

Kathleen Merrigan
Executive Director, Sustainability
George Washington University
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

February 10, 2016

Kathleen Merrigan—KM
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: Today is February 10, 2016. I am in Washington, DC, and this afternoon I have the privilege of interviewing Kathleen Merrigan, who presently is the executive director of sustainability at George Washington University, but over the years has had many interesting positions that we want to talk about. What I like to start out with is quite a bit about your own background, how you got interested in sustainable agriculture, the whole food area, all of this, and particularly maybe policy work to advance sustainable agriculture. So take me back and sort of take us through your great career.

KM: I was born a politician, I think. I have always been interested in policy, politics, from a very early age. Always interested in people who are not getting a fair share and trying to empower them and use my skill set to do that. So when I graduated from college I could have gone into poverty policy—I could have gone into a lot of different directions. My first job out of college was to run a state Senate race, and my guy won—it was a re-elect. I came into his office and very quickly became his chief of staff. And while in that role, a small community, and this is in rural western Massachusetts—I grew up right below the Vermont border—and a farming community. Yes, there is farming in Massachusetts. Actually our next door neighbor was a farmer, a mixed vegetable farm, and in my high school years we saw that farm be sold off for development, and so I became very interested in farmland preservation early on. But my new boss, the state senator, had a community in his district that had serious ground water contamination problems that had come from the use of EDB (Ethylene Dibromide) and Aldicarb for potato and tobacco wrap (was the kind of tobacco we grew up there) production, and it had gotten into farmers' wells. It was so bad that people were told not only could they not drink the water, but they couldn't shower in it. So here we are in 2016—it sounds like Flint, Michigan and the crisis going on there with water. I saw the destruction of a rural community, and I started asking questions. Where are the underground aquifers? What records do we have about what pesticides have been used over time, so we can pinpoint other communities of concern, so we don't have to get to the crisis and figure out what to do. And this is back in 1983, and at the time those were radical questions. So I said—hah, this is a policy domain that I can really work in and get very involved in. We put a lot of money into U-Mass Amherst for the IPM program, Integrated Pest Management, which I still think is a stellar program to this day. And then I went off to graduate school and wrote my master's thesis on efforts in Washington, DC to negotiate a new federal pesticide law, and I worked for Jim Hightower, who was the radical (Texas) Commissioner of Agriculture for the state there, part-time, when I was in my studies, doing work

around structural pest control, because in some states urban use of pesticides is regulated separately from agricultural use—Texas is one of those states. And so I was actually liaison between the Department of Agriculture and the Structural Pest Control Board and lobbying members of the Texas legislature. Can you imagine when they saw this young woman coming in from Massachusetts? They had a lot of fun at my expense. But it was very ... an interesting learning experience that has carried with me throughout my career, because I saw there's sort of one set of rules for how we think of pesticides in urban areas. Most people around here have a little Roundup in the garage, and then they want farmers to do certain things that they're not necessarily doing in their home community. So I saw how the two rules of the road, if you will, could be quite different. So that gets you up through graduate school. I also went to Poland and spent time looking at farmers' use of pesticides there at a technical institute and learned a lot there. So I came out of graduate school—again, I could have gone in any direction. I was very interested in agriculture. I applied to two jobs, one to work for Ted Kennedy on Labor HHS (Health and Human Services) Committee here in Washington, one to Pat Leahy to be the ag committee staffer. The Democrats had just taken over the Senate, so they were both building up new staffs and there was a lot of opportunity. I got two job offers and I went with agriculture. But I could see that my career could have gone in a different direction, because, again, I'm sort of a political animal, and I had met a lot of people through the course of my master's degree, interviewing them about what was going on in federal pesticide law. So I came to Washington, hired by John Podesta, who's a well-known character here in town, eventually became President Clinton's chief of staff. He's now the chair of Hillary Clinton's campaign. He was the counselor to President Obama. He hired me to come to town. It was a lot of opportunity. Brand new day for agriculture and I immediately got involved in biotechnology policy. That's why I was hired to come to the U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee. Most people don't know that. So Leahy was the chairman of the agriculture committee and the chairman of the Subcommittee on Judiciary and the Law. This is back in 1987. The coordinated framework for biotechnology, which is this kooky way we regulate biotechnology in this country—the whole thinking about that was led by Dan Quayle—was enacted in 1986. So I'm coming in right after that. There was this idea that we would really work hard to get the policy system in place to support that biotechnology that I still believe today holds a lot of promise, which puts me at odds with a lot of my sustainable and organic friends. But soon after I was involved in that, the whole development of Bovine Somatotropin hit. So there were four companies working on developing a drug that would enhance the productivity of cows, their milk productivity. And an FDA (U.S. Food & Drug Administration) scientist, who at one point was the lead on the review of BST—Bovine Growth Hormone; people call it Bovine Somatotropin, sometimes just the way you refer to it puts you in a certain camp, so I'll throw out all the terms. So he became a whistleblower, and he felt that FDA's review was inadequate. He had then been demoted and came to my office many months after this all began, and he raised questions about the adequacy of the review, and so I became the point person in the Congress to lead an investigation on that, hearings, engaging ... what is now called the Government Accountability Office did a review. One of the things that I learned from that experience was that we needed more public funding for biotechnology risk assessment research, which was part of the 1990 farm bill, luckily, and also that we needed to make sure—it's related—a cadre of public scientists who could speak to the science, because in this review, in this very tumultuous time, I couldn't find a scientist expert who hadn't at one time or another been on the payroll of one of the four companies who were developing the product. So you had an issue about public trust there that I learned a lot about. So I was hired to work on

