



Draft Agenda

Competitiveness Conversations Across America: *Nebraska — Leading the New Frontier in the Global Bioeconomy*

April 29-30, 2026

Durham Museum
Swanson Gallery
801 S 10th Street
Omaha, NE 68108

All Times Central

April 29

2:00 PM – Registration and Networking
2:30 PM – Competitiveness Conversation Programming
5:30 PM – President’s Reception
6:30 PM – President’s Dinner
8:30 PM – Adjourn

April 30

8:00 AM – Breakfast, Registration, and Networking
8:30 AM – Competitiveness Conversation Programming
12:30 PM – Lunch and keynote
1:15 PM – Competitiveness Conversation Programming
2:45 PM – Adjourn

Nebraska — Leading the New Frontier in the Global Bioeconomy

Wednesday, April 29, 2026

Durham Museum
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801 S 10th Street
Omaha, NE 68108

Day 1 Emcee: Dr. Chris Kratochvil, Vice President for External Relations, University of Nebraska System

2:00 PM REGISTRATION AT THE DURHAM MUSEUM

2:30 PM A VISION FOR NEBRASKA AND THE NATION: INNOVATION-DRIVEN GROWTH IN THE BIOECONOMY

These opening remarks will frame this Competitiveness Conversation by spotlighting Nebraska's statewide leadership in innovation, particularly within the bioeconomy, and connecting it to a broader national competitiveness strategy. The session will also introduce the Council on Competitiveness' vision for expanding the innovation economy to more communities across the country, while highlighting the organization's new national initiative to strengthen and scale the U.S. bioeconomy.

- Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System
- Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

2:45 PM KEYNOTE: THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE BIOECONOMY IMPERATIVE AND THE FUTURE OF U.S. COMPETITIVENESS

- **Introduction:** Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness
- Dr. Scott Hutchins, Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics (REE), United States Department of Agriculture

3:00 PM NEBRASKA — AT THE HEART OF INNOVATION AND U.S. COMPETITIVENESS

Nebraska has developed a distinctive model of competitiveness — one that combines innovation with the capacity to scale and deliver lasting economic impact. This panel will examine how the state’s leaders align business, infrastructure, and research to strengthen Nebraska’s competitiveness and what lessons the Nebraska model holds for the rest of the country.

Key Discussion Points:

1. Nebraska has a rare concentration of assets — from global agricultural scale and bioeconomy potential to central logistics and research excellence. Where do you see the state’s true sources of competitive advantage emerging—and which of these assets are most underleveraged today?
2. Where are the biggest bottlenecks holding Nebraska back from fully capitalizing on these advantages — whether in talent, capital, infrastructure, or policy — and what are the one or two highest-impact actions that could unlock the next phase of growth?
3. How is Nebraska stitching these assets together into a cohesive innovation ecosystem, and what is distinctive about its competitiveness model that other regions should be paying attention to right now?

- Mr. Jim Clifton, Chairman, Gallup
- Ms. Maureen Larsen, Director of Economic Development, State of Nebraska
- Mr. Derek Leathers, CEO, Werner
- Ms. Sandra Reding, President, Aksarben Foundation
- Mr. Hunter Traynor, Executive Vice President, Legislation and Policy, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- **Moderator:** Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System

3:45 PM OMAHA IN MOTION — BUILDING A CITY FOR THE NEXT ECONOMY

Omaha is emerging as a dynamic hub for innovation — drawing talent, investment, and economic growth. In this discussion, city, business, and civic leaders will explore the forces driving — *and constraining* — Omaha’s growth today, and how strategic investments, public-private collaboration, and civic leadership are positioning the city as both a great place to live and a major competitive player in the next economy.

Key Discussion Points:

1. Omaha has diversified economic foundations — from finance and logistics to innovation districts like the EDGE District — and is exploring new frontiers in technology, entrepreneurship, and business leadership. What makes Omaha’s competitiveness model distinctive today?
2. The Greater Omaha Chamber’s “Omaha COMPETES” agenda highlights the need to accelerate job creation and business investment relative to peer cities. In this context, what specific assets and initiatives can Omaha lean into today to close competitiveness gaps and turn recent momentum into sustained economic leadership?
3. When you look at Omaha five or 10 years from now, how will its competitive position differ from today, and why will more families, businesses, and capital want to come here?
 - Mr. Bruce Carpenter, Central Region Civic Director, HDR
 - Hon. John Ewing, Mayor, City of Omaha
 - Mr. Heath Mello, President and CEO, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
 - **Moderator:** Mr. Mike Cassling, Founder and Executive Chairman, CQuence Health; Chair, Aksarben Foundation

