

**Bob Gray**  
**National Center for Appropriate Technology**  
**Narrator**

**Ron Kroese**  
**Interviewer**

**February 11, 2016**

**Bob Gray—BG**  
**Ron Kroese—RK**

**RK:** Today is February 11, 2016. This is Ron Kroese talking, and today I have the privilege of interviewing Bob Gray, who is the representative for the National Center for Appropriate Technology and also represents other interests, including dairy farmers in New York, whom I have known for many years as an advocate for sustainable agriculture and conservation. We are in Washington, DC at the Mott House, 122 Maryland. So, Bob, thank you for doing this today. Really glad to have you here. I like to start these interviews out with what got folks interested in agriculture in the first place, and how come you have ultimately ended up devoting most of your career to agriculture in one way or another, particularly sustainable agriculture and conservation. So take me through your biography.

**BG:** Well, I grew up on a dairy farm in upstate New York, in Cayuga County, which is southwest of Oswego, New York, on a farm that we had about fifty head of dairy cows. I went to the ag school at Cornell, and what got me interested, really, in conservation was working the land. For some reason when you are plowing and turning the soil over—of course we try to avoid as much of that now as we can today—but there’s just something ... I had this feel for the land, and I think many people who are in farming growing up get that feeling. So as I went to college and I started working in the field of agriculture, primarily, all my life, I have always had a deep interest in improving the soil, protecting the land, and doing things that would make sure that you were not harming it. But, you know, those are the kind of things you remember as you were growing up and farming with my dad until I went to Cornell, and then I would come back and help during the summers and so forth, and then my brother farmed with my father for awhile. Our farm, which was near Lake Ontario, was taken for a nuclear power plant site by eminent domain back in the early ‘70s. They never built the plant. They took the land—we had 250 acres—they took about 3,000 acres. It was mainly dairy farms, and you could see why they went after that because there was a fair amount of acreage you could get, that amount of land accumulated pretty quickly by eminent domain. Rochester gas and electric, of course out of Rochester, wanted to build a nuclear plant, and eminent domain was the way these power commissions got the land. My father fought it for a little bit, but you can’t win on eminent domain. Long story short, in 1979 they were getting ready to commission it. Three Mile Island occurred—the plant was never built. The land sat there for, oh, my gosh, over 30 years. It was purchased for over ten million dollars by—and I can tell you nobody got rich, because they paid really ag prices. This was not an area where there was urban development or urban pressures on the land, but they paid that much out to the landholders, and then the town bought it 30-some

years later for \$2 million dollars. But they subdivided that land into 10- to 16-acre parcels, and some of it is being developed now into these ranchette kind of things out on the farm. So that was my experience. Then I went to Cornell in the '60s and was in the army for two years with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division in Fort Riley, Kansas. When I got out of the army I taught ag, high school level, including in Cato-Meridian High School, Weedsport, and Port Byron—they had what they called the Board of Cooperative Educational Services where they shared teachers between three schools, and there was a group of us who taught different ag subjects. I worked with the FFA. I had a young farmer program, in which I brought young farmers in. So then I went from there to work for the county planning office, because there was a lot of planning going on at that time, land-use planning as well as other resources, and I found that very interesting. I was always fascinated by land use issues, and I went to work for the Cayuga County Planning Board as a senior planner for three years. Then I was over in Vermont visiting a friend I had been in the army with, and I didn't see much possibility there for promotion in the future, and so he said—why don't you look into the state of Vermont? I said—gee, what would I be eligible for, what would I be qualified for? But anyways, I went down on a Friday afternoon in jeans and a tee-shirt. I met with the person who was head of personnel, and she said, well, the attorney general is looking for a person who has had planning experience. So I went over to the office, and I wanted to make an appointment with him on Monday, and his secretary said—well, he's in this afternoon. I said—well, I'm in ... she said—that's all right. Anyway, so I spent an hour-and-a-half with Jim Jeffords, who was attorney general in Vermont. He hired me; I became his budget director and planner for the Vermont attorney general's office, and that's how I got to DC, because Jim was elected to Congress in 1974. He started in congress in 1975. He was on the ag committee. That has always been a big deal—Vermont agriculture is extremely important. Senator Leahy is on the ag committee. Aiken was on for years when he was a senator in Vermont, and Jeffords knew I had an ag background, and as a freshman Republican, believe it or not, he got a staff slot on the committee, and in May of 1975 he hired me, and that's how I got started.

