

**Chuck Hassebrook
Center for Rural Affairs
Narrator**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

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**Chuck Hassebrook—CH
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: I'm interviewing with Chuck Hassebrook, who for 37 years was a part of the Center for Rural Affairs, an important player at the Center for Rural Affairs, ultimately the executive director there for many years, and also a very important figure in the formation of the NSAC and its predecessor groups. And so I wanted to have you talk about, first of all, how you got interested in sustainable agriculture, and then how you've made your connection to ultimately being an employee working with Marty Strange, the founder of the Center for Rural Affairs, and talk a bit about that part of your background.

CH: Yeah, well I grew up on a modest size family farm, hog and dairy farm in northeast Nebraska. And, you know, it was not uncommon for the topic around the kitchen table with my dad to be the growing pressure on family farms, smaller farms being squeezed out of business. So, I grew up with that kind of issue, that kind of concern in my blood. And, when I was still at home working on the farm, my older brother came home from college—I was actually raising hogs at the time to pay my way through college. He came home with a report entitled *Who Will Sit Up With the Corporate Sow?* The work was done by Marty Strange and Donna Austin primarily, and Lynn Spivak and published by the Center for Rural Affairs. Two years later I was working for the center and ultimately spent 37 years there on the staff, so I cut my teeth on family farm issues. One of the first things I did was Marty turned me loose to update that report, *Who Will Sit Up With the Corporate Sow?* And we did that in 1979. It showed a dramatic increase in corporate hog production, just in the five years since that report was first published in 1974. And the other thing we identified, really, in that report was how much the growth in corporate hog production was subsidized by federal policy, both credit programs that were financing the growth in corporate hog production, but also tax subsidies, tax shelters, special tax breaks that were theoretically supposed to help farmers, but in reality were giving a competitive advantage to large operations, to investor-owned corporate operations, that they were using to gain a competitive advantage in the hog industry and really drive out smaller operations. And so Marty kind of turned me loose on that and we first succeeded in getting an end to Small Business Administration financing very large corporate hog operations. And then we went after some of the tax subsidies, which was a battle a lot of people thought was unwinnable, but we went about it very deliberately. We started going out to farm groups that supported these special tax breaks for farmers, to get them on our side. And we won—we reversed the positions and won the support of state pork producers associations, of course Farmer's Unions, and National Farmers Organization, many organizations. Grange, and even

some state Farm Bureau chapters came to support our position, and then when President Reagan came up with his tax reform in 1986, we ultimately won some major reforms in that. After that I looked at the next big issue and I saw biotechnology as being what I thought was going to be one of the most important issues to family farming because biotechnology was a powerful new way of shaping new life forms, a powerful new form of research. And it was my contention that we need to understand it, and find a way that we could use biotechnology in ways that strengthen family farms and support it and care for the land, as opposed to simply driving us in the direction of a few big farms and farmers getting a smaller and smaller share of the profit in the food system. And so, it was a controversial approach. There were a lot of folks in sustainable agriculture who were adamantly opposed to biotechnology, but I believed we needed to understand it and use it to get agriculture to where we wanted to go. And that's what brought me into the whole field of sustainable agriculture because I started out from the perspective: let's find a way to focus on research that develops new knowledge--in some cases new genetics--that will enable farmers to use more of their management and skills to cut input cost, to add value to their production, and capture a bigger share of the profit in the food system. And that's really what got me into sustainable agriculture and ultimately led to formation of the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SAWG). Kind of indirectly I pulled together a meeting in Omaha to pick the brains of people in sustainable agriculture about what kinds of research would strengthen family farms, and at the end of that meeting you, Ron Kroese, said, "Well let's have another meeting to talk about how we fix the agricultural policies that penalize farmers who are good stewards of the environment, and out of that came the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

(5 minute: 00 seconds)

RK: We had other issues that were priorities for the Center for Rural Affairs and for some of the groups in the Midwest SAWG that you guys really took the lead on.

CH: Well, and in those years we increasingly focused on how federal agricultural policy, conservation policy, research policy, what have you, we're really encouraging the outcomes that we really didn't want in agriculture. At that time particularly commodity programs, I think, penalized many of the farmers who were the best environmental stewards. I remember a farmer near us in Thurston County--he was trying to compete to cash rent land against people who would grow purely row crops and keep up their bases on the steepest hillsides. He wouldn't do that because he was a committed conservationist. In the end he had to leave farming because he simply could not compete in the rental market as long as people were being subsidized to grow crops on land that ensured that there was going to be a very high rate of soil erosion, so, and plus, that, if you rotate it, you lost corn base, you lost payment. And so public policy encouraged a lot of the wrong things. Likewise with agricultural research, the focus and research really was largely how to develop more new products, so that farmers could spend more money to farm bigger. And the result of that was that a larger and larger share of the profit in the food system was being captured by the companies and sold things to farmers. And less and less was being captured by farmers. And we wanted to see research that really helped develop new knowledge that favored and enabled farmers to use more of their management and skills in the field and in the barn, so that they could add more value