biotechnology. Bovine Somatotropin hit at the same time that Vermont's organic industry was going great guns. We also had the Alar crisis in 1980 ... mmm, I'm going to say around 1988, '89, and that was when Meryl Streep went on *60 Minutes* or television and was all concerned about this one chemical in apple production, and it created what is now referred to the "panic for organic." There are a lot of big players that started to come into the organic world where it had been sort of very small. People kind of knew each other; it was a lot of the gentleman's handshake, and all of a sudden the organic industry, not a group that were necessarily excited about government regulation—and that is an understatement—they actually came knocking on my door, saying we need an organic law, because we believe that the enticement in the market now, the premiums, the excitement about organic, is bringing in all these new entrants, and we don't have a sufficiently rigorous system to separate the good players from the guys who are just in there for profit and aren't necessarily following the rules. So I will let you get a word in edgewise; that's where I'll end it. So I became the organic lady.

(10 minutes: 5 seconds)

RK: And your work led to the Organic Production Act, right, in 1990?

KM: So the Organic Foods Production Act.

RK: And also SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) I want to touch on ...

KM: And SARE—OK, SARE was a big thing. So the Organic Foods Production Act was part of the 1990 farm bill. It was originally introduced in late 1989, right before the end of the congressional session, so you'd necessarily have to introduce a new bill the following year. What we said, and I said very explicitly, was this is a trial balloon. We want everybody and their brother to react to it and get back to us. And so a lot of people got back to me. It wasn't that I started from scratch. What I did in writing that law was I got all the existing state and private certification standards that we had in this country, and then I pulled together IFOAM standards and maybe there were a few other international touch points. And what I was looking at was what was the common denominator for that law. And for the most part that's how we constructed the bill. There was also a research and promotion piece in the Senate bill that didn't become part of the final legislation, but the standards and the program for accrediting certifying agents, the core of the Organic Foods Production Act as it was originally introduced, became law. But I spent a lot of time with farmers and sustainable and organic advocates across the country, making that bill something that they wanted, could live with. There's a national organic standards board that's in the heart of it, and there have been some legal battles with the government over this, because it's not an advisory board. Some people say it's an advisory board. It is, except for it has a statutory responsibility, too, and that is over the national list. What are those materials that are exceptions to the rule, meaning they're natural, but you cannot use it, or they're synthetics, and you can. So there is this national list of exceptions to the rules. Because the federal government had historically been no friend to organic agriculture, and I saw that very much in my own career up to that point, we didn't want the secretary of agriculture to have that authority, to determine what was on the national list. So that power was embodied in a citizen board and, more so, it required a two-thirds vote to get a synthetic to be allowed in organic production, because there shouldn't be a long list of exceptions to the rule, right?

RK: Right.

KM: And the idea that it had to have two-thirds vote, was because even if you put the farmers and the ranchers and the retailers and the processors together, which you might broadly call the organic industry, you wouldn't have the two-thirds vote, you would need to have to pick off some of the consumer and environmental reps on the board. So there was a lot of thought that went into not just what do you have to do with crop rotations under this particular situation? Or how are we going to set up a fee structure so that the program in terms of the accreditation pays for itself? There were a lot of really interesting political decisions and intelligence, I think, built into that law.

RK: It's been important that they were there all these years.

KM: It's been important that they were there. And then it became time to lobby for that law. It was no easy thing. The chairman of the Senate ag committee, my boss, Pat Leahy, it was his thing. And Dick Lugar was the ranking member, the senator from Indiana. He was supportive, but a lot of the committee members were not thrilled, but they would let it go because the chairman wanted it. But in the House it was a totally different thing. Not only was it not part of the chairman's mark of the House farm bill that was going through, but both the chairman and the ranking member spoke on the floor against an amendment offered by Peter DeFazio, which is essentially the Senate bill that he was proposing to attach, and we ran a floor battle that was out of this world. The environmental groups really came to the aid of the sustainable and organic people who were working on that, and we beat the establishment, and I'll never forget that night—I had tickets to a Bonnie Raitt concert at Wolf Trap, and I was in the fourth row, center, and it was a starry night, and I thought—anything in the world is possible.

RK: Wonderful! And that was where like 150,000 or more letters came in, too?

KM: Well, later on in the rule making, the first proposed rule, 275,603, but who's counting? Including the one that we submitted, Ferd and I, with the Wallace Center and with NSAC, and NRDC, which was about a hundred pages, single-spaced. So we had some thoughts on the first proposed rule. But going back to the '90 farm bill—do you want to talk about SARE?

RK: I do, yes.

(15:34)

KM: So that's when I really got to know Ferd. He would be a regular shadow at my door, and he was really pushing to have the SARE program embedded in law. There was in the 1985 farm bill something called the Ag Productivity Act, which was the precursor to the SARE program, and didn't say much, but we had some sustainability work there, and I immediately got engaged in that when I came in 1987 working for Senator Leahy. It was one of my pet projects I was working on.

RK: And we should say what SARE stands for.

KM: The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. It was also known ... out of the Ag Productivity Act they had a name for it, because no one said the Ag Productivity Act—I don't even know if you would know that phrase, but they referred to it as the Low Impact Sustainable Agriculture Program, known as LISA.

RK: Good old LISA.