*6 minutes 30 seconds*

**RK:** I'd never heard that story.

**BG:** So that's what got me going. We worked on a lot of issues, and that was where we thought that we should do something about farmland protection, because the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) had a study that had come out, the National Resources Inventory, the NRI, which showed considerable urban development and pressures on farmland around our major urban areas, and a lot of very good land, and so Jeffords introduced a bill, but he was very close friends with Bob Bergland, then the secretary of agriculture. Mr. Bergland said—why don't we do the study, why don't USDA and I'll get ... he got 11 other federal agencies. He co-chaired it with the Council on Environmental Quality, and they hired me to be the executive director of that study, so I took over doing that. I was with Jeffords for four years, from '75 to '79. In June of '79, I became the executive director of the National Agricultural Land Study. Well, let me just drop back a minute. When I was working on ag issues in the farm bill in the ag committee, I was interested not only in farmland protection, realizing that that's not a federal issue per se, because it's a local land use issues, but the federal government can help with the state and local governments. But I was also interested in sustainable farming conservation. And somebody said

to me—have you ever met Ferd Hoefner? I said no, and they said—well, he’s right over in the Methodist Building, so he was one of the first people I met, actually, in the summer of ’75, so I’ve known Ferd that long. Ferd is really the high priest of sustainable ag. There isn’t anybody that I can think of that would tower over Ferd. He does it, he goes about his business, he doesn’t make a lot of noise, but he’s very effective. So anyways, in ’79 I became executive director of the national ag land study. It went on for two years. We had a lot of fights with some of the economists at USDA about the severity of this and the impact it would have on the availability of food supply in the future. Their argument always was that we will have new technology, we’ll have increase in crop yields, and, therefore, that would offset any loss that we would have in farmland. And the data was more sketchy, because you didn’t have global positioning and all of that kind of satellite information that they have today. They used county maps to do the NRI, and make estimates of how much land was lost, and they were always poking holes, the economists were, in this. But Mr. Bergland and his chief economist, Howard Hjort, who was a very tough guy. I mean, Howard was—give me the facts. But he looked at this and he said—it doesn’t make sense for us, prudence-wise, to lose a million acres a year. There was a three-million-acre figure, but of that a million acres was prime ag land, and he said that makes no sense at all for the U.S. to lose that kind of land, because it’s irreplaceable. And so Will Rogers would say—hang on to your prime farmland; they’re not making it any more. So anyways we fought our way through that study and got that done in 1981, and it did raise awareness of the issue around the country, and we did a book that we evaluated all the farmland protection programs, including agricultural districts, right to farm laws, ag zoning, transfer development rights, purchase of development rights—we did a complete assessment and how they were working, and what changes might need to be made. In addition to that, we did a report on the general overview of the impact of loss of farmland to urban uses. So that came out in ’81, right when the Reagan administration was in place. Fortunately, in changing administrations I had an informal advisory committee, and John Block, who was the director or commissioner of ag in Illinois, who became Secretary of Agriculture, was on that advisory committee that I had, so he understood and he was very supportive. So they started to do things internally at USDA to give states more technical assistance to use their, at that time, the soil conservation service, to help local and county governments assess their farmland, based upon the soil surveys and that kind of thing.

**RK:** Well, at that time, too, it came out, I remember, the severity of the soil loss issue, not just the farmland loss but the erosion problem.

**BG:** That’s right. This all came together sort of at the same time, from the mid-’70s and the ’80s, because the NRI had showed we were losing a substantial amount of soil. And part of it was based upon the fencerow-to-fencerow plowing of grasslands in the Great Plains, as a result, going way back to the sale of wheat to Russia, in the ’70s, and at that time farmers were encouraged to put in as much wheat—you know you’re going to see prices go through the roof—and they were doing that. That land was not suitable to be plowed up. There was a lot of wind erosion and sheet and rill erosion, and there was generally more corn and soybeans being grown, so overall, even in the Corn Belt, there was a higher amount of erosion. So farmland protection, soil erosion, the interests in sustainable ag, doing more to get sustainable farming practices on farmland also came together at that time. That’s right.

12:34

**RK:** That's good. Because that's when I was involved in starting the Land Stewardship Project, and I just remember a lot of the motivation was the idea of elevating the stewardship ideal to confront this issue of the way we were treating our land, and that we'd forgotten that we went through this in the Dust Bowl already, only forty years before, hardly that, and that yet we were doing those same things again, so it was a big part of it.