themselves with their management, reduce input, add value to their production in ways that enabled them to capture a bigger share of the farm profits. So the Center became increasingly focused in those years on agricultural conservation policy and agricultural research policy, and commodity programs. So, in each of those areas we were working to come up with an agenda to redirect the federal dollars in agricultural research at developing farming systems that really strengthened family farming as well as protected the land. And we became much more focused on--and this was very much the work of Kristie Thorp--was focused on developing new conservation policies that really rewarded the best stewards and got more bang for the buck out of our conservation dollars. And we worked very hard to develop options for commodity programs that, instead of penalizing farmers for being good stewards, rewarded them. And for, frankly, redirecting farm program benefits to support midsize family farms, instead of just subsidizing the biggest farms that run their neighbors off the land by bidding land away from them.

(8:00)

RK: Well, and it seems to me--and I'd like you to talk a little bit about it--what you described was certainly true for Nebraska or eastern Nebraska, but what you'd found was these problems were very close to the same throughout much of at least the Midwest, if not most of the country, right?

CH: Well, absolutely, I mean, you were experiencing in Minnesota exactly what we were experiencing in Nebraska, and I think others were experiencing in Colorado and Montana and in Kansas. And that's why--when you and I were so active in organizing the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and then the Coalition--that's why so many of the groups joined in because the issues we were talking about really resonated with people. And I give you a lot of credit because I was originally focused on agricultural research policy and brought some people together to talk about what kinds of research would really strengthen family farms, but at the end of the meeting you were the one that said, "Well, let's have another meeting and talk about what do we do with commodity programs that penalize farmers who practice good stewardship," and that's actually what led to the formation of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition ultimately.

RK: And returning to this research policy, I remember the speech and then I saw one of the papers Ferd sent around that was quoting you--or I think it was an article in the Des Moines Register... I'd like you to elaborate on your phrase about how research policy ultimately sets social policy or sets a social agenda. Talk more about that.

CH: Well, I talk about how agricultural research had become a form of rural social planning, because the decisions we made about where we put our research dollars ultimately shaped what technology became cost-effective for farmers, and when they put it to use it was going to shape agriculture, and shape life in the rural community. And if we continued to do as we were doing then - to focus on new technologies that reduced the farm share of the profit in the food system so that fewer people could produce the nation's food--we're going to lose our midsize family farms and our rural communities are going to become weaker and weaker. We said that

very clearly in the 1980s. Unfortunately, research continued to have that focus and we see what has happened--we've seen a dramatic reduction and loss of midsize farms and we see our rural communities losing population and weakening as a result.

Looking back on it, we set very big objectives. I mean, our goal was to broadly influence agriculture to make all of our farms more sustainable, to care for the soil and water, and to strengthen our midsize family farms and rural communities. Much of what we set out to do to change the entire system was blunted. I mean, we failed to put a cap on farm program payments, we failed to redirect agricultural research overall. But, I think what has happened, though, is that now at least there is, in federal policy, support for alternative approaches to agriculture, for sustainable agriculture approaches that do provide an opportunity for young people to get started with less capital, that do provide a way for farmers who aren't farming huge acreages to use more of their management to capture a bigger share of the food dollar. And so when I see, going forward in agriculture, I think the focus for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, one of our approaches needs to be to continue to find and support those areas, those places where there's opportunity for new people to get started in agriculture, to capture new higher value markets and make a living without having millions of dollars to invest.

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In a way, I think, when we started, what I didn't want was for sustainable agriculture to become just like another commodity--we'd get our little piece. I think we set out with the objective of changing the system so that family-sized farms could thrive generally. But, as I look back, I think our most positive impact was creating some programs that were there to support those sustainable farmers, so that we create an opening--maybe we didn't change the system--a lot of midsize family farms have been driven out since then. But, we've at least created some alternatives there, a place where those young people, those folks without a lot of capital can still get a foothold in agriculture.

I think one of the interesting things is how sustainable agriculture research and concepts are now influencing conventional agriculture. I visited with a farmer in northeast Nebraska not too long ago, who is a no-till farmer, you know, a very conventional no-till farmer. But as he became a no-till farmer he became very interested in soil health, and starting to see positive changes in his soil. And based on that, he became so intrigued by that, that he started adopting cover crops to further speed along that process of soil health and soil quality building. He began looking at what kinds of different crops he could add to his rotation. And so I think one of the things that is happening now is that all the work that was done to support sustainable agriculture is starting to also be of value and be of influence with very conventional farmers who certainly use chemicals, but are using those positive approaches that came out of sustainable agriculture to build soil and add some diversity in their farming operation.