KM: Good old LISA. So one of the things that Skip Styles, who was my counterpart in the House, and he worked for George Brown from California, a liberal Democrat, and I got together. We were so sick of going to all these meetings. And it's like—oh, that girly, sissy agriculture LISA, LISA. And there were all these articles that were really kind of ugly and super-sexist, and anyhow we initially named this new law that would really have a full articulation of SARE as it is today—Best Utilization of Biological Applications, for BUBA. Now, the House didn't go along with that language, but that was kind of our way of fighting back, and when we finally got this really nice text in the law—and by the way, the definition of sustainable agriculture was one of the few roll call votes in the 1990 farm bill.

RK: Wow.

KM: Unbelievable. I remember Senator Bob Kerrey from Nebraska coming up to me and asking me—what are we voting on?—because, for some of the senators it was very abstract and esoteric. I mean, Bob Kerrey being a great supporter and wanting to do whatever needed to be done, we won that, and that definition has stood the test of time. It hasn't been amended at all and is there for everyone to use. But when the law became passed and everything, I started to hear people refer to it as SARA, and I thought “No! It's SARE!” I'm not going to go through all of that again. But it really wasn't just about putting money into sustainable agriculture. It was also about doing research in a different way. It was a real recognition that farmers are investigators on their fields, and partnering them with research scientists was really going to advance sustainability in a much more important and faster and more exciting way than if we just gave a bunch of money to university scientists. Now I can say that because I'm at a university. I totally believe that. And so farmer-researchers, farmers out there being supported through the government program, has always been music to my ears, and so it's been an outstanding program. I don't know of another program that comes close in terms of its impact, especially for small dollars, the loyalty that it has across the countryside for people who know of the program. When I was deputy secretary more recently I proposed a 60 percent increase for SARE in the federal budget for the first two or three years that I was deputy secretary. Now Congress didn't go along, but it was the highest percentage increase of anything in the federal budget that went forward to Congress, so that gives you a sense of my feelings about the program and that model—more importantly, that model for doing research.

RK: Oh, yeah, it's very important. When I worked with the Land Stewardship Project, at that time we saw how important that was, and it was so, like you say, even symbolically that it's being recognized as being worthy of really good research. It's very important.

KM: One more comment on the 1990 farm bill. I just want to again say about the grassroots effort was amazing. There was an organization that was stood up, that no longer exists. There Organic Farmers ... OFAC ... I don't even remember what it stands for, but Tom Forester and others really led that effort to organize organic farmers. Again, not a group that naturally organize. I lived in a group house up by American University, and thank God, because I worked night and day seven days a week. I hardly slept for a year, and my housemates took care of all the shopping and getting my dry cleaning. They were good pals. They also put up a million farmers. I mean, my house was Farmer Central, and people would come and sleep on the floor and bring their sleeping bags and we would all of a sudden open the front door one morning and there would be a box of cauliflower, or ... [Chuckles] the farmers would express their thanks, but really it was such a great thrill to have such passionate colleagues in a battle where we were David and we were up against Goliath.

(21:15)

RK: That's really good. Well, then take us a little further up, then, into the '90s and then ultimately getting to 2001 or so, when it was approved, when the standards came through, and you were working ... just go into that a little bit. Were you connected with Ferd, and weren't you in his office for a while, too, somewhere in your career? When was that?

KM: So, after the '90 farm bill, I continued to work with the Senate ag committee for a couple more years. I left in '92 to go get my doctorate at MIT.

RK: OK, that's when you left.

KM: This is my sort of thing. My career has been going back and forth from academia to the policy making world, and I find it refreshing to bounce back and forth. Not that many people do that, but for me it's the right thing to do. So I left in '92 and went up to MIT and did my dissertation over a number of years, because I was always distracted by real life stuff. My dissertation looked at NSAC, and it looked at the Kellogg Foundation effort underway to organize, and also very much the SARE program. I looked at what does it mean to negotiate around issues within that sustainable agriculture domain, and what are the particular interesting issues around that, like this questionnaire that I administered in the tenth annual SARE conference. One of the questions was—if a space ship came from Mars and landed and the alien came out and said—"take me to your leader"—who would you ... I guess that was in interviews; this wasn't actually in the written surveys, so this is in a lot of the leadership interviews I conducted. Who would you take the person to, the alien? And without exception, everyone said there is no leader, and that's how we want it. Because it's really the adherence around people who are working in the sustainable ag and organic space to decentralize decision making is very, very strong. OK. But put that into the Washington, DC context, right? And the secretary of agriculture is like—find me the leader of the cattlemen! We can do that. Find me the leader of the cotton people! We can do that. On down the list. Find me the leader of sustainable ag! Well, there is no leader. So it just makes the whole thing more difficult. And then talking about what is sustainability, what is sustainable agriculture, right? It's a process, not something that you just ... it's a process of continuing ... it's a life orientation, it's an ethic. It's not a thing that can be scripted in a really nice, tight paragraph. That doesn't compute in Washington, so it was really

