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May 16, 2014

## FIRST “AG CITING” FIELD TRIP DAY

Agriculture is a pillar of our Nebraska economy. Nebraska’s total net farm income in most years accounts for between 5% and 8% of the state’s total personal income. This grows greatly when you look at so many closely related jobs such as agricultural cooperatives, food processing firms, ag related manufacturing firms, and transportation companies that haul agricultural inputs and products. The Nebraska Farm Bureau reports that one out of every three jobs in Nebraska has direct ties to agriculture.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> at Tuxedo Park and Fairgrounds in Crete, Extension in Saline County with other partners started the first “Ag Citing Field Trip Day” for area 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Crete, Dorchester and Friend Elementary Schools and St. James Catholic School, Crete, all participated. Wilber-Clatonia had a school out day due to hosting a Class C District track meet, but a few 3<sup>rd</sup> graders did attend. I feel Ag Literacy is a very important issue starting at a young age. Youth need to understand and appreciate the value of agriculture in their daily lives.

Most of the kids that participated will never farm someday. However, many will land employment opportunities across the board in agriculture. Career choices include: agribusiness management and marketing, agricultural research and engineering, food science, processing and retailing, banking, ag education, landscape architecture, urban planning, bioenergy and other fields.

Agriculture is too important a topic to be taught only to the small percentage of students. There needs to be a basic understanding or some knowledge of food, fuel, and fiber production as well as processing. They need to know where their food comes from.

In my talk about crops, corn leads the way with Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois producing almost half of the nation’s corn crop. In Saline County in 2013, we raised a record 165 bushel per acre corn crop on 145,000 acres. The kids learned a bushel was about the size of a laundry basket and an acre was about the size of a football field. What an incredible achievement with last year’s corn crop.

So we talked about uses of corn for feed, food, fuel and fiber. Corn products and corn derivatives are now in over 4,000 items for consumers. In the A to Z corn chart, the kids all laughed when they learned corn was in disposable diapers. Ultra absorbent, eco-friendly diapers made with corn polylactic acid (PLA). PLA is produced at a plant near the Cargill wet mill corn refinery in Blair, Nebraska. The wet mill plant produces the dextrose used as a feedstock, but also turns out sweeteners, corn oil, and other corn-based products.

Currently produced from corn by NatureWorks, LLC., PLA is increasingly used in food and product packaging, clothing, carpeting and bedding materials, plastic component fabrication, and disposable food service items. PLA and the other biopolymers are able to substitute for fossil-fuel based plastics in many applications.

Biobased materials have the potential to produce fewer greenhouse gases, require less energy, and produce fewer toxic pollutants over their lifecycle than products made from fossil fuels. They may also be recyclable or composted (depending on the biomaterial and how it is produced).

The downside is it has caused the recycling industry problems, because they need to separate the standard “PET” plastic from PLA or corn plastic and most recycling technologies are unable to distinguish between the two types of plastic. Ag Literacy and Ag Science is becoming increasingly complex and more important than ever.

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