**BG:** And farmers were irritated with the federal government on things. Let me tell you an example. I've talked with a farmer out in Washington state where they put power lines through farmland where they could have gone around it; they could have gone around the edge out in the Yakima Valley. And this farmer said to me—the public power commission said I'm not going to let any damn farmer tell me where to put power lines. You could go under those power lines at night and you could hold up fluorescent lights, and they would light up. And insects wouldn't be under those.

**RK:** You can hear them buzzing.

**BG:** Yeah. And so those were the kind of things we thought the federal government could do, in fact, Bob Bergland once said to me—they brought me out for this, Farmer's Home Administration was putting this new sewer line in, dedicating it, and, he said—I went out there—I forgot which state it was in, but he said—they were going through like 200 acres of prime farmland. The federal government was paying for sewer lines, and all this land was going to be converted. So he said—we shouldn't be doing that. We're part of the problem. We're not going to control local land use. So, all of this is moving forward, the soil conservation and the farmland preservation issue sort of culminated in '85 farm bill, and I'm probably the most proud of all of the work that I have done was in 1985, because we got the Soil Conservation Reserve, we got the Sodbuster Bill, and we got sustainable ag authorized in the farm bill. And it was a tough fight. In fact, I used Howard Hjort's firm—I went to work for the American Farmland Trust, which ...

**RK:** You were with Jeffords at some time in there, weren't you?

**BG:** Yeah. After the National Ag Land Study was over, in 1981, I became director of policy development for the American Farmland Trust, a private non-profit organization dedicated to preserving farmland, both from policy matters as well as taking easements on land as well. So I was working with them up through the '85 farm bill, and we got these provisions in which were major, major changes, in my view, because we had never had a program, for example, of conservation reserve where you would rent land or get it out of production, put it into grass or trees, and the goal was 35-, 40-million acres, and you know who—I'll never forget, I was testifying because I would go to almost every hearing I could get on the Hill, and push the idea of the conservation reserve, and I was testifying before the senator from Indiana, Senator ...

**RK:** Lugar?

*15:42*

**BG:** What's that? Lugar! And Lugar was ... I started to testify, and I was giving some facts and figures, and he was looking through the testimony, and he said—Mr. Gray, would you hold for a

minute? I don't seem to have your testimony. And so the staff all jumped up, and about four copies were stuck in his face. "I have it now!" he said. But anyways, about three weeks after that hearing, he introduced a conservation reserve bill in Indiana, and he had the secretary of ag out there, and that was a huge help, because then it became really bi-partisan. Lugar was highly thought of, and he's on the ag committee, big ag state. I worked with many other conservation organizations. We actually had a conservation coalition, but we had the Audubon, Sierra Club, the Conservation Foundation, Wildlife Fund, all of those groups would participate with us, and we would talk about strategy for getting this done. I would have to say, in looking back over the last several years, that this was something I feel great accomplishment to get that much done in a farm bill. To move this issue beyond just trying to fund USDA's conservation money for conservation practices—we always had a big fight on that. It wasn't a lot of money, but this was a big outlay, and it really started ... and you know, it started, the idea for the Conservation Reserve Program came from farmers, my understanding is, in Colorado, wheat farmers, because that was where they had been plowing up a lot of land, particularly on the front range, and so Senator, I think, it was Armstrong, was from Colorado. But anyways, he was visiting with a bunch of wheat farmers, and he said—well, I don't want to regulate; this is more federal regulation. What do you guys think? So one farmer stood up and said—you know what you should do? If you want to plow up this land, go ahead and do it, but you won't be eligible for federal farm programs. Go ahead and do it—no one's going to stop you, no federal agent is going to come out and say you can't do it. And that caught on, because, in other words, if you're going to not plow up that land, then you're going to be eligible. And it was a good idea, and we were able to fight our way through that and get this passed.

