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(Editor's note: This story is accompanied by two sidebars, one that compiles key quotes from the report and one that provides key points made by the report.)

Report: Land-grant Universities Key to Nation's Future in 'Biocentury'

LINCOLN, Neb. – Agriculture and agricultural sciences are critical to the economic future of the United States, and public investment in land-grant universities is essential if they are to remain “on the frontline of sustaining and securing America’s leadership and competitiveness” in these fields in the 21st century, according to a new report.

The report, titled “Power and Promise: Agbioscience in the North Central United States,” was prepared for a coalition of 12 land-grant universities, including the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, by Battelle Technology Partnership Practice and BioDimensions.

Ronnie Green, University of Nebraska vice president and Harlan vice chancellor of the university’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the report confirms what many Nebraskans already know about their university and the future, but it contains critical messages for policy makers and leaders across the nation.

“Production of safe, plentiful food and bioproducts in an environmentally sustainable way is, quite simply, the most important work we face as a nation,” Green said. “Just as our land-grant universities have been leaders in agricultural and natural resources research, teaching and outreach throughout our history, we must accelerate our efforts to meet the new challenges of this century.

“We are incredibly well-positioned to do so at the University of Nebraska with our focus on food, fuel, water and rural communities,” Green added, “but public investment in this work is critical. This report helps make the case that this is central to guaranteeing the United States’ continued leadership in an increasingly competitive world.”

Two other leaders in Nebraska agriculture echoed those comments.

“This is a very interesting and challenging report and indicates exciting times are ahead for agriculture and bioscience. Land grant universities need to be prepared and

will be prepared,” said Roger Wehrbein of Plattsmouth, producer, former state senator and longtime member of the Ag Builders of Nebraska.

Greg Ibach, director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, said, “The University of Nebraska’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in developing vital technology, genetics and practices for agricultural interests here and around the world. In order to feed and fuel future generations, we must continue to support the development and implementation of cutting edge research and extension programming.”

The 107-page report lays out what’s at stake: The 12-state North Central region – from Nebraska north to South Dakota and east to Ohio – has a \$125 billion, 2.4 million job agricultural industry. The region contains 37 percent of U.S. farmland and produces 45 percent of U.S. agricultural exports, including 83 percent of soybeans and products exports; 85 percent of feed grains and products exports; 61 percent of wheat and products exports; 60 percent of live animals and meat exports.

But the challenges in what the report terms the “Biocentury” are daunting.

“Today’s global challenges and opportunities have grown in number, placing even greater demands on modern agriculture to address worldwide food security, while at the same time advancing American interest in renewable energy, food safety, human health, natural resource sustainability, and global economic competitiveness,” the report said.

“Meeting the demands of a growing population, for more and better food, and the demand for the fiber, fuels and materials required as inputs for economic growth, is made all the more difficult by the pressing need to do so while reducing environmental impacts and global climate change associated with human economic activity,” the report adds.

The report notes that land-grant universities are by definition “leveraged for the good of agricultural producers, industry and society through the operations of a purpose-built extension system ... It is America’s land-grant universities that uniquely engage across the full-spectrum of agbioscience – from the most basic scientific enquiry through to the practical services in support of producers, manufacturers and society provided via extension services.”

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, the report warns, other nations are staking claims as leaders and innovators in these areas. Countries in Europe, as well as India, China and Korea are well positioned to challenge America's preeminence.

"We have a system at risk – a system in which the U.S. currently has a leading position and tremendous potential opportunities, but one that can be rapidly eroded by foreign competitors if the U.S. fails to appropriately invest," the report said. "Sustaining and protecting current production, while realizing the potential of exciting new economic opportunities, require investment in the fundamental scientific research and translational support mechanisms contained within land-grant agricultural experiment stations and extension services."

"Realizing this promising future ... depends on ongoing public and governmental support for the land-grant mission and the provision of required financial resources to enable the continued work of experiment stations and extension services," the report said.

In addition to UNL, the report was prepared for Iowa State, Kansas State, Michigan State, North Dakota State, Ohio State, Purdue and South Dakota State universities and the Universities of Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin.

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