

Recently I spoke about agricultural entrepreneurship and the best traditions of farm life at the Rural Advantage/Healthy Farms Conference, which is sponsored annually by the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.

Despite the cold, snowy weather, the conference was well-attended. More than 150 producers and food entrepreneurs from across the state came to Lincoln to participate in sessions ranging from “Value Added Beef Cuts” and “Grassland Management Strategies” to “Commercial Wind Power” and “Hops as a Sustainable Crop for Nebraska.”

I took this occasion to thank the farmers and producers attending for their work. I noted that farm life is not easy. Although many people today are attracted to idyllic and romantic concepts of agriculture, as evidenced in the popularity of the Facebook game “Farmville,” running a farm operation is hard work.

Farm life is not Farmville. There’s bad weather, which is never in short supply, mechanical failures, and broken fences. There are calves born, and not on their own, at 3 am. There’s much more that can go wrong, and a lot of times, it does.

But it is rewarding and important work. Our farmers are stewards of the land and caretakers of animals, and they draw forth from the wonders of Creation nourishment for their fellow man. They are also businessmen and women, providing wholesome goods to consumers and sustaining family-based operations. This, in the view of most, is a harmonious livelihood and noble calling. Our founding fathers recognized agriculture’s profound importance to the nation. Thomas Jefferson said: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands.”

Agricultural life helps form the character of our state. The values of hard work, family life, neighbor helping neighbor, and personal responsibility are found most profoundly on the family farm. These values, along with the relatively stable agricultural economy and Nebraskans’ common sense in making fiscal decisions, have helped Nebraska generally maintain economic health, in stark contrast to many other places in the country suffering significantly from the national economic downturn.

While there are many challenges in agriculture today, I also see many opportunities. More young people are returning to agriculture – the University of Nebraska agricultural colleges have experienced record enrollments in recent years. Exciting forms of agricultural entrepreneurship, such as direct to consumer marketing and the growth of local and regional food systems, are emerging rapidly. Right now, only about 7 percent of local food dollars stay in the community. That number, by comparison, was 40 percent in 1910.

More and more people today are taking interest in where their food comes from and how it is raised. I told the participants at the Healthy Farms Conference that this presents great opportunity for Nebraska agriculture, where we have abundant natural resources, innovative

and responsible farmers and producers, and a population with a strong connection to agricultural life.

As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, and ranking minority member of the Nutrition Subcommittee, I am optimistic for agriculture's future. Our system of production agriculture, which supports our economic security and helps feed the world, is complemented by forms of agricultural entrepreneurship that provide new income opportunities for farmers, helping us all carry forward the best traditions of American agricultural life.