interesting. But my MIT professors were very suspect when I had a response rate on my survey of something like 67 percent. They said—no one gets that kind of response. I said—yeah, I did. I went to the SARE conference, and it wasn't required, and there was no time set aside within the conference to do it, but all of my friends in sustainable ag and organic ag, they'd hand it out on the bus, they would walk around the conference meals, and I got this outstanding database that anyone can have access to, and it's my dissertation is on file up at MIT, the National Ag Library, and all that. But looking at NSAC was really part of my academic pursuit. So I finished my course work at MIT, and I came back to Washington, and that's when I started working for the Institute for Alternative Agriculture, which, over the course of the time I was there, was renamed as the Henry Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture, thanks to generous donations by Jean Douglas Wallace. Garth Youngberg was the head of that, an amazing man. Most people know his history, that after issuing the study on organic farming when he was a USDA employee back in 1981, he was fired. So he then became a MacArthur Foundation Genius and got an award. Maybe if I got fired that would work. I don't know how that works ... but, anyhow, he used that money to seed this institute. And he had Neill Schaller there, former ERS employee. Kitty Smith, who later went on to be ERS administrator. Kate Clancy, who's done a lot of important work in the nutrition world. So it was a really ... Rick Welsh is up at Syracuse and now editing the journal. I got to know Willy Lockeretz pretty well from that process. He was the editor of the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*. This was back in the day. If you are a scientist and you want to write something and get it published around sustainable agriculture, hard to find a journal. That's not true anymore. Especially if it's related to food, it's almost hard not to find a place to publish it, because there's such a desire for that kind of stuff now. But back then, it was really, really hard, so Garth had the vision—let's set up our own journal and have that sort of rigorous peer review process through the institute and have a place for people to put out that important work. So I was there for, I think, about five years. The first two years or so I cohabitated with a friend of mine who is a lobbyist for California agriculture that had this exquisite, exquisite space, and all my sustainable ag friends would come in, and they would be treated like kings and queens, but they just didn't quite know what to do when they came in the board room, and I had access to all kinds of staff. It was sort of my friends ... I was their pet project. But Ferd and I were talking about a real need, and that was to go beyond the law making process. So the sustainable ag world was really getting good at how a bill becomes a law and lobbying Congress, doing fly-ins, that sort of thing. But after the law passed they sort of dropped the ball. Part of it was resources, but part of it was just intelligence. And later on I saw this in life. When I was a professor up at Tufts University, my graduate students, I would say—how many of you have ever written a letter (or at that point it was probably an e-mail) to Congress? Almost all the hands would go up. I would say—how many of you have ever responded to a rule making, written in about what a rule should be? And not only did no hands go up, but they would just look at me quizzically, right? So we were sort of at that point in time, so this would be the 1996-7 era, and so we wrote a grant to the Mott Foundation, received it, to work on policy implementation together. Decided I should cohabitate with Ferd, and so I moved into his suite of offices and went from the posh lobbying firm to do-it-yourself IKEA furniture, but couldn't have been happier, because we are very compatible and worked together, at that point, already a lot of years, and really wanted to build up that office as a hub for people engaged in sustainable and organic agriculture who were coming to town or needed to understand what was at play. And so one of the first things we did out of that grant was we started to send out newsletters to people in the field about what was going on, and, in particular, also what was going on at USDA or FDA.

That newsletter service, that sort of sharing of intelligence has only gotten better over the years. I now look forward to getting those e-mails from the organization, because I know there's going to be a lot of great stuff there that I won't see elsewhere. So, yeah, so Ferd and I were together, and I was very involved in responding to the first proposed organic rule at that point. That was one of the things that we did, among other things. But the Wallace Institute was at a crossroads, because Garth Youngberg, who was the founding director, was retiring. I had just had my first child and I was on maternity leave, and I was anticipating coming back and likely taking over as the new executive director. I remember thinking to myself—is this really a smart move? My husband had taken a sabbatical, so he was going to half-pay. And I was worried—and part of it was because he knew I was worried. I was going back into a pretty big job, because when you lose a founding director, that's always a crisis point for an institution. I thought I had some good ideas, and I thought I would pull it off, plus a new baby. While I was on maternity leave, the board met and decided to, instead, disband the Wallace Institute as it was and move it into Winrock International as a different sort of entity. And it wasn't a decision that I agreed with, and it certainly wasn't a decision that I wanted to lead. I didn't want to have to dismantle an organization that I felt had been so essential in its current form. So I started looking for a new job, and I went to USDA. I never would have thought I would do ... it was kind of like going to the Evil Empire. You expect Darth Vader to greet you at the door. But the deputy secretary at the time was Rich Rominger, who I had come to know because his farm had been featured in the National Academy of Sciences' *Alternative Agriculture Report* that was published around 1990, and he had formerly been the secretary of agriculture in the state of California, a very progressive man. And I said—Rich, you know, I need a job. My husband's on sabbatical; we can't go without an income. And it turned out I got a really big job. So I was worried about running a little \$1.5 million dollar organization. I became the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) administrator, which meant I had 10,000 employees and a billion dollar budget—wheoo—with a brand-new baby. But it all worked out, and the main reason I was hired—and Senator Lugar and Senator Leahy, a lot of Congressional members supported me to get that position—was because they had such a horrible response to their first proposed rule on organic, and they wanted to get straight. Dan Glickman, former congressman from Kansas was secretary of agriculture. He said they were going back to the drawing board, and that they were going to give me the crayons. So I came in, after that explosive response from the public that USDA had gotten it wrong, and started to re-write that rule from scratch. And one of the things that was really important to me was that when we put out the second proposed rule that we acknowledge all the comments that had come in, and we provided the information as to why we made the decisions we did. So it's like this is what we heard. We agree or we disagree for the following reasons. So that the proposed rule and the final rule (that I also oversaw) would become educational documents, not just—here's the rule—but really would help lead a discussion forum for where we were going in organic agriculture, not just the immediate scene, but also some of the to-do lists that we left, and what the vision was for that. It was quite an amazing process to pull that off in the midst of running the agency, but I became a believer in USDA at that point, even though they hadn't been very helpful to me in the course of my career in a lot of ways. I had USDA career employees pulling all-nighters, working on that rule. I pulled people from all different agencies. It was really phenomenally successful. So we put out this second proposed rule. We got 41,000 comments on that. But a lot of great—good job, Kathleen and team. And then we put out the final rule in the very last days of the Clinton administration. It came out in December of 2000, and, of course, January 19, 2001 was President Clinton's last day, so we

were cutting it close, but we got it out there. And the Bush administration left it stand. I don't think they really wanted to take on the organic guys.

