

Denny Caneff
River Alliance of Wisconsin
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

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Denny Caneff—DC

Ron Kroese—RK

RK: It's August 17th, 2015. We're in Ron and Kimberley's back yard, and today we're talking with Denny Caneff, of the River Alliance of Wisconsin, who in the past was involved in some of the early meetings, in the Midwest particularly, of a group that then became a part of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. So, Denny, tell me about it, starting out with your own background, even as a kid growing up, what led you to have an interest in agriculture and sustainable agriculture. Give me some background.

DC: Sure. Yeah, funny you should mention as a kid, because I grew up in rural Minnesota, south of Hastings. My parents didn't farm, but a lot of relatives did, all the neighbors did. I worked on farms. So, leap to the mid-80s in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I was working for the Ag Press Service at the College of Ag. The Ag Press Service was the propaganda organ of the College of Agriculture. And we were in the middle of the "farm crisis", and they were doing a series of stories about the farm crisis. And it was amazing how much the academics blamed farmers for making bad decisions, and I thought this didn't seem right to me.

RK: And that was about mid-80s, early 80s?

DC: It was '85-'86, and Wisconsin was a little bit insulated from that because of the dairy. The dairy industry was still, at the time, quite strong, and so they weren't so dependent on grain farming, which had kind of collapsed across the rest of the Midwest because interest rates were high and the market fell through, and then people were stuck with these huge expensive loans. Anyway, there was this undercurrent with these academics that farmers made bad decisions. This just can't be. And then I happened to hear an interview on a public radio call-in show with a farmer named John Karr, who was this brilliant, well-spoken critic of what was going on in agriculture, especially about the university system he felt was disadvantaging small family farms to the benefit of what he called corporate agriculture, the industrialization of agriculture. And I just stopped the car and listened to him because it was so compelling, and I called him up and I said—I want to come talk to you—and it totally changed the direction of my academic work. And my master's thesis, which ended up being called *Technology Resistance on the Farm*, and, in fact, the term sustainable agriculture was just starting to be used. So, this is '86. And they refused to let me use it in the thesis. They said—that's not a term that's considered

academically sound, so I had to throw it out, I had to scrub the whole thing of the term. I think they let me refer to it once. Otherwise it would not have been serious research, I was told. So by then I'm getting really intrigued by all of this, and it turned out, at the same time, this farmer that I had talked to, John Karr, was a board member of the Wisconsin Rural Development Center, which was Wisconsin's version of the many groups that popped up around the Midwest in that time to sort of respond to the farm crisis. And they had a project and would I be interested in carrying out this project—and it was a classic family farm vs. the industrial mentality about farming—of a radiologist who had bought up 30 small dairy farms and then turned them into corn and bean deserts, took out the grass waterways, took out the wood lots, rented out the houses to not-great renters, let the out-buildings go to hell. So they were...it was a study and microcosm of the collapse that was coming, and it was another sort of an awakening for me, and it really got me engaged in what was going on. To me it was ... the socioeconomic aspect of it was the most interesting, the political aspect. The agronomic piece was also of interest to people of low-input farming, organic farming and so forth. And that was all a nice alternative to what was going on, but I really enjoyed understanding the power relationships of how agriculture worked and who was disadvantaged, and how they were, and what public institutions had to do with that. Of course, farm policy and so forth. So, then I came to work in Saint Paul for the infamous Bill Norris creation, Midwest Technology Development Institute, where you rescued me, Ron! [laughs] And, you know, introduced me to the people in Minnesota. And I think the first Sustainable Ag Working Group meeting, which was actually before we had a name, I think, in early 1988. And I was still working for that institute. So, that brings me up to that spot in time. But, like I said, the political and socioeconomic underpinnings of what was going on in rural America and rural Wisconsin, rural Minnesota, was so interesting. And like I say, the public institutions and their role in either fostering that or counteracting it was, I think, what we were all about, those groups coming together that felt like we had a higher expectation of public institutions than to either sit by idly, or in fact actively helped bring down family farming.

