

Craig Cox
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

September 4, 2015

Craig Cox—CC
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: I'm about to interview Craig Cox. Today is September 4th. What we want to start out with today, Craig, is some personal background about you, how you got involved with conservation. You've been involved in the many efforts over the years that have been very important in moving forward conservation policy, which is our emphasis of these interviews. And how you personally got involved with it, what led you to become involved, even from the time you were a kid, in conservation. So, go ahead.

CC: Well, I grew up in Saint Paul, you know, in the old part of Saint Paul over by Macalester College, and, you know, the outdoors just seemed to be hardwired in my brain and everywhere else. I don't know why. Not anyone else in my family was like that, but all I wanted to be was outside. I didn't really care what I was doing, I just wanted to be outside. And then, probably the biggest thing that sent me on this path was my dad bought a cow pasture on Carnelian Lake, you know, out by Stillwater. And that really became my haven. You know, we, for the first five years, we just sat on a blanket and then we went through a series of shacks and cabins until I was spending much of my summers at that cabin. And at that time the area was not developed at all. So I had free rein, you know, through prairies and savannahs and oak forests. So, for a kid of, you know, seven years old, that really kind of solidified my interest in nature and my love of the outdoors. And it followed from there. I found my grandpa's tackle box in the basement. I found his old bamboo fly rod behind the furnace, so then I started fishing, and after that I started hunting. I was always into hiking, and it just went from there.

RK: And I imagine you made a connection with the Saint Croix River ...

CC: Absolutely.

RK: ... and the Mississippi, too—even as a kid in Saint Paul, the Mississippi River loomed so large.

CC: Yeah, my friend Mark Methven and I got into snakes when we were kids, and we would ride our bikes down to the Mississippi River, the bluffs, and we'd hunt for snakes, catch them, and bring them back, keep them in aquaria in our bedrooms, which was not a big hit in my family, but they tolerated it [laughs] for a while. So, yeah, it was wonderful to have all that within bike-riding. It was great. So then in terms of career-wise ...

RK: And school wise, too.

CC: Yeah, I went to Macalester College because they had a great ecological program at that time, natural resource and ecology. They had a place out in Rosemount, you know a station. Unfortunately, almost the moment I arrived at Macalester they went into some significant financial problems and they cancelled that whole ecology program. So, I knocked around at Macalester for a while, got a nice liberal arts vacation, did not graduate from there, and then quit as I was starting my junior year, because I knew I was just never going to finish there. And then I started volunteering, you know. I volunteered for an environmental lawyer that was working on the reserve mining case. I volunteered for another... do you remember the big push to mine peat in northern Minnesota? Well, there was a project, a big science project, run through the University of Minnesota to evaluate, and I volunteered for that. And then decided I needed to get serious, go back to school. That was about, I was out of school for about four or five years. Went back, went to the University of Minnesota in the wildlife ecology and management program. I graduated from there, went to work for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, ended up in the state park system, in this unbelievably wonderful job. We got it in our heads in the state park system at that point that in what was then the 50 state parks we wanted to represent all of pre-settlement Minnesota, one way or the other. And so I was in charge of trying to manage resources on parks and the metro area, and then central Minnesota, so it was prairie restoration, savannah restoration, big pines, wetlands. It was—for somebody like me, it was delightful. It was great. So, I did that for 10 years and towards the end of that it became clearer and clearer to me that, you know, focusing all our effort on these relatively small postcards of public land was really going to be pretty limiting, in terms of, if you looked around at what was happening on agricultural land, what was happening to streams and rivers. You know, if we didn't really manage or if we didn't take on farming and the way the impact that farming was having on the environment and natural resources and habitat, that everything we did on state land was really going to be overwhelmed with what was happening on the private landscape. And that was reinforced for me—you know, I'm a crazed trout fisherman—and one of my parks had this beautiful tiny little trout stream that was actually the southern border of the park, between park and private land. The private land was pretty steep, it was cleared, and there was a terrible rain storm, and overnight that trout stream literally disappeared. The whole channel was full of sediment. So, that was, to me, kind of the straw that broke the camel's back. And then, timing-wise, I was coming to this realization right as the 1985 Farm Bill was finishing up, and that farm bill was remarkable for the conservation community. It's when I think the conservation community woke up to the potential of farm bills. You know, especially with the Conservation Reserve Program, the conservation compliance provisions. My boss—my current boss, Ken Cook—likes to tell the story that in the '85 Farm Bill, everyone that was lobbying for sustainable agriculture or natural resources could fit in one cab. You know, up to the Hill. And then, that was just such a watershed moment. So, I decided I was going to work on farm policy. So, I managed to get a fellowship to go back to the University of Minnesota, finish graduate work, and agricultural and natural resource economics. Typical story. I was hired for what was supposed to be an 18-month gig at the National Academy of Sciences Board on Agriculture. I arrived there just as alternative agriculture was ... the finishing touches were being put on that book, and I was part of the team that released that.