**RK:** And that was, at that time, called cross-compliance, if I remember, and that it's now is called conservation ...

**BG:** Compliance, yeah. Cross-compliance seemed to get sort of a negative connotation, and so then from there we went on to other programs in the '90s, all the way through up to now, including the organic program was established in the '90 farm bill, and we had the SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program, which is great. We were always fighting for more research and technical assistance to help farmers, and the Conservation Reserve Program got going full-bore. And then over the years a lot of add-ons, including the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Farmland Preservation Program, the Grasslands Reserve Programs—they've all been consolidated now in the last few years, but they were all aimed at getting that land out of production. Now, in this case, these programs were permanently putting land out of production, where the CRP was a ten-year deal, but it still was effective, and the next NRI (National Resource Inventory) showed that there was a reduction after this program. Well, there was a couple more NRIs after that. I remember going out to Minnesota and going on a farm that had around 175 acres or so in the CRP. It was all in beautiful grass, and it was just nice to see that. The guy was growing hay, and it was very rolling, steep land, and he put it in the CRP for ten years. And he was happy with it because he was developing another market for the sale of hay. There was all these arguments about using the CRP when there were droughts and so forth, but generally, if that land is in grass or trees—not much of it went into trees—but if it's in grass, it's going to be OK, as long as it isn't plowed up.

**RK:** And that program—not to go much further with this—but that program came under stress with the big increase in corn prices back about three-four years ago, and some of that land, when farmers couldn't retire after the contract was up, I'm afraid, went back into production, and then we kind of repeated this cycle, that of over-production the price goes down, and there will probably be more pressure to put that back into the ...

**BG:** Yeah, now you're looking at corn at \$3.70 a bushel, where you're up to almost \$8 a bushel. And that puts huge stress on these conservation lands, because they want to use them, they want to get in there. And so as we move forward from the '90s, we kept getting additional programs—the EQIP Program that's very much geared for—the Environmental Quality Incentives Program—then the Conservation Security Program, going all the way up through to the Conservation Stewardship Program, and these have all just been add-ons, and during that whole time, Ferd just was quietly getting more and more sustainable ag programs through, the Beginning Farmer Program and others, and he would incorporate provisions into various ongoing USDA programs that would include emphasis on sustainable ag. That's a real key, because some of these things were not allowed by USDA by regulation, so we had to change them, and Ferd was just doing that on many, many fronts during that time period.

21:24

**RK:** And he was drawing on the strengths coming from the farmers that were part of regional roots, like the Practical Farmers of Iowa or the Land Stewardship Project, and the various groups that were ... so it was always one of the things Ferd is proud of himself is how we are always ground trooping all these ideas, either getting them from farmers or checking back in to make sure these work on the farm.

**BG:** Yeah, and I would have to say this. In addition to Ferd's work at the federal level, the Land Stewardship Project and programs like that at the state level would build the grassroots support, and that's what you needed. It was tough at any federal level to get any organization to get things done, unless—well, what about my state? What's going on in Minnesota? What's going on in Iowa? What about Missouri? You were one of the first—I was privileged to be on the board of directors of your Land Stewardship Project, but that was a huge help. That, combined with what Ferd was doing, gave him the political leverage to get these things done.

**RK:** So, we've covered your federal work, and that's really good, and now on your personal career, you, then, pretty soon just hung out a shingle as a consultant, didn't you?

**BG:** Yeah, I did.

**RK:** When did that take place?

**BG:** That took place in 1985. I had done the National Ag [Unclear] Study after I left Jefford's office, 1979 to '81, then I worked for the American Farmland Trust for four years, and I sort of decided that if I was going to do this now was the time to do it, because I had some name recognition out there among conservation organizations, and so I hung out my own shingle and set up my own firm. It became known eventually as Bob Gray LLC. It was a limited liability

company. Initially I did a lot of work for different conservation organizations. For example, I did a survey in Colorado of wheat farmers in terms of using the Conservation Reserve Program. I did a tremendous amount of work in Minnesota. I probably did more work in Minnesota than any other state on farmland preservation. I even did an evaluation on the airport they were going to build next to the Twin Cities ...