RK: No, probably not.

(34:51)

KM: I will say that when I became AMS administrator the *Washington Post* did a profile of me, because everybody was interested—I was young, I was a brand-new mom. I came in with a six-month-old, and I left, after ... it wasn't quite two years, so maybe 19 months, with a two-month-old. Basically, I was producing babies in that period, and when I was finishing up the final rule, I had my baby in the carriage and I was going around all over USDA and later on, years later, people told me that was one of the more impactful things that I did. People couldn't believe that I would bring a baby to the workplace. So I'm on a ramble here, but I think the point I was going for was I had this profile in the *Washington Post* and I was a little bit of an oddity. I wasn't the typical AMS administrator type. And I'll never forget—they called out to Chuck Hassebrook, who I hope you're interviewing for this series ...

RK: I've already interviewed him.

KM: ...and the quote that he had at the end of the article said—she's one of us.

RK: That's perfect.

KM: She's [Unclear]. That meant a lot.

RK: Yeah, I'm sure it did. Well so then, besides bringing your children up, where did you go next?

KM: So after all of the Clinton administration stuff, and there was a lot more than organic that I was working on, including upgrading testing for meat around salmonella and E-coli, and all kinds of things I could tell you about—it was a great job—I found myself as a Democrat in a Republican town. I do identify as a Democrat quite strongly. And so I applied to be a professor at Tufts University, where Willy Lockeretz, the editor of the journal ... and they had a master's/Ph.D. program called Agriculture, Food, and the Environment (AFE). One of the things that I did as AMS administrator, besides coming in with a six-month-old and leaving with a two-month-old—my two kids are 22 months apart—I also finished my dissertation at MIT, so it was a very productive period. So I applied to be an assistant professor there and was hired. So we moved up to Boston, and for eight years I had the privilege of running that program, which, when I arrived, was the smallest of the programs in the school, and when I left was the largest. I really focused on getting my AFE students in really great jobs and great internships across the country, including with Ferd. So we sort of had a situation where AFE first, if I had the right student for him. It was sort of an automatic. I had the same sort of situation with Organic Valley and a number of organizations I worked with across the years. So my students really found themselves in great spots and found great leadership positions.

RK: And they're still ... yeah, I think it would be an interesting thing to know just where many of those people are. I'm sure they're in very important positions.

KM: Bob Scowcroft calls them "Merriganistas." [Chuckles] So I think the eight years I put in at Tufts I did some interesting research, including looking at a garden-based learning as strategy for increasing students' consumption of fruits and vegetables beyond what's grown in the garden, working on a lot of various sustainability pursuits. But most importantly, I was mentoring a young group of people who would become sustainable ag leaders themselves, and they are in great spots across the country in industry, in government, in NGOs. Yeah. At a certain point in your life you realize you're one person, and even if you work night and day there's only so much one person can do. And being a university professor gives you the multiplier effect.

(39:02)

RK: Yeah, right. I think Aimee Witteman was one of those people.

KM: Aimee was a great student.

RK: And she was my colleague at McKnight several years.

KM: I didn't realize that.

RK: That was really good—after working at NSAC. That's one great example, right there. She just had another baby.

KM: I did know that. I keep up with a lot of my students. So, and also, Aimee was in the part of this. Britt Lundgren was one of the students who is at Stonyfield. I had a bunch of students who looked at the Conservation Security Program, as it was once known, and something that Ferd has been a real big advocate, and NSAC has been a big fighter for over the years, because it's kind of our version of a green payments program, ultimately, bottom line. And we looked at it after the passage of the—oh, God, which farm bill it would be? I have to think about that for a minute. But we wanted to see how would this really work for New England farmers. It hadn't really been extended all the way through New England, so some farmers had a chance to do it and some farmers we did hypothetical application, but on the real-life farms, working with the farmers, what it would take. And our research was funded by American Farmland Trust, just a little pocket change. And the students that worked on that with me did such a great job that not only was the report circulated widely, but Tom Harkin, the senator from Iowa at the time, invited me down to testify at the first of that farm bill's hearings on the conservation program, and, ultimately, pretty much adopted our recommendations from that report. So for me it was not just mentoring, but it was also having the kind of people power and the intellectual capacity to move some mountains, so a great eight years spent there.

RK: Senator Harkin, I was saying ... there are people—about every person I interview I get more names of people I really should be talking to. Senator Harkin is definitely on that list. Especially for me—I'm an Iowan, originally.

KM: Yeah, no, really a great champion. Tom Daschle, a great champion. Of course, Pat Leahy. So you had some great people in the Senate, in particular, who were thinking about sustainability.

RK: I'm actually going all the way back to trying to see if I can interview Bob Bergland in Minnesota. Goes back to that original report, that one that got Garth fired, so there's a lot of potential out there for good people to interview, that's for sure. So, I wanted to get now to the years as the deputy secretary, USDA, how that came about. And then, that will hit on the "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food", and couple your real accomplishments there.