RK: Right, and it was also private institutions. As you were talking I was thinking, when I was with the Land Stewardship Project at that time, a lot of our battle focused around insurance companies taking over farms.

(6 minutes: 32 seconds)

DC: Yeah.

RK: And the same sort of thing you talked about, the mistreatment of the land, really the people that had been on it before. That was also part of the farm crisis of the time. And the other thing I think that was going on, thanks to writers like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson and some others, and the thing called the *National Agriculture Lands Study* of the late 70s, early 80s, was growing awareness of the damage being done to the land by this industrial farming that had taken over so much, post-World War II. Maybe it wasn't felt quite as much as Wisconsin because of the need for the pastures on the dairies and things, but it was happening. And if you want to talk a little bit about your view on how things were happening with the Conservation Reserve Program that had been passed in the '85 farm bill.

DC: Yeah, and by 1988, when we started to meet, I think the benefits of that were already

showing up and we got excited about what other possibilities were...what things would be possible under CRP, so expand the acreage, have conservation easements that were more permanent than 10-year contracts, all that kind of stuff. And then when I look back at that, and how CRP has essentially almost gone away, we were ahead of our time, and I think CRP helped us see the possibility and the huge importance of farm policy on saving soil, on giving people another alternative to living on corn and beans.

RK: Well, I have with me—getting us back to the, say 1988—the paper that Margaret Krome sent out, that you actually took the notes for, that then went on to become the kind of founding meeting, I believe, for what was the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group in the Midwest. So, you have any comments about that...

DC: Well, yeah. Well, I look at that now, Ron, and I go—the audacity of us! [laughs] And the ambition, too. And I look back and salute us for both of those things. We were telling like we were going to reform farm policy, as if just getting organized and grabbing a few folks, and putting out some position papers, and we were going to change policy. So, it was amazing. And I think the other thing, when I think about, again, compared to today, going through those minutes, that we had faith in the federal government responding to us, and responding to these cries for change and a new way to support agriculture. New approaches to supporting farmers and farming. I don't know what it's like to drop into a sustainable ag meeting these days and think about trying to get Congress's attention for such a thing, but that never occurred to us. I read through those minutes now and I don't think anybody thought that this was a huge hurdle to jump—that of course we'd mobilize people from the Midwest, and we started telling them about getting bigger and pulling folks from the Southeast and the western plain states. It was pretty gutsy for a bunch of advocates in these states to say, well, we're going to reform the farm bill.

(10:00)

RK: Well, and I remember back for me, with Land Stewardship Project, we were really drawing on the fact that post-Dust Bowl days and the Great Depression of the 30s, and in the Roosevelt years, the government really did respond in a big way and we were sort of, at least in part, trying to bring that back to life, that whole notion of the role a federal government could play, with conservation being the lead term to take us there.

DC: Yeah. You know the only hint I saw of hesitation of: What are we up against? Who are we going to run into? There's reference in there to the grain groups, you know, and I think, unspoken, Cargill or the whole big grain apparatus that was dependent on cheap corn, and then trade, too, came in there. And both of those things, at least in those early meetings— it's like, uh-oh! [laughs] We didn't know how to deal with that, but we knew that was a shadow hanging over all of this with these big other economic forces, whose shins we had to kick to get our way into members of Congress and get their attention for a better way to think about and support agriculture.

RK: Well, I'd like to talk about some of the internal struggles that went on, too. That was part of it. And when we were meeting with the bigger group (of sustainable ag policy leaders) a couple of weeks ago at NSAC's (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition) annual meeting, I

remarked about how I remembered reading through these old meeting notes, how democratic the process was, and it also reminded me of how difficult it sometimes was, and how agonizingly long the discussions were going on. I remember seeing in your notes here: "Discussion then led to what form the working group should take. The idea of a 'working group' was preferred to a coalition. 'Coalition', to some, implied agreeing on everything. And it was felt that it was not necessary or desirable for this group. Groups could opt to sign on to initiatives as a whole, that fit in with their respective interests as a group." So really, all that time we were trying to think about how to keep the tent together.