**RK:** I remember that.

**BG:** Yeah, yeah. I'll never forget, the guy said—boy, this is a good report. Although, this architectural firm and engineering firm, they wanted the contract to do all the work. They were not terribly happy with my summary that said if you put a new six-lane, or whatever lane, highway out in Dakota County and start building hotels, you think you're not going to convert farmland? All of that land is going to fall under pressure. Well, anyway, that airport, that extension, was never built. I think it's Dakota Heights, right in that area, is where the airport is right now. But, so, as we moved on, we just kept getting more things tacked on, and that was always the game plan, as we moved through the subsequent farm bills. Now '85, going back to ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas), in the 1985 farm bill there was some language put in there because we had been talking about getting information to farmers on sustainable farming practices, and so there was language in the farm bill that said that information of that nature should be provided to farmers as to how to improve practices that would help the soil, reduce pollution and so forth. And so Peggy Miller, who worked with the National Center for Appropriate Technology, she lobbied to get money to set up ATTRA, which was the Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas. It's under the National Center for Appropriate Technology, which is a private, non-profit organization. And in the fiscal 1987 appropriations bill she got \$500,000 to get it started. And that's when they hired me, because she knew I had an ag background, and, of course, she was fulltime staff at that time with NCAT (National Center for Appropriate Technology) to help get the staff recruited and start the program up. And we opened our doors to start to take phone calls on our 800-line on June 1, 1987. We were in Memphis and Shelby County, and that's when we opened our doors. It's been growing ever since. But I'm very proud to be associated. I've been associated right from the very beginning.

*26:11*

**RK:** I was privy to some of this because ...

**BG:** I worked for you! [Chuckles]

**RK:** ... I became the head of the National Center for Appropriate Technology, for NCAT, and it had already been through several struggles, but I think it would be interesting to talk for five minutes about just what an effort it has taken to keep that program going, because, as you referred to, not everybody within the bureaucracy of USDA necessarily likes some of those programs.

**BG:** No, they did not. It was the same way with the National Ag Lands Study, although that wasn't a program, it was just a study. But there were a lot of economists in the Economic

Research Service said, ah, that's a waste of time. I don't care how much land we lose—we'll have new fertilizers, we'll improve crops, we'll increase yields. Well, when ATTRA got funded in fiscal year '87, it sort of got off on the wrong footing. It wasn't intended to be that way, but the \$500,000 was added to the extension budget, and the extension service here in Washington said—we would have gotten that money. This is money that's going to a private non-profit; it's taken out of our ... it was an add-on; it wasn't taken out of their budget, but they did everything they could to bad-mouth it over the years. Now, which is so interesting, are the evaluations we've done—who recommends farmers to use ATTRA? Extension service agents at the county level are one of the highest, because these guys are overworked and stressed out, and this is one-stop shopping for sustainable ag. So that was our first hurdle, to get through that, which was not easy, because they had the long knives out to kill the appropriations for the next few years. We did not like it, particularly in Shelby County, where we were at the Agricenter, because the facilities wasn't all that good for us in terms of our staff. We had a staff of 11, that's who we started with. And so we talked to Senator Bumpers in Arkansas, who was very active, obviously, in ag issues, and he said—why don't you come over to Fayetteville, the University of Arkansas, because that made a lot of sense, then we'd be affiliated—not in any official way, but we'd be close to a university, we'd have the results of that research that would connect us with other land grant universities, and it was a great place to get new staff. So we rented some facilities from the University of Arkansas, and in 1989 we moved over there. Well, somebody was very unhappy, obviously, that they lost a tenant at the Agricenter in Memphis, in Shelby County, which is the county around Memphis. But anyways they went to Congressman Whitten, who had chaired the appropriations committee for 40 years, and he also chaired the ag appropriations—that was his specialty—but he chaired the overall committee. Well, he zeroed us out in 1989. But Senator Bumpers—I will never forget this because I talked to his staff guy, Chuck Culver, probably three-to-four times a day, and Senator Bumpers is very, very savvy guy politically—he knew what he was going to do. And so what he did is we got transferred to the Interior Department, to their extension division that they had, to get us out from under Jamie Whitten, and I'll never forget, there was a vote, because Whitten wanted this resolved, and he said—I'll give the ATTRA folks 60 days to shut the office down. And Bumpers said no, he said—I ask that we adjourn the meeting—because the co-chair Bumpers wasn't chairing that. I forgot ... it was the senator from North Dakota, but anyways, so they took a vote, and Bumpers voted by proxy with all the other members of the committee to adjourn the meeting. And that gave him time to go to Interior and work it out so we could be transferred over there. But I asked his staff guy, I said—god, I'm glad he had all those proxies. He said—he didn't have any of them, but he could have got them. He was bluffing Whitten. Again, that's one of those stories that you won't forget. I don't know if you want to put this on, but it was a ...