RK: That was the Chuck Benbrook report...

CC: ... the Chuck Benbrook Report, and you remember that was like a thunder clap when it hit, and that, you know—it was just fortunate, right? That I happened to land at that board on agriculture that was vitally interested in sustainable agriculture. You know, I ended up running the soil and water quality agenda, for an agriculture project, which was kind of a follow-up to alternative agriculture. So, that's when I was first really introduced to the sustainable agriculture movement, although it was still a little... can't think of the right word, but it hadn't coalesced the way it has now. So, I can remember these crazy debates over what does sustainable mean, and, you know, a big fight over language and the farm bill, defining sustainable, the vehement reactio—or backlash—to release a Alternative Agriculture. So, that's where it started for me. You know, I came in clearly from a natural resource, environmental perspective into this sustainable agriculture world. And the 2014 farm bill was my fifth farm bill that I worked on from various positions. In the 1990 bill I was at the National Academy of Sciences, '96 bill I was on the Senate Agriculture Committee staff for that farm bill. 2002 and 2008 I was running the Soil and Water Conservation Society, and was engaged in the farm bill from that organization and then this last one I was at the Environmental Working Group. So, it's farm bills and farm policy, its implications for the environment and conservation, pretty much define my working life.

(11 minutes: 50 seconds)

RK: Very good. I recall, I think, the first time we met, you know, for me, too, that it was the '85 Farm Bill and the preparation for it. What I remember, kicking off the Land Stewardship Project in 1982, was the National Ag Land Study...

CC: Right.

RK: ... that came out and had findings like the fact that there were two bushels of soil lost for every bushel of corn grown in Iowa, and that just jumped out at people. And that, in my mind, set the stage for the '85 Farm Bill.

CC: It was remarkable. It was at the end, you know, the National Resources Inventory landed in 1982. That really woke people up to the extent of soil erosion, that soil erosion was so concentrated on highly erodible land. Senator Armstrong introduced what was going to become Sodbuster, I think, in '81 or '82. But, it was, I think for all of us ... I was still only tangentially involved at that point. But, I mean if you look at what we've accomplished in farm bills after '85, it's just striking what was accomplished in '85, I mean it was...I don't think we've accomplished anything of that magnitude in sustainable agriculture and natural resources since then. I mean, there's been some really high points since then, but that was, you know ...

RK: Looking back over Ferd Hoefner's memo that he provided to us about his view of the progress over the years—I don't know if you had a chance to look at it ...

CC: I did. I looked at it.

RK: It's really quite amazing...

CC: It is.

RK: And a lot of what starts taking hold increasingly is the mandatory funding.

CC: Yeah.

RK: And getting funding into these. You could maybe talk about that. I was going to say that the first real memory I have of really connecting to you was—I think I was actually lobbying you ...

CC: Yes.

RK: ... when you were on the Senate staff.

CC: Yep. Absolutely. I remember.

RK: Yeah, so I'd like you to talk about your positions in the Senate and what you did there, and then also when you were president of the Soil and Water Society. Talk about those organizations, and a little bit of a bigger picture.

(14:27)

CC: Well, I was hired out of the National Academy to be the—Senator Leahy, who was Chair of the Senate Ag Committee at that point, to be the conservation leader for the upcoming—what was supposed to be the '95 Farm Bill, turned into the '96 Farm Bill. And Jim Cubie was my direct boss, Chuck Riemenschneider was Chief of Staff—it was a great, we had a great team.

RK: When did Kathleen Merrigan arrive?

CC: She was going out the door as I was coming in the door.

RK: Because I remember her work, too, as important.

CC: Yeah. So, we started out immediately trying to think of how do we make a closer linkage between the commodity title and the conservation title, because it was clear to all of us that the way that a commodity title is structured, you know, had huge implications and created really significant barriers to the kind of farming systems that we were, you know, we thought were more sustainable, more environmentally friendly, maybe better for farm families themselves. So, that was a bit of a departure from—or maybe more, we made that linkage with conservation compliance as one way to try and blunt some of the incentives, the negative incentives created by farm subsidies. So, we started talking about what's the next step, you know, where do we go from compliance. And we conceived this notion of a conservation farm option, which really came out of our shop. Ferd became a huge ally in trying to move the conservation farm option along, but it was the first sort of notion of making conservation an option instead of the traditional farm subsidies. So, for farmers that were more interested in conservation and

diversified farming operations where, you know, corn and bean subsidies didn't really work as well for them, or if they were grazing, then the way we pitched this was, you know, you can be in the deficiency program, or you could be in this conservation farm option, where your farm would be supported, but really based on what you were doing for conservation and the environment and the landscape. It was kind of the first little inkling of what was to come, which I'll get back to. But a couple things happened. One is the Republicans took over the Senate in 1994, remember, as part of a Gingrich revolution, so Senator Leahy became ranking member, and Senator Lugar became chair of the Senate Committee, so of course that has had a huge impact on our influence.