4:15 PM A NATIONAL ADVANTAGE — SCALING THE BIOECONOMY

Nebraska unites an unmatched combination of agricultural production, bioprocessing capacity, investment, research, talent, geographic centrality, and industry leadership — all helping to position the state as an engine for the U.S. bioeconomy. This panel will examine how Nebraska’s integrated ecosystem is

accelerating innovation from farm to market, enabling scale, and strengthening U.S. competitiveness across food, fuels, materials, and biomanufacturing.

Key Discussion Points:

1. Why is leading in the bioeconomy important for U.S. competitiveness, and what role must Nebraska play to ensure the United States leads globally?
2. Nebraska sits at the center of the most productive agricultural system in the world, with corn, cattle, ethanol, and emerging bioproducts all converging. How can Nebraska convert its unmatched feedstock into leadership across the full bioeconomy value chain?
3. What are the bottlenecks — in capital, regulation, infrastructure, or market demand — that most impede moving Nebraska's bioeconomy from regional strength to national scale? What might unleash Nebraska's full potential in the bioeconomy?

- Hon. John Bode, CEO and President, Corn Refiners Association
- Mr. Kelly Brunkhorst, Executive Director, Nebraska Corn Board
- Mr. Billy Hagstrom, CEO & Co-Founder, Bluestem Biosciences
- Mr. Ben Rhodes, Executive Director, Nebraska Ethanol Board
- Mr. Craig Uden, Nebraska Cattlemen President, Central Nebraska Cattleman & Feedlot Owner
- **Moderator:** Mr. Dan Hoffman, President, Invest Nebraska

5:00 PM BREAK/NETWORKING

5:30 PM PRESIDENT'S RECEPTION

6:30 PM COMPETITIVENESS CONVERSATION DINNER AND KEYNOTE

- **7:15 PM — Introduction:** Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System
- Gen. (Ret.) Anthony J. Cotton, Former Commander, United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM)

8:30 PM DAY 1 CONCLUDES

Thursday, April 30, 2026

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Day 2 Emcee: Dr. Chris Kratochvil, Vice President for External Relations, University of Nebraska System

8:00 AM BREAKFAST AND NETWORKING

8:30 AM KEYNOTE ADDRESS FROM NEBRASKA'S STATEHOUSE

- **Welcome and Introduction:** Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System
- The Hon. Joe Kelly, Lieutenant Governor, State of Nebraska

8:45 AM OPENING PERSPECTIVES — BIOECONOMY AT THE INTERSECTION OF PRODUCTIVITY, SECURITY, AND PROSPERITY

Building on Day 1's discussions of Nebraska's innovation economy and its central role in the bioeconomy, this opening session will set the stage for Day 2 by exploring how the bioeconomy intersects with national security, higher education, evolving innovation and finance models, and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence.

Key Discussion Points:

1. What did you learn yesterday about approaches and best practices in Nebraska you would recommend to drive national innovation?
2. Why is leading the global bioeconomy race, in particular, so critical to U.S. competitiveness? What benefits accrue to leaders in this space? What is at stake if the country does not act decisively in this global, bio innovation race?
3. Success in the bioeconomy depends on strategically aligning a complex lattice of talent, technology, investment, and infrastructure. What will it take to build the innovation ecosystem of the future — spanning research and

discovery, to manufacturing, and innovation in the marketplace?

- Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System
- Mr. Jim Stutelberg, CEO, Primient
- **Moderator:** Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

9:15 AM TECH TALK: STRENGTHENING DEFENSE AND RESILIENCE IN THE BIOECONOMY

- Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Paul Friedrichs, Former Deputy Assistant to the President and Former Director of the White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness

9:25 AM SECURING THE FUTURE — NATIONAL DEFENSE, BIOSECURITY, AND THE BIOECONOMY

Panelists will examine biological risks and how emerging technologies, heightened vulnerabilities, and strategic partnerships are shaping the United States' approach to biosecurity and resilience. Discussions will focus on the imperative of safeguarding national interests while advancing economic growth — and explore strategies to achieve both.