KM: So I would have stayed at Tufts forever, because it was a very fulfilling job, but my husband had never landed the right job in Boston. And so we were in a commuting situation, with young kids. The reality is I was coming back to Washington one way or the other, because of his job, and so I decided I would make a play for a job in the Obama administration. And I hoped to be undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs. And I put on a pretty good campaign for that and got the call from Tom Vilsack, saying we'd love for you to be the undersecretary. Yes! Started going through vetting, and in that time he was talking to me about the various candidates for deputy secretary, so I knew that they still hadn't made a decision. And then one day he called and said—Kathleen, we've changed our mind about you being undersecretary. And I'll tell you, I was just crestfallen, because I know it was coming—he's going to ask me to be his senior staffer, do whatever. And he said—we ask you to be deputy secretary. And there was no one more surprised than me on that, right? Because I'm from Massachusetts, I wrote the organic law, and then female. It's not a trifecta for deputy secretary. But it all worked out. I was confirmed by the Senate, I gave testimony on Wednesday afternoon, and Thursday by midnight I was confirmed. There was some tough questioning in my confirmation hearing about some of the articles I wrote, and it was bi-partisan, though. It wasn't like the Republicans were after me and the Democrats were defending me. It was like a lot of agricultural politics—it was more regional. You know, what crops you represent and all of that. But Pat Leahy was there to defend me, and so did Pat Roberts, from Kansas, quite eloquently.

RK: Oh, really? So something ...

KM: Yeah, I was sort of proud of that—with a lot of humor, with a lot of humor. So I became deputy secretary, and I had the basic job for deputy secretaries is to be chief operating officer. When you're talking about 110,000 employees and \$150 billion budget, I don't even know. I almost still today can't get my mind wrapped around what that means. Luckily, really great staff. And I had been in and out of USDA in various ways over the years, so I had a lot of trusted relationships with long-time senior career people. So I got good intelligence—that's critical, as opposed to being a politician who comes from the outside, I was seen as almost one of them in a way. I had garnered a lot of respect for pulling off that organic rule, in part, when I was AMS administrator years earlier. So I came in, and while I had those responsibilities—and I loved doing the budget—that's a big thing for me—and I like all that managerial stuff, I wanted to have some signature issues, and so there were a few. One was local and regional agriculture. Now, actually, Tom Vilsack, the secretary, asked me to take that issue on. Didn't tell me how to do it. But I said OK, that seems like it's in my space. So we came up with the idea of "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food", which was an initiative, not a program, not an office, no staff,

no budget. And some people thought I was crazy about that, but having been long in the tooth, politically, in this town, I knew to anticipate political push-back. And so when there were moves afoot in the House to get rid of “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food”, the appropriators were very frustrated, because they couldn’t write out in the appropriations bill the staff, the budget, the program, because it really was just an initiative. It’s about culture change. And so we were able to defeat those real efforts to undermine what we were doing. But “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” was about supporting local-regional. It was about trying to figure out within all of the programs at USDA how do you help local-regional? They don’t need a special program. I didn’t want it ghettoized somewhere, I wanted it throughout. And how did I politically take the body-blows? And I took quite a few in that. How did I take the political body-blows to make that politically safe space for people to be creative and think about how to do it. One of the things we did was we did a geospatial mapping tool called the Compass. It’s been under-utilized to this day, but my vision was that for anyone in the congressional world to say I don’t want this, they would have to look at the dots on the map of all the different USDA investments in local-regional in their state, and they would actually be arguing against their state, so it’s a very good silencing mechanism. More importantly, by doing this geospatial mapping tool, the idea was that USDA, which has 17 agencies—it’s so huge—one doesn’t know what the other’s doing, that would help identify gaps and synergies. So up in my home area in western Massachusetts, I saw one organization being funded by three agencies at USDA that didn’t know the others were funding them, right? And there were other parts of my state where no money was going in. So putting on the mapping tool helped. It also was a way to allow innovators to lead. So if I went into my FSA, Farm Service Agency office in Utah, and I’d say—I’d like to do this—and they say—oh, no, we don’t do that with a program, and I’d point on the map and say—this is really interesting. They did it in Iowa and they did it down in Florida, so why can’t we do it in Utah? So it allowed people to network and use the evidence about what’s going on around the countryside into really kind of sort through and find ideas and spark newer innovations. Ultimately “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” has really gone great guns and really changed the way USDA thinks about and helps support local and regional agriculture. The bigger quest that I was on is trying to make local-regional-organic—all minority people, all the people who felt like they were on the outside feel at home within USDA. You know, when you have a government agency, department, that’s so big, there are a lot of these people, political scientists, who write about agency capture and these programs become only for a few people. I think part of the problem is it’s just so complex and there’s just so many of them. And so how do you make government really accessible? How do you make it transparent? How do you get people to feel they own part of it? That was part of what we were trying to do. So it was bigger than local and regional. It was really about making the people’s department, as Abraham Lincoln termed USDA, really the people’s department. So I worked on “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food”. I also did a college tour as deputy secretary. I went to nearly 50 colleges and universities over time across the country, talking about “Know Your Farmer”, talking about careers in American Agriculture, because I was very concerned about the transition going on in our working lands and in our federal workforce. Before I had been invited to join the administration, before President Obama even won, I had opportunity to have cocktails with Tom Vilsack, and I gave him data from the Office of Personnel Management that showed that in the first term of Obama, 50 percent of USDA employees would become retirement eligible. And at that time, before the economic recession, the projection was half of them would do so. So you were going to see major turnover in USDA, and at the same time, we know that the average age of farmers is

around 59. So the future pathway for American agriculture wasn't crystal clear. So part of it was I was on a rebranding mission for agriculture and recruitment campaign, saying—these issues are at the center of everything you care about. You care about climate change? You need to care about agriculture. You care about social equity? You need to care about agriculture. You care about health and nutrition? You need to care about agriculture. So that was a really joyful part of what I did.