RK: Oh, yes.

CC: But, Senator Lugar actually was far more simpatico with what Senator Leahy's staff was trying to do then than the rest of the committee, really.

RK: Yeah, I remember that.

CC: And then the second thing that happened is there was a huge backlash against conservation compliance, so we spent a lot of time defending compliance, especially the Swampbuster provisions, where there was a lot of pressure coming out of North and South Dakota...

RK: Talk about what Sodbuster and Swampbuster actually intended to do...

CC: Right. So, the two things...there was a lot of academic research. The Economic Research Service had done a lot of work that really documented that the way we were subsidizing agriculture was creating incentives to plow out marginal land that was highly erosive, and also to drain wetlands and expand into wetland areas. The conservation compliance provisions then really focused on those two things. So, it was a quid pro quo between farmers and taxpayers. If you wanted to remain eligible for farm subsidies, you had to implement some basic soil conservation practices on your most highly vulnerable land, which was then, from that point forward, was called highly erodible land, which was defined by the NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service]. It's about 140 million acres of crop land that was to have conservation practices on it. You had five years to get your plan done, and five years to get it fully implemented, so the whole program was supposed to be in place by 1995.

RK: And, in theory, then, if you didn't comply, you would lose ...

CC: ... eligibility for those benefits. That's right. And similarly, what is officially called the Wetland Conservation Provisions, commonly known as Swampbuster, is if you—it's a little complicated—but if you improved the drainage to make production of a subsidized commodity possible on a wetland, you would lose eligibility for those same benefits. And that's what the big ... you know, most farmers and landowners, it seemed like the highly erodible land provisions were easier for them to swallow. I think partly because soil conservation was more accepted in the mind of landowners, I think.

RK: Yeah, it had a history.

CC: It had a history, it was highly visible, the Swampbuster issue was much more politically fraught because it really affected producers in the Prairie Pothole Region, which of course was, from our point of view, great, because that's one of the most important, maybe the most important wetland complex in North America. But, it was a political firestorm coming out of the North and South Dakota, pieces of Nebraska. And that became a huge fight to try to maintain the Swampbuster provisions.

(22:10)

RK: And we succeeded. There were some things we introduced that people would consider weakening the statute. We thought it was a way to soften the blow of it and make it more manageable. We added wetland mitigation provisions and minimal effect and some of these other notions that we thought would give landowners more options to work around, while still maintaining its core. We should come back to compliance, because after the '96 Farm Bill, I went to USDA to be a special assistant to SCS [Soil Conservation Service] Chief Paul Johnson, the Iowa farmer and legislator. So, I saw first-hand what compliance was accomplishing. And when it was taken seriously, it was really transforming the landscape in ways that I don't think any policy intervention has since that time. Since that time, it's just not been implemented in any comparable, serious way. So, the gains have eroded, no pun intended. We can come back to that when we talk about the 2014 Farm Bill. So, that was the second thing—how can we link the commodity title more closely to conservation? How do we defend conservation compliance? And then, the third big thing was creating EQIP, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. I have a very parochial attachment to EQIP because I wrote most of that statute with Dave Stawick on Lugar's staff. And we eliminated four previous conservation programs, including the Agricultural Conservation Program, Colorado Salinity Program, the Great Plains Program. The funding for those programs had been going downhill. There'd been a lot of controversy about the Agricultural Conservation Program, whether it was actually a conservation program or another form of farm support. So, our concept was to eliminate those programs, consolidate all of their functions into a new program, which we called the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and then, most importantly, to actually fund that program out of the Commodity Credit Corporation, this really odd bank that the Department of Agriculture has access to, the same funding stream that the farm subsidies are funded out of. So, that turned into this huge brawl to eliminate those programs and start this new program, but it was amazing how ferociously a lot of the agriculture community and FSA [Farm Services Administration] itself resisted making conservation a function of the Commodity Credit Corporation. But, we won that eventually, by the end of the farm bill. And that was a huge sea change, which really made it possible to ramp up funding for conservation programs the way of Ferd's memo documents, and we saw this huge jump in funding flowing to the conservation title after the '96 Farm Bill. And my feeling is that at the time it seemed like a trivial thing, but to us it was absolutely critical to win that battle because it was clear to us that that was the only way that we were really going to build funding for the conservation title. And it was the only way, at that time, we thought we could reform the commodity title and use savings to build up other functions, especially conservation. So, if we had them in the same funding, how crazy this gets in the congressional structure, but if we had conservation in the same funding pool as commodities, it would be easier to do that subsidy shift.