RK: You triggered a thought I had about a farmer I talked to, a committed stewardship kind of farmer not long ago, and has been involved with cover crops for quite a while, but wanted to do more. And what he bemoans, and this was in southern Minnesota, is there hasn't been enough

research devoted to cover crops and the difficulty that farmers in more northerly colder climates are having, trying to use the cover crops that are available. He was thinking, you know, if we had 20 to 30 years of really good federally funded research--probably federally funded--on new varieties and really digging in deep on cover crops, we'd be better off. That's an example of the kind of things we need in our research.

CH: Well, and in fact the report I wrote in the late 1980s on biotechnologies said one of the places we had to focus was on developing cover crops that didn't dry out the soil. And of course, when we looked at it, I mean, from my standpoint and the Center's standpoint, we weren't just interested in organic agriculture, although we saw it as an important--as a good alternative, as a good thing to have there. But we were also looking at ways to help make all farms more viable as they took care of the land. And so we had talked early on about, maybe we can use biotechnology to breed better cover crops. And, you know, I think if you look back at the recommendations that came out of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in the early years, things like research more focused on strengthening midsize farms, more reward for stewardship practices, crop rotation, targeting farm program benefits to midsize farms, I'll tell you, if they'd been adopted in 1990, agriculture would look profoundly different today. We'd have many more family-sized farms on the land, we'd have a very efficient agriculture, and we'd have healthier communities.

RK: Yeah. Well switching tracks a little bit, but not much--thinking back over your intimate connection to NSAC and the groups that led up to NSAC over the years: what do you think are the one or two successes you're most proud of, as far as programs and policy recommendations that managed to get passed and now are out there on the landscape? What would you point to?

(16:19)

CH: Well, I you know, I wouldn't point to one that I did personally, but, you know, I think I'll say three things that just in general I'm proud to see that came out of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. One is just better conservation programs that really did a better job of rewarding farmers who do a good job in conservation. And now there is--well, we didn't reform agricultural research overall--at least we now have agricultural research programs that are focused on developing new knowledge that enable the farmers to capture a bigger share of the profit in the food system, cut costs, as they protect the land and water. And lastly, there are new programs like the Value-Added Grant Program that helped farmers develop new high-value markets so that farmers can--again, those who don't have millions of dollars to get started are able to start smaller, but make a better living by producing a product that consumers are willing to pay more for. So, I think there are all those sort of positive programs that reward stewardship, that create opportunity, and that create space for approaches to farming that are good for small farmers and the land. I'm proud that we got started.

RK: I feel the same way. It's very true. I want to note these areas where progress has been made, but we probably have at least as long a list of efforts that were attempted and things we knew should happen, and made a lot of sense to us, but didn't happen. So, now in light of those two successes and not-so successes, talk a little bit more about where you think NSAC should go in

the future. What are some policy priorities, and then how could they be implemented or put in place to try to really make them happen? How are we going to get there?

CH: Yeah. I think it's great that the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is working on crop insurance reform. I mean, I think right now we have a crop insurance policy that said if one corporation farmed the entire U.S., the federal government would subsidize them on every acre, about two-thirds the cost of their crop insurance. And I don't know anybody who really thinks that makes sense. I guess somebody must, but I don't think many people would. And I know most farmers don't. And so I think NSAC should continue to fight and maybe the day will come when Washington is ready to hear it, that we need to stop subsidizing huge farms that drive their neighbors out of business, that drive family-sized farms out of business. And I think NSAC needs to continue to do that. And at the same time, I think NSAC needs to continue all the work it's doing and build on it. That creates openings in agriculture for ordinary folks. To keep opening up new markets for people who want to farm on a modest scale, so that they can make a decent living without, again, having millions of dollars to invest. The programs that reward the right practices to protect the land and water. I think what I'm really saying is that NSAC needs to stay the course and keep up the fight. I mean, so much in policy is about being there year-in and year-out, and being persistent. And so, I can't offer any dramatic new directions for NSAC, but I can say they need to keep the course. One of the things that has been really important about NSAC was: while it certainly brings a perspective of concern for the environment, it's not an environmental organization as such. It has always been an organization with very strong farmer involvement, by design. The plan was the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition would only include groups that worked directly with farmers, so that we kept that farm voice in there, and I think it's absolutely essential that NSAC retain that, they keep bringing in those farm voices, and keep being that voice for the folks in agriculture sort of leading the way to new sustainable approaches to farming.

