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Celebrating Nebraska Agriculture, a Powerhouse of an Industry

by Sherry Vinton, Director, Nebraska Department of Agriculture

Agriculture is Nebraska's number one industry and the heart and soul of our state. Agriculture deserves recognition and celebration every day, especially during National Ag Week, March 17-23. As the Director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA), it's an honor and a privilege to serve the dedicated people of Nebraska's agricultural community.

Being Nebraska born and raised, my roots run deep within the agricultural community. My family and I ranch south of Whitman in the scenic Sandhills, giving me a firsthand understanding of the role agriculture plays in shaping Nebraska. I'm proud to be part of the extensive network of 45,000 farmers and ranchers who consistently deliver high-quality agricultural products year after year.

I always like to talk with people about Nebraska agriculture because it's interesting and exciting. Nebraska is the best place in the world to grow agriculture. Nebraska has abundant resources, the best land for growing crops and for grazing, plenty of water, wide open spaces, and ample feed for livestock.

Out of Nebraska's perfect resources for growing agriculture, one tops them all – our people. Nebraska farmers, ranchers and agribusinesses are true innovators, embracing precision agriculture, genetic advances, and modern equipment to produce more while using fewer resources. Their innovations ripple across the entire state, impacting all of us and emphasizing the interconnectedness of agriculture with our daily lives.

Farmers and ranchers are also dedicated and resilient. They face challenges and come back stronger. January proved to be a challenging start to this year when severe winter weather created significant challenges for everyone, including those who work in Nebraska's agriculture industry. During these severe winter weather emergencies, Nebraska livestock producers did what they do best. They fed, cared for, and kept close watch on their livestock.

For those producers unable to tend to their livestock and needing immediate assistance during the storms, NDA worked with local, state, and federal partners to prioritize their critical needs. We send our heartfelt thanks to Nebraskans for supporting Nebraska farmers, ranchers, and agribusinesses during winter emergencies and always.

Building on past challenges makes us stronger as we continue to look toward the future of Nebraska agriculture. Nebraska agriculture provides us with ample reasons to be grateful and to celebrate.

Notably, Nebraska is a powerhouse when it comes to agriculture, leading the nation in many important categories. In beef production, Nebraska's quality products are unmatched. We are:

- #1 in beef and veal exports (2023);
- #1 in commercial cattle slaughter (2023);
- #2 in all cattle on feed (Jan. 1, 2024); and
- #2 in all cattle and calves (Jan. 1, 2024).

While beef takes the spotlight, the Nebraska swine industry, with 3.8 million head and a sixth-ranking of all hogs and pigs on farms (Dec. 1, 2023), makes its mark.

Our state's poultry production has significantly increased in recent years, as well, with recent hatcheries and a world-class chicken processing operation in Fremont. Chicken eggs are on Nebraska's list of 10 leading commodities for 2022.

Nebraska's varied climate, elevation and soil help farmers grow a plentiful supply and variety of crops. In 2023, we ranked:

- #2 in the nation for proso millet production;
- #3 in the nation for corn for grain production;
- #4 for dry edible pea production;
- #5 in grain sorghum production; and
- #6 in soybean production.

Nebraska has a unique advantage, known as the "Golden Triangle," where the combination of corn, livestock and ethanol production provides significant opportunity to add value at every step along the production chain.

In 2023, Nebraska ranked number two in ethanol production with 24 operating facilities having the capacity to create more than 2.3 billion gallons of clean, reliable, renewable fuel. Approximately 35 percent of Nebraska's 2023 corn crop was used in ethanol production putting Nebraska corn and value-added agriculture in action.

Clearly our agriculture industry is worthy of celebration. Anything worthy of celebration is also worthy of preservation and education. Youth outreach in agriculture education is an important part of the work we do at NDA. With that in mind, I'd like to mention NDA's annual Nebraska Agricultural Youth Institute. NAYI is a good way for Nebraska high school juniors and seniors to learn more about Nebraska agriculture and the many careers available in the ag industry. Those who attend NAYI do so for free thanks to many generous sponsors. Applications are available online at nda.nebraska.gov/NAYI. Students need to apply by the April 15 deadline to secure a place at this year's NAYI.

As we celebrate National Ag Week, let us express our gratitude to the farmers, ranchers, and all the people working in the ag industry to provide us with the food, feed, and fuel we depend on every day. By recognizing the challenges, celebrating the successes, and advocating for the future of agriculture, we help make our agriculture sector even stronger.

Thank you for allowing me to shine a spotlight on Nebraska agriculture during this special week and always.