(27:35)

RK: Right. And there was a good connection to what became NSAC. [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition]. And Ferd Hoefner played a role.

CC: Indeed. It was a real challenge to get EQIP through, and in the process of the coalition that got EQIP through, we saw the beginnings of the conflicts that were going to dominate people's feelings about EQIP going forward, because one of the stronger lobbying groups that helped get EQIP over its hurdle was what we called the Barnyard Coalition—the pork producers, the cattlemen, the folks that felt they didn't have a dog in the commodity program fight. There was pressure growing about the water quality and pollution issues around what came to be called CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation]. So, they saw this as an opportunity to get some support for those folks to start meeting the environmental pressure that was coming to their industry. So, that was not something that Ferd and NSAC wanted to see happen.

RK: Yeah. That concern was because they said—well, we really don't need to have more of that money going to enable and expand CAFOs.

CC: Yeah, so the compromise was to limit the cost-share. In fact, to prohibit cost-share for CAFO-like practices—manure storage, and so on and so forth—to animal operations that were larger than 1,000 animal units, which was, at that time, the threshold. Above that you were subject to the Clean Water Act, below that you were not. And we also capped the amount of total cost-share you could receive in a contract. We thought the combination would blunt, if not eliminate, any possibility that EQIP funds would end up being used to support the expansion of the concentrated animal feeding model of livestock. Unfortunately, all of those things were blown up in succeeding farm bills, so that issue has continued to be a real sore spot.

RK: Right. And I know that. And the other thing—trying to get some of those funds going to more organic producers and things like that has been a part of the ... one thing that's so clear is that these programs aren't just ongoing struggle past and static. They're just evolving and changing and need to be protected in all of this, over and over.

CC: Yeah. And what I think we really learned is how critical the rule-making and the policy—the internal agency policy about how are these funds prioritized, how are they distributed, how priorities are set—is. It was a real learning curve for me to be in the agency when all these rules were actually written and to witness first-hand. It was just as much sausage making as getting the bill passed in the first place.

RK: The other thing that happened around '96 was allowing the State Technical Committees to have representation from nonprofit groups to try to ensure not only the rule making, but how it worked on the landscape, and I know you were a part of that, too.

CC: Yeah, and that started out pretty slowly. I think that's been one really good development over time. The technical committees really are pretty unique. They've evolved way beyond technical committees, you know. Now they're really policy-making committees. And NGOs and other folks, if they can engage, can have a significant influence on what's happening in their

states. That's been a long time coming, and it depends on how strong that NGO community is, and in some states there just aren't very many local groups, so it's still kind of the traditional community that calls the shots on what's happening to those programs.

RK: When I worked at the McKnight Foundation, that's one of the things we tried to do in the Midwest and in the Mississippi River states, was fund some groups so they could enable some representation on those technical committees.

CC: Right. Now I'm really jumping ahead, but one thing on that front...one of the issues that we confronted in the state technical committees was there was really an imbalance of information that the NGO community and, in fact, a lot of other people...there wasn't really a common basic set of facts about what were these programs subsidizing, which practices, where. And it has been a barrier to really enabling people, empowering people to have a serious conversation about are we spending our money on the right things in the right places, supporting the right farming systems. EWG [Environmental Working Group] was big into data. So, we're about to launch later this year a conservation database that will document in every county what conservation practices have been funded by the big four programs—EQIP, Conservation Stewardship Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and the Conservation Reserve Program. So, it'll be a first-ever look inside the black box of those programs. A big reason why we pushed this, was to really empower those groups that are engaging at the State Technical Committee, with the first-ever really detailed information they can bring to the table and be on a leveled playing field, for the NGOs and the agency folks.

RK: Well, you know, this is really good. And I think we did jump ahead, but I would like to take us back to maybe at least 2000 or '96 for a couple reasons, to have you talk about the Soil and Water Conservation Society that you worked with, and also to talk about the next steps on policy. So you can pick it up from there.

(35:26)

CC: In my last job in the USDA, Tom Hebert, who was the deputy undersecretary for natural resources and the environment, left the agency, and I was asked to fill in in that job until they found a political appointee to fill it permanently. And that was the job that drove me out of D.C. Because I was really tired of the politics, I was tired of hand-holding, congressional offices, and I actually felt like I was getting dumber—that I was spending all my time on politics, both internal agency politics and external dealing with congressional offices, that I wasn't really learning anything anymore about the science of sustainable agriculture. So, the job at the Soil and Water Conservation Society, which is a professional ... it's kind of a combination of a scientific society and a professional organization, headquartered in Ankeny, Iowa, had chapters throughout the United States and Canada. It actually has a really storied history. It goes all the way back to Hugh Hammond Bennett and the Dust Bowl days, and his conception of the movement that he was creating. It's the most amazing story if you ever spend the time to see how this movement, the soil conservation movement, was born and institutionalized like a snap of our fingers. But, his conception was that conservation districts were going to be the leaders, the political community leadership for soil conservation. In their vision they were going to have taxing authority, they were going to have regulatory authority. They really were going to be quite the

