paying careers available to students who study with us. We have tremendous teachers, and a wonderful knowledge base to share. Yet new enrollments in our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and at the Nebraska College of

Technical Agriculture at Curtis are down. We must turn this around. We really must, for many reasons, one of which is that there are people who would make the determination that if enrollments are down in various majors, the importance of those majors has diminished. We cannot have that said about agriculture in Nebraska. We really can't. We need your help in turning this around.

The word agriculture in the Institute covers everything from the farm-gate to the restaurant-plate. Careers in agribusiness, agricultural economics, journalism, food science and technology, fisheries and wildlife, water science, etc., etc., etc. are found here. We provide a positive, caring atmosphere in which students can learn, and what they learn here can springboard them to any-number of worthwhile careers. If you know students who are interested in science, please tell us. Science is the basis of the work we do, and many students with science interests may not know of the exciting work they could do here. If you know students interested in careers in agriculture, natural resources, public policy, family and consumer sciences, please tell us. We want to contact these young people. We want to encourage them to grow with us. We welcome your encouraging-

young people to pursue careers in food, families, natural resources, and community development. The need is great, and so are the rewards.

How else can we work together? Please – give us your best advice. Tell us when you think we're right – and when you think we're wrong. Reasoned discussion is the hallmark of a great university, and while at times we may need to agree[^] to disagree[^], discussion helps us make our thinking clearer and better define[^] "the reasons" we do what we do.

Support candidates for public office who are interested in agriculture and its future in this agricultural state. And never pass up the opportunity to tell people about the value of agriculture, and how a safe, abundant, affordable supply of food is a Nebraska priority.

I work with someone who often says hands are not made for wringing; hands are made for doing. Working together, we can accomplish much of what needs to be done to benefit both agricultural producers and consumers, our communities, state, nation, and, yes, our world. I truly believe that. But we have to get to it. We have to stay at it. This is long-term[^] "education"[^] we're talking about. And it matters.

I'd like to end my talk today with one more short story. It seems one day a first grade teacher was reading the story of Chicken Little to her class. When she came to the part where Chicken Little tries to warn the farmer that "the sky is falling, the sky is falling," she paused for dramatic effect and asked her pupils, "And what do you think the farmer said to that?"

One little girl waved her hand excitedly and replied, "Holy cow! A talking chicken!"

The teacher started to cough and couldn't go on for nearly 10 minutes. Neither can I. My time is up. Thank you for the pleasure of being with you here today. Thank you.