

Conferences that bring producers together with organizations that support them provide an opportunity for understanding, said a University of Nebraska–Lincoln college dean, speaking at the Nebraska Grazing Conference in Kearney.

Right now, according to the latest data, 46 percent of the state is rangeland, four percent is pasture and about seven percent is hay and silage, said Steve Waller, dean of UNL's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. Since about 57 percent of the state is involved in a forage-based livestock system, understanding the real world problems and issues facing livestock producers is critically important.

Not only does UNL strive to serve current producers, it also works to prepare for the future through research and teaching.

"We want to be sure we have professionals who are prepared to help producers of the future," Waller said.

Two forward-looking new programs seek to provide that future leadership, the Grazing Livestock Systems Major and the Beef Industry Scholars Program. The scholars program is a joint effort with the beef industry that provides experiential learning for students, so it's a seamless transition when they move into the industry.

Waller said that UNL's extension program is a model nationally. Nebraska has the highest 4-H enrollment per capital of any state in the nation.

"E-extension is the new way to deliver information nationally and it's housed in Lincoln," he said. "Some of the best sites, the beef site, for example, are done in Lincoln."

He said that UNL is viewed as very progressive and client-sensitive, citing work at the Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory. He expects that producers will soon be able to use DNA markers for replacement heifer selection.

"I think that some of this speaks to the sophistication of livestock production and how rigorous the science has to be to keep up with the changes in the industry," Waller said.

In fact, research in agriculture and natural resources at UNL ranks ninth in the nation over a ten-year average. This measures the ability of UNL scientists to do cutting edge, futuristic research. UNL is relatively small compared to many of the land grant institutions with which it competes.

The conference was exceptional, Waller said, because a large number of young people attended.

"I think it's reassuring for the industry to see there is a new generation that's passionate about livestock. That, to me, is uplifting," he said.

Waller said that UNL as a whole is the number one public institution in the U.S. in terms of popularity. That means that students who apply to UNL are very likely to come to UNL. Two private institutions rank ahead of Nebraska, he said. They are Harvard and Brigham Young.

"That is an amazing testimony to the commitment the students and the state have to this university," Waller said.