powerful local unit. Then, what was then the Soil Conservation Service was going to be the scientific and technical support for the districts. And then they conceived of this ... they thought they were giving birth to this whole new profession of professional conservationists that they thought didn't exist. And they thought they needed a professional home for this new professional class of people. It was actually at that time the Soil Conservation Society of America was born, and then over time, as water resources became critically important, the organization changed its name and, to some extent, its focus, to the Soil and Water Conservation Society. It was really interesting. It was part of that insane, amazing innovation that took place during the Dust Bowl and the New Deal. So, that organization got started and then was pushed to the side by the Second World War, and then the same people that wanted to get it moving prior to the war got it moving after the war. So, I took over that organization.

RK: When was that?

CC: 1998, August 1st. We decided we were going to get more active in policy advocacy, which was a pretty significant departure for the organization. So, we managed to raise money, some from the McKnight Foundation, to engage in the 2002 Farm Bill debate. We did that by holding a series of roundtables around the country that brought together farmers and conservationists and other folks. We called it *Finding Common Ground*, and we would have a two-and-a-half day discussion. And we—meaning the Soil and Water Conservation Society—extracted from those conservation discussions, where we thought the common ground was that was relevant to policy proposals for the upcoming farm bill. So, that was our contribution—we wrote the report, we disseminated it, ended up testifying several times on the hill during the 2002 Farm Bill debate. So, we were very engaged in that 2002 Farm Bill, which was also an interesting ... I don't know if I'd call it a watershed moment, but it was both a good win and a big disappointment simultaneously. The big win is it was the bill that quadrupled, if not more, funding for conservation programs. So, EQIP went from \$200 million to over \$1 billion. So, it was this stunning increase, historic increase, in funding for conservation programs, which was wonderful. That was a huge step forward. The big disappointment was, and this goes back to the sustainable agriculture community again, was the notion—it kind of harkened back to the conservation farm option—can we try this again? Because the Conservation Farm Option was really never implemented. So, is there something else we could do this time, in that same vein, to make conservation, put conservation on the same footing as commodity programs? And you probably remember that one thing that the '96 Farm Bill did was allegedly to end farm subsidies—traditional farm subsidies. There were these payments at the time called Market Transition Payments that were just direct cash payments based on what kind of subsidies you had gotten previously. They were supposed to go down year by year until they were gone in 2002, and then the rhetoric was that farmers would then be farming for the market. Well, they didn't go away. They became the Direct Payments Program, that even then was being criticized because—why are these payments being made? Whether it's a good year or bad year, based on what you used to plant, not what you're planting now? It just didn't make sense to a lot of people, including us, of course. So, the notion was—what could we do to turn those direct payments into green payments, right? And that was where the Conservation Security Program concept ...

(44:03)

RK: ... and the Conservation Stewardship Program...

CC: Yeah, eventually. So, the big idea—and I don't know if Ferd would dispute this or not—was to turn direct payments into the Conservation Security Program. And we failed. And I think for farmers and for agriculture, it was a terrible missed opportunity, because just think if we would have done that, where we would be today in terms of the legitimacy of farm subsidies and support for farmers. It was just a huge disappointment to me that the Conservation Security Program ended up a small program in the conservation title.

RK: Yeah, so there's the tragedy, I mean I think we did get the program out of it, but instead of it fundamentally changing the commodity programs, it became an off-to-the-side program that relatively few people were able to really engage in. And those who were, were probably already kind of diversified, and it was sort of a program to reward people that were doing the right thing. That's how I remember it.

CC: Yeah, and it unfortunately set up the conflict between the sustainable agriculture community and more of the conservation environmental community. That's still a sore spot. With now the Conservation Stewardship Program, the conflict is over how much are we rewarding farmers for what they're already doing, versus how much are we rewarding farmers for doing more than what they're already doing.

(46:02)

RK: Right.

CC: The notion of rewarding farmers for what they were already doing was the critical component of transforming the commodity programs, right? Because that was critically important and completely legitimate, if we were transforming direct payments into the Conservation Security Program. But, unfortunately when it fell into the conservation title, now it's like, well, the conservation title is supposed to be all about dealing with these significant natural resource and environmental problems, and how are we really making progress if we're spending money just on what's already on the landscape. And that sort of tension has been a sore spot around the Conservation Stewardship Program and its relationship to other environmental organizations.

RK: And I can say when I talk with the Land Stewardship Project, for example, they are quite proud of that nonetheless because at least for their kind of people, their members are finally getting some benefit from programs that previously had offered them virtually nothing.