Key Discussion Points:

1. What are today's underestimated biological risks that will shape future U.S. national security and resilience?
2. Many of the same technologies and supply chains underpin both the bioeconomy and national security. How can the United States develop a strategy that harnesses these dual-use technologies to advance economic competitiveness while safeguarding critical infrastructure and biosecurity — ensuring progress in one area does not compromise the other?
3. Securing the bioeconomy requires immediate alignment across government, industry, and research institutions. From a national security perspective, what are the most critical next steps the United States must take now — in workforce, infrastructure, partnerships, or regulatory frameworks — to strengthen resilience, deter threats, and maintain global leadership in biotechnology?

- Dr. Tiffany Heng-Moss, Vice Chancellor, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR), University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Dr. James Lawler, Associate Director of International Programs and Innovation, Global Center for Health Security
- Dr. Gina Ligon, Director, National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE)
- Dr. Marty Vanier, Director, National Agricultural Biosecurity Center, Associate Director, Biosecurity Research Institute, Kansas State University
- **Moderator:** Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Paul Friedrichs, Former Deputy Assistant to the President and Former Director of the White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness

10:10 AM COMMERCIALIZING BIOECONOMY INNOVATION THROUGH UNIVERSITIES AND NATIONAL LABS

Leaders from academia, industry, and the U.S. Department of Energy national laboratories will share insights, challenges, and opportunities for translating research into commercial solutions, fostering partnerships, and preparing the next generation of innovators.

Key Discussion Points:

1. What does it take to move a bioeconomy discovery from promising research to a commercially deployable product — and where do you most often see the process stall?
 2. Are current university technology transfer structures and venture funding models equipped to handle the capital intensity and long development timelines inherent in bioeconomy innovation? How might these models need to evolve?
 3. What partnerships and skillsets are needed today to ensure the next generation of innovators can successfully bridge the lab-to-market gap in bioeconomy commercialization?
- Dr. Kirk Dombrowski, Vice President of Research and Economic Development, University of Vermont
 - Dr. Peter Dorhout, Vice President for Research, Iowa State University
 - Mr. Steve Marshall, Vice President, Process Innovation, Cargill

- Dr. Todd Pray, Chief Strategic Partnerships Officer, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory
- **Moderator:** Dr. Ken Bayles, Vice Chancellor for Research, University of Nebraska Medical Center

10:55 AM BREAK

11:10 AM LIGHTNING ROUNDS: BIG IDEAS IN THE BIOECONOMY

Three rapid-fire talks spotlighting breakthrough ideas to unleash the bioeconomy. Fast-paced, forward-looking, and built to spark what's next.

- **11:10 AM** — Ms. Veronica Breckenridge, Managing Partner, First Bight Ventures
- **11:20 AM** — Dr. Todd Pester, Vice President, Corteva Agriscience
- **11:30 AM** — Mr. Mark Warner, Co-Founder and Chief Technology Officer, Liberation Bioindustries

11:40 AM TECH TALK: INSIGHTS INTO CONSUMER DEMAND FOR BIO-BASED GOODS

- Mr. Dan Foy, Principal, Global Analytics, Gallup

11:55 AM NO DEMAND, NO BIOECONOMY: WHY CONSUMERS HOLD THE KEY AND WHY THEY SHOULD CARE

For all the investment in biomanufacturing and innovation, the bioeconomy will not reach scale without strong market demand. This conversation focuses on the often-overlooked demand side — how consumers, corporate buyers, and public procurement can create the conditions for growth. Panelists will discuss strategies to build trust in biobased products, align price and performance with consumer expectations, and translate scientific advances into everyday value that makes people open their wallets.

Key Discussion Points

1. Your organizations bring bio-based innovation to market — but adoption ultimately depends on whether customers see clear value. What has moved the needle in converting interest into demand — *price, performance,*

sustainability...something else? — and where have you seen the biggest gaps between what innovators assume and what customers will buy?

