

By Benjamin Welch

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If anyone can make a prediction about the future of farming in Nebraska and the United States, it's the secretary of agriculture.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln got a quadruple opinion when it hosted former U.S. Secretaries of Agriculture John Block, Dan Glickman, Mike Johanns and Clayton Yeutter Friday at the Lied Center.

The secretaries kicked off the 2012-13 Heuermann Lecture Series with discussion on the Morrill Act, which celebrates its 150th anniversary, the agricultural outlook and supporting the world's growing population.

"We've done a wonderful job with moving forward with research and education," said Block, who served with Ronald Reagan from 1981-85. "We've managed to feed the United States and countries around the world."

It's not enough, though, Block said. He stressed the benefits of the Morrill Act's legacy, which created land-grant universities in 1862, made education more affordable and stressed disciplines in agriculture, home economics, mechanical arts and other then-practical professions.

"But we've got to continue to do this," Block said. "You don't do it unless you continue to focus on research and looking ahead. I don't think we're paying enough attention to research today."

Despite the drought and climate change, the former secretaries observed how Nebraskans are still in a prosperous period. Farm income has never been higher. About a third of the state's production is shipped to other nations and 30 percent of Nebraska's GDP comes from agriculture.

Locally, 25 percent of Nebraskans are involved in agriculture, considerably higher than the national average of 15 to 18 percent.

However, one resource faces scarcity that is essential to growing crops: water.

"Water is the oil of the next century," Glickman said, who served as secretary from 1995-2001.

Block pointed out that genetic engineering has created crops requiring less water, and Nebraskan Johanns, who served from '05-'07, said the state must take advantage of being on top of the Ogallala Aquifer.

Other hot topics among the panelists included livestock, organic food, women, farm bills and ethanol.

"There is no reason why we shouldn't have a guest worker program," said Yeutter, who grew up in Eustis and served as agriculture secretary from 1989-91.

Block said immigrants, whether legal or not, were necessary to take the jobs Americans didn't want to pick berries or milk cows. Johanns said while most Americans have no problem with legal immigration, reform must be created to allow all to pursue prosperity freely.