CC: That's right.

RK: But, I'd also like you to talk about that it wasn't by accident that it didn't take hold fundamentally. There were forces working to make sure that didn't happen. I'd like you talk about the struggle, why were they opposed, and who was opposed to it.

CC: Well, this has been the sad tale of farm bills from the get-go, and I actually think it's gotten worse over time. There's a lot of money in the commodity title, and the money flows to relatively few people. The crops that are subsidized make up about 30% total of sales of agricultural products in the United States. It's the big corn, beans, wheat, cotton, rice—it's the big five. And it's just the traditional concept of politics, it's if you have a relatively concentrated group of people who are benefiting tremendously from a certain flow of money, they have every reason in the world to hire a bunch of lobbyists and spend a whole bunch of money making sure that flow of benefit stays. Whereas, if there's a bunch of more diffuse people who aren't benefiting... You have this very vested interest that's gotten themselves locked in, and if you look at the membership of the ag committees, especially the House ag committees, as my boss Jim Cubie used to say—no one gets on the ag committee to polish their environmental street cred. If you look at the districts that are represented, it's the districts that the subsidies are flowing to. Some less so in the Senate, because your district is a state. But still, what's happened is both the Senate and the House ag committees have become the guardians of the status quo, and they've become very powerful. The Farm Bureau, and the soybean growers, and the wheat growers—they're just really locked in that structure. So, it's very hard to break into that if you're an NGO. And they like direct payments a lot. And they didn't want to give them up. This is the continuing fundamental problem. The farm bill in Congress is considered the ag committees' turf, and the ag committees make sure that's the perception in Congress. And they are not very interested in doing anything interesting, unless it's somehow enriching the flow of dollars mostly to the same folks who are benefiting from the current subsidy structure. And it's really difficult to get people who are not on the ag committee, whose interests would be different from that, whose interests would be that of fundamental reform, whose interests would be using the Conservation Security Program to transform farm subsidies. But, it's just hard to get them motivated, and to get them to really ... you know, you've got to pick your battles when you're a senator or a congressman or congresswoman. And it's not always very clear why somebody would invest all this time and political chits to reform the farm bill, and that's been our problem whether you're an environmentalist, or sustainable agriculture person, healthy food person, farmers markets, or all of the other really wonderful things one could do, and should be happening in the farm bill—that's been our fundamental problem. And it still is. And this last farm bill in 2014 was just a horrendous example of that.

RK: Right. In my days when I worked with Land Stewardship, which came out of, in part, the National Farmers Union, the decline in the post-World War II years of the general farm organization and the commodification of agriculture policy. In the old days you had a farmer that was growing several different commodities and had animals and things like that, and they belonged to an organization, a general farm, but nowadays you're a corn grower or a bean grower.

CC: Yep, it's terrible. And just an anecdote: When I was on the Senate agriculture staff we had a visit from the Australian parallel to the Farm Bureau, who spent some time with me and us on the committee, which was fascinating. And one of the things the executive director said was he thought the worst thing that US agriculture had done was to form these commodity-specific organizations and that it was taking US agriculture's eye off what was really most important for US agriculture, and he compared that to Australia, where they weren't comparable... And I was always really struck by that. And if you look at the constraints that that commodity-by-

commodity-by commodity structure and political structure has created in US agriculture, it is really unfortunate. And it's reinforced by the check-offs and the marketing programs, and it's not good. I don't think it's good for the long-term interests of farmers, either.

(55:01)

RK: No, I don't either. It's one of the areas that maybe sustainable agriculture looking forward can help deal with, because it is less commodity-focused overall, I would say.

CC: Yeah, it is. And I think you see some cracks in that edifice. But they're still pretty small. But I think they're going to open, maybe open dramatically, in the coming years, as agriculture faces some really fundamental challenges that I don't think are going to be solved within this same structure that we've built.

RK: I want to talk about what we really need going forward, but I did want to take us further in your own career, when you left the Soil and Water Conservation Society and EWG.