(51:00)

RK: And I would think that some of the work that NSAC was doing, people like Chuck Hassebrook with the beginning farmer programs and things like that must have really been in synch with that effort, right?

KM: Yeah, absolutely, so we were very focused on beginning farmers, all kinds of support for beginning farmers. We were very focused on farm-to-school, also as a way, not only to build on that research I was talking about in terms of changing people's, children's orientation to fruits and vegetables, but reconnecting the 99 percent to the 1 percent. So back then there was this big thing about Wall Street. You know, Wall Street was collapsing, and it was about the 99 percent of people and the 1 percent of Wall Street with all the dollars and all that. But from where I was sitting, it was the 99 percent of us who have no connection to the farm or ranch and the 1 percent that do. In fact, just this past month there was a Super Bowl talking head show I was watching, and one of the guys said—I forget the number was—how many chicken wings are eaten at the Super Bowl. It's like over a billion, I can't remember what he was saying, and he said—I wonder how many chickens that would be? I was like—divide by two? You know what I mean? [Both chuckle] So it was like the literacy—people joke about that, but it's really quite serious. Now, in this administration we were really lucky that Michelle Obama chose to make food, particularly childhood nutrition, one of her two core issues, the other one being military families. I don't think USDA had seen that much demand for their skill set in that area. We were very involved; I was very involved in constructing Let's Move! and I spent a lot of time in the White House on that. And when you look at the report that was the precursor to the Let's Move! title and the marketing materials, there's a lot of mentions of "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" in there. So very engaged in that, which was wonderful. It was a time when we were changing the dietary guidelines, so it went from the food guide pyramid to the My Plate icon. And talking about how we were going to battle obesity. One of the things I'd like to take some credit for—I don't know if I deserve it, but I was very concerned in those early days that discussions were about obesity and about hunger. And for me, I said, they have the same root cause, and that's lack of access to good, healthy food. And when you have that framework, sustainable agriculture is really front and center, so I had a lot of opportunities to bring organic and sustainable to my job. So I was able to bring in Miles McEvoy, hired him to be the leader of the national organic program, which was real exciting. He was someone I worked with back when we were writing the 1990 farm bill, and he was the kind of guy who was well-known in the organic community because of his good work, but he was comfortable wearing his suit and being a bureaucrat. Not everyone wants to do that, right?

RK: That's right.

KM: So he had the kind of bureaucratic cred that was important. He's done a great job. We decided that we needed to really put some more rigor into the organic program. One of the first things we did was work on the Access to Pasture Rule. That was something that had been sitting on the shelf for a long time, and it took a lot of energy, but it was really, really important. We did a lot of great things. I, very soon after hiring Miles, brought Mark Lipson in to work at the organic sustainable advisor to the secretary and myself. Mark's one of my best friends, and I know Mark because he was the farmer who was deployed to knock on my door, back when I worked in the Senate, to say we needed a national organic law. He was also the person who officiated at my marriage to my husband.

RK: Oh, really!

KM: Yes, and I told him when we did the dress rehearsal—he just did the regular stuff—I said—no, no, you're here, you're my friend, it's real important; you can feel comfortable to say something. Well, I grew up Catholic, and I had some of my Catholic relatives coming. We were in a chapel, not a Catholic church, and that was already kind of shaky enough for him, but I remember at the altar Mark saying—I'm from the organic farming divinity program or something like that. Oh, my God! So he was hired to come in and he worked with me on a day-to-day basis. And one of the things that is a nice legacy that he left was putting together a web-based training program, Organic 101 and 201, something like that, where 40,000 USDA employees, when I left, had taken it, meaning they are learning about what organic agriculture is. Now, you would think someone at USDA might know that, but really there's so much misinformation out there about what organic is, still to this day, that was really important. So the same kind of thing that I was trying to do with "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" around culture change, we were also trying to do culture change around the organic.

RK: Then just to take us through up to now, you left then after the first term, right?

KM: I did.

RK: Then you went back into academia, right?

KM: Back into academia, just down the road. I did a lot of agriculture stuff. Ferd's on speed dial; I can't imagine going very long without talking with him about one thing or another, so we're generally in cahoots.

(56:43)

RK: You're in a sustainability position now, right?

KM: So I'm the executive director of sustainability. I'm also a professor, and I'm teaching a course right now called "The Sustainable Plate." I'm also on a United Nations environment program steering committee, called Team for Ag and Food, and what we're trying to do is come up with an internationally accepted framework that scholars can use to put value on externalities of food production, both positive and negative. You can't manage what you can't measure is a good slogan to associate with this. So we're trying to not only do this, but also develop a network

of research scientists across the globe who want to work on this in common pursuit. I think it's very powerful; I'm very excited about it. I'm also co-chair of AGree, which is an effort that's been going on since 2011 to build consensus in food and ag reform, that's run by four co-chairs, two Democrats, two Republicans—Dan Glickman, Gary Hirshberg from Stonyfield, initially, Emmy Simmons from the Bush administration, where she was the number two person at USAID, and Jim Moseley, who was the deputy secretary under President Bush. Gary stepped down in March of 2015, and I was asked to take his place. So I'm spending a lot of time there, and it's a new place where they're asking me to think strategically about local and regional agriculture. I'm also really involved now in trying to think about the next farm bill, whenever that is.

RK: 2017-18?

