

\$20 million gift to support agriculture at UNL

Written by Gothenburg Times
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University of Nebraska alumnus and cattleman Paul F. Engler of Amarillo, TX, announced a \$20 million gift to support programs in agribusiness at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The gift from the Paul F. and Virginia J. Engler Foundation to the University of Nebraska Foundation's Campaign for Nebraska: Unlimited Possibilities will establish a permanently endowed fund to support the Paul F. Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The gift will provide new student scholarships and an endowed chair in agribusiness entrepreneurship. Among other ways the endowment will support ag entrepreneurship at the university include program support for student courses, a lectureship series, entrepreneurship training camps, internship placement assistance, student travel and more. It will also help create a venture capital fund to support student start up businesses.

Engler, 80, said he feels strongly about finding and mentoring kids who have the entrepreneur's "fire in the belly."

"I think about myself and my age, and I still have fire in my belly," Engler said. "We need to identify these boys and girls who have that fire in the belly when they are young and then when they come to the university, expose them to a curriculum that teaches risk—how to evaluate it and how to manage it—because if you do not take risk as an entrepreneur, you are not going to make it."

Engler also said he is concerned about the health of the country's rural communities.

"A lot of these rural communities are in tough shape economically," he said. "They have lower populations, and then services move out of the town. That is true not only of Nebraska but in other ag states as well. Statistics will show that in Nebraska we have a higher percent of the population living in small, rural towns than do other states. I want those communities to not only survive but to become more active."

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James B. Milliken, president of the University of Nebraska, said a recent study by Gallup indicates about 70% of young Nebraskans want to start their own business, which he said is also key to the state's future economic growth.

“Paul Engler’s gift taps into Nebraska’s greatest resource—our young people—and leverages the university’s greatest strength: an education that prepares them to be successful,” Milliken said. “Nebraska can be strong only if all regions prosper, which is why we should all celebrate this gift.”

UNL Chancellor Harvey Perlman said Engler’s generosity will provide tremendous new opportunities for countless students across the state as they experience the opportunities to build businesses for rural Nebraska.

“Paul’s vision is a unique, comprehensive program to support entrepreneurship and young Nebraskans,” Perlman said. “This program will be an important component of UNL’s efforts to serve rural Nebraska. Paul knows well and embodies the spirit of agricultural entrepreneurship, and his leadership and mentorship to the next generations will benefit this state more than anyone can imagine today.”

John Owens, NU vice president and Harlan vice chancellor for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, praised Engler’s desire to motivate Nebraskans and to empower them with education.

“Entrepreneurship is the driving force in the American rural economy, and Paul Engler has made a permanent investment in generations of the future,” Owens said.

Paul Engler was born in Stuart and took an interest in agriculture at age 13 when he helped manage the family’s small cattle herd and made his own cattle purchase. He studied animal sciences at the University of Nebraska and graduated in 1951.

He worked at various agriculture companies before starting a cattle operation in Texas in 1960. He started a Texas-based operation for Iowa Beef Packers in Amarillo, and formed his own

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company, Cactus Feeders, in 1975, which is now the world's largest privately owned cattle feeding operation with locations across northern Texas and southwest Kansas.

Engler married Virginia "Jinx" Engler in 1981 in Amarillo. Also a Nebraskan, Virginia grew up in Valentine and attended Valentine High School and the University of Nebraska. She died on Dec. 16, 1996, at age 64.