CC: Right. I did that in 2008. The reason I did that was because it was clear to me we weren't winning, and I had succeeded in moving the Soil and Water Conservation Society farther into a role as an advocate, but the intensity of the advocacy I thought we needed was just not appropriate for the Soil and Water Conservation Society. And just by happenstance ... I'd known Ken Cook forever. I'd met him when I first moved to D.C. He and Maureen Hinkle were incredibly helpful to me as a newbie in the D.C. world and really helped me get on my feet. And EWG didn't exist at that time. So, when I was in D.C. I'd often check in with Ken and see what's going on. So, we had dinner and more than a few glasses of wine, and hatched this notion of starting a Midwest office of the Environmental Working Group, that would be a focus of reinvigorating EWG's work in the agricultural arena. Back in '93 when the organization was founded, a big part of the core of EWG's work with the farm subsidy database and all of that work, EWG had really evolved its focus on exposure of humans, especially children and infants to toxic substances in the environment. And that work just exploded. It's still exploding. But Ken wanted to revitalize. That took so much attention and time that the ag work had slipped, and he wanted to revive the ag work. So we decide to talk to some funders, including Gretchen Bonfert at McKnight Foundation, test the waters to see if there was any interest in supporting this new EWG office and, lo and behold, there was, so I made the jump to EWG to start that office and rebuild that agriculture work with the notion that we would be a more strident advocate in the farm bill space, mostly for reform. And EWG is not held in high regard by some components of the ag community, largely because of the farm subsidy database, revealing how much money people were getting through various farm subsidies. And EWG is a little more in-your-face when it comes to advocacy, and we've probably ramped that up in the last few years. But we still are very science-based and very data-based. And we try to use research and data and now, increasingly, remote sensing satellite imagery to change the conversation. We don't have boots on the ground; we're not doing on-the-ground projects. We do a lot of lobbying in D.C., but we're not a grassroots organization, like a lot of our partners are. We're mostly trying to affect how people think about issues, and how they're thinking about what appropriate solutions would be.

(1:01:00)

RK: I'd say in that role now, it's appeared to me, working in a funding role at McKnight, it seems that the National Sustainable Ag Coalition and Environmental Working Group are very much allies.

CC: Yeah, it's really been great. And we still have our little friction points. The Conservation Stewardship Program continues to be one, but that's really pretty minor compared to our areas of agreement. Because we're a little odd as an environmental group. We think food is really important. We think healthy food, nutrition, components of the farm bill are often as high of a priority for us as the conservation title. We really think the way we subsidize agriculture through the commodity title, and now unfortunately through crop insurance, is really vitally important. There's not very many environmental organizations that focus on subsidies and crop insurance; they're mostly focused on the conservation title. But NSAC and Ferd, we share that view. So, he's vitally interested, NSAC is vitally interested in the commodity program. So, we're vitally interested in payment limits, and actively engaged, and Ferd is very concerned about what's happening to crop insurance. So, on the really big fights, we're shoulder-to-shoulder. More shoulder-to-shoulder with the Sustainable Ag Coalition than we are, oddly, with other conservation and environmental groups—we think their agenda's a little too narrow, a little too parochial. And not really targeted at the kind of more fundamental reform and the stunning possibility potential from an environmental conservation point of view, if we could really move the needle toward more sustainable farming systems on the landscape.

RK: In my judgment, one of the contributions of NSAC and in the recent years EWG is strengthening groups like National Wildlife Federation's commitment to conservation and sustainable agriculture, and bringing that in, and increasingly understanding that. And I think the water quality issues in particular have driven that understanding.

(1:04:00)

CC: Yeah, and it's really interesting to see the science now actually coming behind that and reinforcing it, because what scientists have learned and are telling us is that in this really intensively farmed landscape, like the corn belt, there's only so much you can do by tweaking the corn-soybean rotation. More state-of-the-art nutrient management is a good thing. Soil conservation is a good thing. But, they're really telling us that the fundamental problem is, like in a state like Iowa where 90 percent of your landscape is in one or two plants that are only green growing for three-to-four months out of the year, you can't solve these more fundamental national resource, environmental, sustainability issues without diversifying that landscape. And it's been really interesting to watch that some of the top scientists in the country are telling everybody that now. And you see it coming on, the cover crop movement, and the incredible research that people like Matt Liebman are doing at Iowa State about the impact of more, longer rotation, the prairie strips work, the Green Land Blue Waters work here in Minnesota. So, I think that we still have a long way to go to have the larger environmental community get that, that it's not just about how much fertilizer you're applying, but it's these bigger questions about the farming system, and the agricultural landscape. But, I think it really helps to have EWG and NSAC on the same page there.

RK: I think the teachings of Wes Jackson are so important. I think it's really starting to take hold that you just have to look at the lessons that we've learned from ecological studies to see that that has to really be underpinning. You really do have to do as much as possible to, as Wes says, "mimic" natural systems in order to have successful agriculture ultimately in the long term. And that's really what's underneath all of this.

CC: Yeah, and despite the track record of not being able to conquer the farm bill yet. I think my optimism for the future is I think the real gains have been what sustainable farmers are doing themselves. Sprinkled out across the landscape are these men and women who are coming up with these exciting, innovative ways of farming. It's just amazing. And I think with low commodity prices, with herbicide-resistant weeds, with insecticide-resistant insects, I think those sustainable farmers, the folks that are doing longer rotations, the folks that are mimicking ecology, that are looking at agro-ecological approaches as their way of managing their operation—I think they're going to do well. And I think they may do better than the folks that try to stay trapped in this treadmill of corn and soy, which is getting more and more expensive, harder and harder to do, more and more stressful. One of the farmers I talk to for advice, he's got 17 landlords that he has to deal with every single year to keep his operation together. I ran into a farmer at a conference that was actually complaining, yelling at me about conservation compliance and EWG, but it turns out after we talked for a while, he has 31 landlords. So, I think this notion of the more diversified farming systems has got legs.