KM: 2017-18. With the cut in price now, people are trying to do it sooner—who knows? Want to be in a ready position with the makings of the first urban agriculture title to the farm bill. It's time. So I'm doing a symposium later this year. I've been very involved in the discussions around dietary guidance in sustainability. The advisory committee that the government sets up to advise on the new dietary guidelines that were issued in January 2016, but they were due in December 2015—they gave themselves a little extension—that happens. The committee had recommended that sustainability be a criterion for making dietary advice, and the government rejected that. But I had held a symposium about that, had different activities, and actually was the lead author in a policy forum piece in *Science* magazine in October last year on this topic. So this whole idea that we need to address sustainability in a bigger way in food production—it's not going to go away, and it's about building that team of analysts, research scientists who are going to work on the kind of materials and the peer reviewed literature that will be necessary to really make the kind of changes that the farmers and ranchers that I work with in the sustainable ag world knew were needed many, many years ago. It's catch-up time. So I'm doing a lot of things in sustainable agriculture. At the same time I'm really learning a lot about the importance of making cement in different ways for sustainability. In battery storage—you know, if you have a solar farm full of voltaic panels, goats will jump on top of them; that will destroy the panels, but what about sheep? And what can we do ... so I'm really expanding my mind in terms of the sustainability space, a lot of it around energy and climate. A lot of it around urban sustainability, and that's great, because my goal is to be a lifelong learner. You know, some of the issues that I have shepherded over the years around the organic and sustainable ag, it's become a big club of advocates. Those issues have become popular, and I think part of my personality, and I'm a stubborn old goat, is I kind of like the issues that people aren't noodling on, and I love to kind of push them forward. So almost sometimes when my issues become very popular I say—oh, there's enough people who are going to do that. I need to find another thing where I will agitate. I think when Senator Chambliss, who was the chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, when I was confirmed, when he was pushing on me about things, I finally said—Senator, I've always been known to be a provocateur. I think that's a fairly good tag line for me in my career.

(1:01:39)

RK: Well, this has just been wonderful. Before we wrap it up I'd like you to give me your view, if you will, on what you think should be on more the on immediate horizon, and maybe further

out, policies that should be pursued by NSAC and the allies in sustainable agriculture, what hasn't been done that's critical.

KM: So my favorite book of many years is *The Third Plate*, by Dan Barber, who's a very intellectual, brilliant chef up in New York state. One of the most exciting meetings I've gone to in a number of years was one he convened, where he brought plant breeders together with some of the world's greatest chefs. And the breeders were saying—you know, we've been only been asked to breed for yield and resistance. We've never been asked to breed for taste. Dan is really leading a new field of work which I would call farm-driven cuisine. How can we have our plate reflect back to what the sustainable agriculture needs are? I don't know exactly all the policy ways you would deal with that, but I think that is really very critical. There's a lot there. I recommend that book to anyone. I'm using it in my class, actually. It's really made me think deeply about things.

RK: It seems like that would be another way to engage a lot of people ultimately to go into it, into agriculture, who are really concerned about food. So it has that further benefit.

KM: That's right. And so we have our happy international year of the pulse. There's an example—pulses as the food agriculture organization in the United Nations has said, make ... if we ate more pulses it would be really great for sustainability reasons. But they're not a normal part of our plate. How do we also avoid food trends? I had a great symposium last night that I put on at GW, and had a bunch of chefs, and they're all talking about how, first, everyone, every restaurant in America has Brussels sprouts, and then the cauliflower craze, and now it's ... I forget what they said ... anyhow, those things don't help. So how can we actually get into people's minds the kind of things that have ... those decisions that you and I as individuals and collectively as a nation really make a difference in terms of that plate? There's a lot of work that could be done there and I could write a bill. I could set up a new program. For me, for sustainable and organic agriculture, the biggest challenge is for them to believe that government matters. I guess right now, in this year, with how the election is running—we're taping this as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have just won the New Hampshire Primary, just yesterday, in sort of an anti-Washington, the system doesn't work, thesis—how do we get people to believe that Washington can work for them? How do we get people in the sustainable and organic world to say—we're citizen leaders; the government is ours. It's not us versus the government. That has been a central challenge across the years. So Ferd can come up with all kinds of great ideas, and I can help him and we'll work together, but part of it is how do you build that faith and commitment that you need from people in the countryside to really get over the top? And part of it is, I think, in the organic world particularly, there still is suspicion about big, and there's still suspicion about being too tightly organized, that whole decentralized impulse that I talked about earlier is strongly there. I had a great breakfast one time with George Siemon, who's the CEO of Organic Valley, now a billion dollar organic co-op, which I'm so excited about, and Mark Lipson, the organic farmer who I hired, and myself. We said—why, so often, is organic the firing squad of the left, meaning a circle. We are all shooting at each other, instead of seeing that the skirmishes—we spend so much time fighting about this, that, or the other thing, these little tiny things, and the organic standards, or whatever. And people will go to the New York Times if they don't like the outcome, whatever. And what they're doing is they're missing the big picture, right? Organic's still like this, and why the infighting, when you really need to fight all of this.

So, yeah, I think Ferd, NSAC, and how they put together their platform and how they decide what their priorities are is a very strong process. It just needs more people to believe in it.

RK: Right. I think so, too. I don't know if you have anything else you want to add. I think you really hit, along the way, a lot of the topics I wanted to cover and gets you very much in this record I'm putting together, in this archive. I really appreciate it.

KM: Good luck with it.

RK: Thank you.

Transcribed by
Carol C. Bender
WordCrafter
carolbender@msn.com
651-644-0474