DC: Yeah.

RK: And I could even remember some tensions between the Land Stewardship and the groups in Wisconsin. I don't know if you remember anything to add about that?

DC: There were a couple of camps that people started to organize around. There was the National Save the Family Farm Coalition, and so there was a group called Wisconsin Farm Unity Alliance. And I think Iowa had one called Prairie Fire. And every state had a "save the family farm" group, and the sustainable ag groups were different. We had a different view. I think the "save the family farm" guys had kind of a commodity pricing and price supports parity orientation, kind of like NFO (National Farmers Organization), where we kind of took a different approach, and I think people weren't going to try and fight over who was right and who was wrong, but it was how to merge—these were pretty different philosophical approaches. And in one of those meetings, Tom Saunders from Wisconsin, from Wisconsin Farm Unity said—we have to have a big philosophical discussion! I think we probably did! [Laughs] My recollection of a few of those meetings was that they were two-day meetings, long, into the night. And then there was sort of a morning session. People were going to have lunch and then hit the road, and I think more work got done in the last hour of the second day than the previous several hours, because—OK, we gotta come out of here with something that we are going to do next. So, despite all that conversation, I think we kept those big philosophical differences at bay and I think at some point there was a merger of...I won't say literal merger, but at least a *merging*—of the philosophies and realizing we're all kind of up against the same obstacles and we want the same thing from federal farm policy of supporting family farming.

(14:19)

RK: Yes, I think you're exactly right. That's how I would put it, too. I mean, there was always respect for each other's views. It wasn't that one was necessarily totally right and the other totally wrong. It was just different ways of thinking about how to go forward. And, of course, we really didn't know for sure how to go forward, so that was just all part of it. But I remember that was a big deal back in the day. Some of it seems a bit like tempest in a teapot now, but at the time it was real important when we were trying to build a group, a working group, if not a full-on coalition.

DC: Yeah, those differences were meaningful to people, and they were serious about them. But I think the leaders of both of those camps saw above it, and got above that fray, and I think came to conclude that the forces against both of us were big enough that it made more sense to find ways to come together than to squabble.

RK: There was also another tension I'd like to just acknowledge somewhat, that also has, I think, been dealt with, largely quite well. And that was...we have to just strengthen organic agriculture versus the attitude that prevailed more within the working group around the whole fairness for family farms and things like that. That was also another tension.

DC: Yeah. In Wisconsin that played out in an interesting way, because, you know, Wisconsin is the home of Organic Valley, which is the biggest and most successful organic cooperative—it's organized as a cooperative—in the country, I think. And, you know, a lot of the elements in the Family Farm Coalition and Farm Unity Alliance...I think they always had a market orientation, they always had a pricing orientation. And in one way, if you were going to get price supports, then sell your own stuff at some kind of a premium. And so the organic movement had sort of a place to go that way, kind of a market orientation, and skipped worrying about federal farm policies. And that's been hugely successful and they've done so well.

(16:42)

RK: So, as I recall, you stayed with this work for about six or seven years, and then you moved on?

DC: Yeah, so I started with this Midwest Technology Development Institute in '86—I got in the door with this Midwest Technology Development Institute, and then I got hired by the Rural Development Center to go back to Wisconsin and work as its executive director, and of course that organization was involved in the Sustainable Ag Working Group, so I slid right back in. And then I—you know, we got through the '90 farm bill and the 1995 farm bill, and then I left there in April or May of '95. And then three years with American Farmland Trust in the early 2000s, and the work I did, you know, was the regional office, which was four states, but there was farm bill work, but I didn't have much to do with farm bill work. Obviously, AFT was always involved in farm bill work. But, not me personally.

RK: But American Farmland Trust did important work at that time, or was an important group with its focus on preserving farmland, keeping farmland in farmland.