RK: Good. And I'd like to conclude this with what's your thinking on what we need to do with the next farm bill and next policy initiatives to push that transition more towards ecological approaches? I'd like to have you talk about that thinking forward on what you think some priorities should be for NSAC and the policy agenda broadly.

(1:10:00)

CC: So, let me just start with what I think we're missing. And what we're really missing is there's not enough grassroots pressure on legislators or agency policy makers at the state level or the federal level. And so we find ourselves visiting legislative offices, either at state legislatures or at the federal legislature, and trying to convince their staffs or the member that they should really be interested in this, which is not really the place you want to be. You want them hearing from their constituents that there's problems here or opportunities here. And the best of all possible worlds is they're reaching out to you and saying—look, were hearing all this; what can we do? What can the farm bill do for us? What can some legislation at the Minnesota legislature do? Like the buffer law. That was a huge victory here. So, part of what we need to do as a community is we need to figure out how to build that pressure—how do we get that moving in ways that legislators are hearing from people other than us? So, NSAC is well-suited for that with their grassroots network. EWG is not, yet, but we're really beginning to build an impressive social media capability. In fact, we're having an ag strategy meeting at the Ames office—all our government affairs people, and the ag team, and our development people, and our technology people—to really reset what we're thinking. So what's going to give us the leverage to make the changes we think need to be made, I think we need to really focus on doing that. Part of our contribution, I think, is going to be using our growing capacity in remote sensing, and to really start telling true stories about what's happening on the landscape. And I think the environmental

natural resource problems are beginning to cross thresholds where it's harder for people to ignore them. And I just think of Toledo, losing its drinking water for four days because of an algae bloom driven largely by runoff from an agricultural watershed. Six months later Ohio passes a law prohibiting manure application on saturated or still-covered ground. The severe problems in southern Minnesota with polluted runoff from ag operations that leads to the governor proposing a buffer law that actually gets passed, and we think we contributed to that, with our *Broken Stream Banks* report. That was our first real rollout of our remote sensing capacity. And so I think part of what we need to do is heighten the awareness that things are not going well—beach closings in Iowa, the Des Moines Waterworks lawsuit. But then simultaneously with that, we have to really get people excited about the alternative. And partly that's where groups like NSAC, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Land Stewardship Project—where you can show that it doesn't have to be this way, and people can make a good living and all these other benefits for rural communities flow from this. You know, we've got to do both. We can't just depress people about what's going wrong. There has to be a recognition that things are not going well, but there also has to be excitement about the solutions. And I think if we can somehow consistently and strategically and smartly do that, we'll start to build this larger ... people will start hearing about it.

RK: Right. And then that can be the base for policy changes.

CC: Yeah, and then we can start to think about how do we change the conservation title and how do we change ... make another run at the commodity title, particularly on crop insurance now, to try yet again to get our farm bill lined up with what the public needs from the farm bill, not what this fairly narrow sector of agriculture thinks they deserve from the farm bill. That's what's got to change.

RK: And the research policy that can drive it and...

CC: That's right. And we're also thinking more about initiatives in key states. Do we want to be so totally dependent on federal policy? But like Minnesota ... where are there opportunities at the state level to make some progress and to demonstrate that this can be done, and to build confidence that this can be done? So I think that's the bigger picture, and we can talk about what's the specific agenda. You know, I have my ideas about how I can wave a magic wand and reinvent EQIP and CSP and the conservation title as a whole, how I would do that. Certainly we have our own ideas about what we should do with crop insurance, which we can talk about. But, until we change that dynamic of us looking for champions in Congress, in the right-wing side of Congress, who we can appeal to from a budget hawk perspective about how expensive crop insurance is. So, we're kind of searching for allies or champions instead of champions coming to us, because they're hearing about this. And we've made strides, obviously, if you look at Ferd's memo. We've made strides. But, I don't think we're going to transform ag policy at state or federal level without changing that dynamic. And I think there's possibilities now with ... I mean, just look at the press coverage about agricultural issues, both positive and negative. It's changing. And social media is remarkable for what you can communicate and the conversation you can have there.

RK: Excellent. Well, I think we've really hit almost all the points I wanted to. I really enjoyed this interview and I want to thank you, for not only for your comments today, but for your career and all you've done to help bring these things about, and what an ally you've been for NSAC and moving policy forward.

CC: Well, they've been a great ally. It's been fun, actually. And a great partnership.