(20:54)

RK: Yeah, I think that's very true and I think also it's always been important to have those farmer voices in there, not only to lend credibility and authenticity to when you talk to policy-makers, but to really ground-truth and say, "Well, are these really good ideas or not?" Some of these folks are more willing to, maybe, try out a new program--be the innovators and then report on it and on what tweaks need to be made. That's going to be very important.

CH: Well, that's right. I mean, because there's a lot of ideas that sound great on paper, or in theory, but when you bring a farmer in who has to try to make those work on a real farm, that is a very important, as you put it, ground-truthing perspective that I think we absolutely have to have.

RK: Especially when you look at the way things work with the sort of "sausage making." By the time the rules get through being made--and so much of that happens more off to the side and not so much in the public eye and the press's eye--the rules often are not necessarily the best ones to reap the spirit of the programs. I think that's been a chronic problem, too.

CH: Well, that's right. And as the Center for Rural Affairs founder and my manager Marty Strange used to say, "You know, winning legislation is only half the battle. You've got to put in at least as much effort into getting it implemented right." And you know, I thought when he first said that, that was maybe a little bit over-exaggeration, but it may even be an understatement actually, in reality. I learned that was very true.

RK: And then even after that, you have to do things like we've been doing with the technical committees, making sure that you have farmers on these local committees, and overseeing where those dollars go once the programs and the rules are done. That they go where the spirit of the law intends them to go. So, it is a process all the way through.

CH: Yeah, and I think that's been a very important innovation that we now have these state technical committees with farmers and folks who are dealing with the conservation on the ground in real communities in our own states, actually involved in helping shape how they're implemented at the local level. You know, there's just a perspective that if everything is going to be decided by somebody who's sitting in the offices of USDA in Washington, they're just going to miss a lot. I don't care if they're well-intentioned, or if they're smart, they still can't really fully understand what's going to make the greatest positive impact, or what's going to cause a problem out in each different farm and each different community across the country. And so those state technical committees, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, helped put in place, to help guide the implementation of conservation programs at the state level and make them more responsive to farmers and local communities, I think, were really important.

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RK: I do, too. There's one last area I wanted to touch on that kind of builds on what we were talking about. While I think there's no denying that in the NSAC circles and more broadly, that we need to have this organization be there with farmers involved for the reasons you've just described. But at the same time, if we look now, there are fewer of these midsize farmers out there, and we're still hoping to achieve victories. It seems to me that an effort has to be made to reach out into the public deeper, educating and that sort of thing, so we can actually get more advocates who are not necessarily farmers, that are well-informed, that can take part. And I would like your reaction to that.

CH: Well, I think it's always been important about the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is that they did bring that farmer voice, but then they brought that farmer voice together with non-farmers to work together with folks who were concerned. Environmentalists, folks concerned about where their food came from. And bringing that coalition then was much more powerful than farmers themselves would have been. But I also think it helped inform those environmentalists and those food advocates so they better understood the implications of policy for farmers at the farm level, and it made them advocates for better policies that were more practical and more workable and ultimately more effective at the farm level.

RK: Yeah, I think so, too. And it cuts both ways--the farmers learn, too, from learning what the desires are and what are the motivations for people coming out of a more urban background,

and that's really important, too.

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CH: Absolutely. And I think, we get so polarized in this country sometimes where it's--in some people's minds--it's farmers against environmentalists. Well, I'll tell you, that's not a very good... the numbers on that approach don't line up very well for farmers. But it's also, you never get the best solutions when you just divide up and shoot at each other. You always get the best solutions when you get together and listen to each other and try to find win-win solutions. And I think that's so much of what the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition did. I mean, we created alternatives--ways of supporting good stewardship--but kinds of good policies that could be good for farmers and good for the environment as well. And that wouldn't have happened without having farmers at the table, but it wouldn't have happened without having non-farmers at the table, and conservationists at the table either.

RK: And if we stretch it out I think even a little further than that, now it's almost becoming farmers against foodies, you know. But increasingly the people who are really concerned about local health and food are realizing that there has to be that connection, and that the farmers are realizing that they need those people as advocates, too, and they need to come together to be smart with each other.

CH: Yeah, and I always think that, you know, there are some that would say that having people concerned about where their food comes from is a threat to farmers. I always think it's an opportunity, I mean, if they care about where their food comes from, first of all, I think we can make a very compelling case to them that they're better off if it comes from a family farm. And secondly, you know, that's going to mean, often times, that they're going to be willing to pay more for it if it's produced in ways they support, and that's not a threat, that's an opportunity. And that's actually where many of the new opportunities are coming in family farming is in--working with those consumers who care about where their food comes from and they're willing to pay a little more for something produced in ways that they support. That's a great opportunity for the little guys in rural America to get a foothold in agriculture.