DC: Well, it was really interesting though, you know. I thought it was—I mean, I was personally glad to kind of get back in—because that's what I knew, I knew this farm stuff. So it was great to kind of get back in that milieu and then I realized that American Farmland Trust was sort of controversial to more, I don't want to say radically minded, but kind of radically minded, farm advocates because AFT was sort of blind to farming practices, you know. They'd say—let's save the land, and we're not going to look real hard if it's an industrial dairy. Or, you know, corn and beans or something like that—that's kind of all there was in suburban Illinois where there was a lot of work to save farm land. So, it was an interesting new controversy for me to kind of deal with, that by-and-large I thought it was a good thing to be saving farmland, but people were pretty critical of asking the question—saving it for what? If the practices are abusive of land, you know.

(19:01)

RK: Yeah, and over the years that I've watched, AFT has gotten more and more involved in policy matters and things like that, that were probably more closely aligned with the sustainable agriculture movement—

DC: Yeah, good.

RK: —over the years that I've observed. Well, now, how long have you been with the River Alliance?

DC: Twelve years, next month.

RK: Twelve years, wow. So, I'd like to talk a bit about what you've observed and agriculture's effect on the rivers of Wisconsin. Talk about the River Alliance of Wisconsin, and then about ag and its effect and any positives you're seeing.

DC: Sure. There are 85,000 miles of rivers in Wisconsin. It's a watery place. The biggest water quality challenge to rivers in Wisconsin is agriculture, without even a close second to anything else. So, if you're going to worry about the quality of the water in rivers, you have to pay attention to what's going on with agriculture. We were talking about the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) earlier, and there was a county—Iowa County in Wisconsin, I think—had, as a percentage of the total land base in the county, one of the highest percentages of CRP land in the country. And it was a beautiful place to drive through, because there was all this prairie growing. And when the amount of money paid to farmers or landowners for CRP contracts fell down, fell off, and then when corn prices took off, thousands of acres of CRP land went under the plow again. And the rivers immediately showed it. So Iowa and the neighboring Grant County—siltation, nitrates, grass waterways that used to be there were plowed under. This was a huge failure of federal farm policy, not to figure out a way to save that land from heavy erosion. Federal farm policy probably doesn't...never has had the sway or influence in Wisconsin because of the dairy industry. So, people were growing all these forages, which never qualified—there was never a program for forages. But, with the dairy industry changing a lot, so small, medium-size dairy farms almost completely gone now. We're under 10,000 dairy farms, all told, in Wisconsin. From when I started the Rural Development Center in '88, it was almost 40,000. So, a huge collapse, almost. And, of course, the number of cows has hardly changed. So just the same number of cows, but concentrated in fewer and fewer places. And the big challenge for rivers in Wisconsin around agriculture is manure distribution, because basically they're dumping manure. They don't have the land base in a lot of places to make sure the manure is completely taken up by the crop. And so, you know, you get an ill-timed rain, or people spread manure on frozen, snow-covered ground. And then these days and climate change, you get a rain in February and frozen ground and [it goes] right to the river. So, we now have huge algae blooms. There's a dead zone in Green Bay, kind of like the one in the Gulf of Mexico, obviously smaller, but these are all, you know, legacies of farming's impact on rivers.

(25:10)

RK: So, does the River Association do policy work that's relevant, if not federally, state?

DC: State a lot, yeah. More so than federal policy. Because the thing most farmers in Wisconsin—livestock, especially dairy—have to pay attention to is the state's regulations of manure distribution, and then the construction of their barnyards. Obviously there are federal programs that farmers would qualify for, but ... you know, in Wisconsin there's a dance between kind of voluntary incentives, which are really what defines the natural resources conservation service programs that they deliver to farmers. And the stuff that the state and the counties do, which make people do stuff. [laughs] But that's the dance! You know, I think there's a cry more and more for really kind of putting the screws to the livestock-dairy operations in Wisconsin, to require things. I mean, these things have been voluntary for decades, and people are realizing that voluntary just doesn't work. And so, I think we who are working on water quality and river or lake conservation aim our efforts at the state because we can more easily influence that, and the livestock operations have to pay more attention to the state regulations because those are generally stronger and some are compulsory.

