

National Agriculture Week
“Agriculture: Nebraska’s United Front”
By Greg Ibach, Director, Nebraska Department of Agriculture

National Ag Week is a time of celebration and reflection, as we recognize and pay tribute to all those who contribute to Nebraska’s number one industry.

This celebration generally has us all thinking about farmers and ranchers, as it should, but I am asking you during this National Ag Week to broaden your viewpoint. It is estimated that one in four jobs and a quarter of the economic activity in Nebraska is related to agriculture. Of course our farmers and ranchers provide the foundation for these figures, but to get to “one in four jobs” we must include all other business entities that are somehow tied to agriculture. From Gering to Omaha and Cody to Falls City, main streets are impacted by the prosperity or challenges of the agriculture economy. This makes National Ag Week important to all Nebraskans.

As a farmer and rancher myself, I have been pleased to see the ties between urban and rural Nebraska strengthen as the agricultural industry continues to expand into several areas. This connection is cultural as well as economic, as most urban Nebraskans are only one or two generations removed from a family farm.

From the economic standpoint, new businesses are starting up in Omaha and Lincoln and other cities across Nebraska that provide innovative technology, marketing, processing and infrastructure to support our ever-evolving family farms and ranches. Both public and private entities are offering careers in these areas, careers that pay well and provide incentive for our best students and employees to remain in the state. I am constantly amazed by the number of companies that are either looking to locate in a Nebraska city or town or expand existing facilities. The Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership in our state’s largest city has actually developed a detailed strategy to take advantage of this trend and provide a path for companies to become a part of our state’s thriving agribusiness sector.

From a cultural standpoint, the connection between our urban and rural citizens is growing stronger, as agriculturalists are opening their farms and ranches to tell the story of the methods they employ to produce the crops and livestock that become food for our neighbors, here and around the world. Consumers want to know more about how their food arrives at their table, and farmers and ranchers are eager to share the story.

One example of this is the dramatic growth of farmers markets across state, with more than 100 markets providing venues for direct communication between consumers and farmers. On a broader scale, farmers and ranchers are widely using social media, broadcasting snippets of real life on the farm, often highlighting livestock care and environmental stewardship practices. They are even taking their message to international audiences, sharing their stories through personal visits to overseas markets, through videos and by hosting foreign consumers and food processors right here in Nebraska.

This interconnectedness means we all should care about the fact that currently our farmers and ranchers are facing a significant downturn in the prices they receive for their products. This reduction in profitability has resulted, and will continue to result, in economic impacts across our state. It is part of the reason our state is facing a budget shortfall over the next two years.

Under Governor Pete Ricketts’ leadership, we are working to further diversify, and add value to, our agriculture sector, a move that we hope will smooth out income peaks and valleys in the overall market. The state Departments of Agriculture and Economic Development, along with industry partners, are working to add more livestock production to enhance our row crop farms and searching for ways to add

value to commodity production through recruiting additional food processing and bioscience companies to Nebraska. I am optimistic about the opportunity to Grow Nebraska through these types of development efforts.

I also am optimistic about the future for our farmers and ranchers. We will bounce back from the current downturn, and traditional production agriculture will continue to be a main staple in Nebraska, as it has been since the frontier days of the mid-1800s.

Agriculture truly is the lifestyle that unites us all. I hope you will join me in celebrating National Ag Week in Nebraska.