2. In your experience, what has been most effective in helping customers — whether farmers, manufacturers, or consumers — adopt bio-based products? And where do you still see skepticism or friction slowing uptake?
3. Demand for the bioeconomy often depends on alignment across the value chain — from producers to processors to major buyers. What role do partnerships, large corporate purchasers, or procurement commitments and demand signals play in creating market pull? And what would it take to move from niche adoption to truly scaled demand?
 - Mr. Carlos A. Cabrera, Executive Chairman, Genomatica
 - Ms. Lee Ellen Drechsler, Senior Vice President, Corporate R&D, The Procter & Gamble Company
 - Dr. Jason Thomas, CEO and Founder, The Pennycress Company
 - **Moderator:** Dr. Jonathan “Jon” McIntyre, Founding Partner, Nodl Advisors; Distinguished Fellow, Council on Competitiveness

12:30 PM LUNCH & LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

- **1:00 PM:** The Hon. Neal Robbins, Deputy Under Secretary, Rural Development, United States Department of Agriculture

1:15 PM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEADING THE BIOECONOMY RACE

This session will explore global trends, innovations, and strategies shaping the bioeconomy, highlighting lessons for U.S. leadership and Nebraska’s role in the evolving global ecosystem.

Key Discussion Points

1. Countries from within the EU, to Brazil, to China are investing heavily in the bioeconomy with coordinated national strategies and state-directed capital. What does the global competitive landscape look like today, and what risks does the United States face if it does not match the urgency of its most significant competitors?
2. In a global context, where do you see the greatest opportunity to strengthen U.S. competitiveness in the bioeconomy — leading in standards, optimizing

regulatory frameworks, building resilient supply chains through international partnerships, or something else entirely?

3. The Midwest exports agricultural commodities at massive scale. What would it take to shift from exporting raw feedstocks to exporting finished bio-based products — and what is the first concrete step toward that transition?
 - Mr. Rob Hanson, Co-Founder and CEO, Monolith Materials
 - Mr. Joe Sanders, Executive Director, Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute, University of Nebraska
 - Mr. Gustavo Sergi, CEO, Sustainea
 - **Moderator:** Mr. Gregory Jaffe, President, Jaffe Policy Consulting and Ambassador, World Bioeconomy Association

1:45 PM HOW CONVERGING NEXT-GENERATION TECHNOLOGIES ARE USHERING IN A NEW ERA OF BIO INNOVATION

Artificial intelligence is transforming the bioeconomy and driving breakthroughs in personalized medicine, transportation, sustainable agriculture, climate solutions, and more. This panel brings together leaders from industry, academia, and government to explore how AI is accelerating innovation and shaping the future of the bioeconomy.

Key Discussion Points:

1. The convergence of platform technologies, from supercomputing to AI to quantum to bio, is driving innovation across agriculture, personalized medicine, advanced materials, manufacturing processes, etc. Which areas of the bioeconomy are poised to benefit most immediately from this convergence?
2. What main barriers prevent industry, academia, national laboratories, and government from translating the power of converging platform technologies into scalable, real-world applications, and how can these sectors collaborate to accelerate that scale-up?
3. How does the United States responsibly deploy AI and bio innovations to maintain global competitiveness, while addressing critical issues like ethics, data governance, and workforce development?

- Dr. Sarah Glaven, Visiting Fellow at Princeton University's Andlinger Center and former Principal Assistant Director for Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy
- Mr. Edward Shenderovich, CEO, Roebbing
- Dr. Mark Stone, Professor of Biological Systems Engineering and Director of the PRAIRIE Initiative, College of Engineering, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- **Moderator:** Dr. Santosh Pitla, Professor of Biological Systems Engineering, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Co-Director of the AI Institute, University of Nebraska System

2:30 PM REFLECTION ON THE CONVERSATION — SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. BIOECONOMY

In this closing conversation, the Cohosts from the Nebraska Competitiveness Conversation will reflect on insights from the day's discussions and explore the emerging opportunities for Nebraska and the Council's bioeconomy initiatives. The session will highlight priorities for innovation, collaboration, and investment, setting the stage for the next phase of advancing Nebraska's innovation economy and the U.S. bioeconomy.

Key Discussion Points:

1. Reflecting on the Conversations, what is your takeaway as the most critical strategic actions that can accelerate the growth of Nebraska's and the broader U.S. bioeconomy, particularly in areas such as advanced biomanufacturing, regulatory reform, workforce development, and supply chain resilience?
2. Looking ahead to 2030, what does a "successful" U.S. bioeconomy look like in terms of economic impact, technological leadership, and the development of regional innovation hubs? And what steps should leaders at all levels take to translate the insights from this Competitiveness Conversation into measurable progress?
3. How can the Council, through its bioeconomy initiative under the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers, sustain momentum and accountability to help achieve these goals?

- Dr. Jeffrey P. Gold, President, University of Nebraska System
- Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

2:45 PM ADJOURN