RK: Well, I was wondering, maybe to conclude, if you have anything more—any anecdotes or anything you remember in particular that would be good to have on the record?

DC: Well, I think—yeah, this is fun, Ron, to think about. Another ideological struggle that popped up inside the Midwest Sustainable Ag Working Group was how to think and talk about animal welfare, and the animal welfare and the animal rights groups who were saying to us—well, it's great you're talking about sustainable agriculture, but what about the animals? And that was sort of touchy for us, because we were working with these family farmers, and we feel like they're good stewards of their animals, but of course there's sort of the industrial side of animal raising that was getting more and more controversial. And I think we were, you know, rightly or wrongly, accused of enabling that. So, what are we saying about that? So, we said—well, there's a balance there. They're not incompatible. These things don't cancel each other out. So we did that publication that was called *A Case for Sustainable Agriculture and Animal Welfare*. It was a little book. I remember the struggle that we had internally about what we wanted to say, feeling like we don't have to placate animal welfare groups. We can make our case and say this is good animal welfare. And it was a popular publication. I remember it was one of those things that helped put the Sustainable Ag Working Group on the map, because we took a controversial subject and played it well, and used good, strong arguments. I have not seen Ferd Hoefner very often in the intervening years, but I saw him four or five years ago, and he said two or three times a year he still gets a call from somebody looking for that publication. That it was a statement—I won't say statement for the ages, that overstates it—but it was a pretty strong statement at the time that I think still holds. That, you know, family-scale agriculture can do well by animals and can do well by the land. That, in a way that either the industrial system cannot. And sustainable agriculture—a cornerstone of it—was that family-scale farms, how they raised animals and how they treated their animals, they were not incompatible. That they were, part and parcel, the same thing.

(27:34)

RK: The kind of industrial side of big animal agriculture wants to label anybody that has any question about it—they immediately say—well, you're just PETA, that group that they then label as being ultimate animal radicals—

DC: Well, I think–

RK: –and it scares everybody to even take the topic up, because they immediately throw that out.

DC: I think that was our fear, that there would be this taint with PETA. And we– even the Humane Society of the United States was really good–I mean, they didn't say we shouldn't raise farm animals and just avoid eating meat. And I think the argument that we made in the Sustainable Ag Working Group was, you know, animals and manure were ... Well, and the cycle of crops run through animals, on the back end comes the manure, and back to the land to, you know, put the nutrients back in once the crops had come and fed the animals. I mean, it was a closed, good system that of course had been around for as long as people have raised livestock. And doing that right, and doing it well, we were convinced that it was possible. And we knew of examples. But I think the touchiness for the sustainable ag groups was that we even took the thing up in the first place, that we had succumbed to pressure from animal rights groups to sort of prove that animals had a role, and I think for the farmers that we worked with, you know, there was always nervousness about even taking that topic up. And it was pretty brave of us to do it, I think. And that publication stood the test of time. I had pulled it out a few years ago, and you know, it's still right.

(29:39)

RK: Right. So, I don't know if there's anything else we need to really talk about. I just wanted to make sure we got you in the archive...

DC: Just a last thought, that–from the news this morning. So, there's talk of Monsanto and Syngenta merging–big giants. Monsanto, obviously a long- time giant in agriculture, and Syngenta kind of as well. And I think the idea of the two of them coming under one roof is sort of frightening to a lot of people. So, in some ways it says, you know, the battles are never over, the challenges remain, and it's incumbent upon people who care about these things to stay at it. And that we've had good influence, we've had positive change. There are all these things we can look to. I really think there's a second food system in the country as the result of a lot of the work all of our groups did, starting in the 80s. That, you know, you can buy your chicken, buy your vegetables, buy your cheese from somebody you know, somebody down the road. There's an amazing system now, operating under the radar of the big system, but there it is. If you want to participate in it, you can, and I think that's all a result of us thinking, challenging the world about how agriculture could be different.