**RK:** I think that's very interesting.

**BG:** Yeah, Bumpers is very ... he was so helpful to us.

**RK:** Oh, yes.

**BG:** And we got over there and then the program started to grow. We started to get more money over the years. We now get \$2.5 million. Our second crisis—I'll just go through the crises—after that, in '89, which we actually ... Bumpers shut down the ag appropriations conference

committee for six weeks in order to get this resolved in the fall of '89. Then he got us over to Interior, so that was it. We got us out of the way of Congressman Whitten, and we survived. We got a little cut in our appropriations, but then we worked out very ... Interior was very good, but we were sort of like, to some degree, a square peg in a round hole. They let us do what we were doing with farmers, and we did some work with the refuges as well, because some of those refuges rent farmland to farmers, and so we were doing sustainable farming, which was really necessary on refuges, because of ducks and geese and everything else you have on the refuges. So that worked out OK, but then we got back into USDA, and we went to Rural Development, and that was during the Clinton administration. We decided that that was the time to make the move. And so we went in there, and the reason we went to Rural Development rather than back to Extension, because we'd had a little bit of difficulty, but not some other agency, was that a lot of the things that they were doing in Rural Development worked with cooperatives, have rural business cooperative service, and so it was very active with farming organizations, and it made sense. And so that's what we did. We were transferred back over there, so then we started to do work on farm energy, value-added products. Now they have a value-added grant program that's very good—as well as sustainable farming practice.

**RK:** NSAC played quite a role in that value-added effort with the Center for Rural Affairs.

**BG:** That's right. I should have mentioned the Center for Rural Affairs, that's another—all of this, your Land Stewardship Project and all of these others were working with Ferd. I mean, they worked with me, but Ferd was really sort of coordinating all of that. But, then coming forward to now, just mentioning, in 2015 we had 1.8 million contacts with farmers around the country through the ATTRA program, and that includes them going up to our website and downloading our 450 publications, contacting our office either through the 800 toll—less of them use that now because ... except the older farmers, who aren't that conversant with computers. But most of the stuff comes in on e-mail now. Somebody will send a question in—I've got this particular insect or this problem—and if we have a publication that will give them guidance, we'll start out, but if it's a very specific, very technical question, we have to get back to the person, get all the information on their farm, and then write up a very separate, detailed memo back to them as how to deal with it. But then we do workshops around the country, all over the country, and we get thousands of farmers that way, so those are sort of the three legs of the stool. And most recently, we have a program that I'm very fond of. We've started a program to help returning military veterans who want to get into farming. It's called *Armed to Farm*, and we've had over seven hundred veterans that we have trained. Now we are doing it week-long, and we just evaluated it. We got ahold of about a hundred of those veterans who'd taken the program, and what makes me feel so good that 80 percent are actively in agriculture now. Now, you can't bring somebody into this program who just woke up some morning, you know yourself, and say I want to get into farming. You got to know what you're doing. So if you've had some background, had some interest, had some connection, we have to screen the people we bring in. We get about 100 applicants, we take about 30 in each of these week-long training sessions. And this has strong bipartisan support.

**35:00**

**RK:** Yeah, that's true, and that's in the ATTRA budget now?

**BG:** Well, here's what's not in the ATTRA budget—yes, the staff provides all of the training, so that's all done in-kind, all of the materials. Now, they bring in USDA people and university people as well, and they go out to farms. Part of it is in the class, part of it is going out on successful commercial farms, whether it's organic or whether it's conventional or whatever. But we have to pay for all of their lodging, travel, and food for the week. It's not fair to ask them to pay for that. And so what we've done, we've asked for a little bit more money for fiscal year 2017, another \$250,000. We're asking for \$2.75 million, and we would use that \$250,000 to do more of these, and to pay for the travel, lodging, and food for the veterans.

**RK:** I had one last question about ATTRA. Hasn't, in the last few years, the funding stabilized or moved into the mandatory category?

**BG:** It has not, and you raise a very good point. What happened was this—we had always said we were authorized—this was one of our big crises. This might have been ... I don't know how this compares with Whitten, but we could have been wiped out on this one. There was this big issue about earmarks, and so it came up that ATTRA was clearly an earmark. You can look at the language in the '85 farm bill, but it's very general, so in the 2008 farm bill, we put in authorizing language. We didn't direct it to NCAT at all, because you can't do that, but we said a private non-profit would operate this program, and we listed all of the issues that ATTRA would deal with, and they would have a cooperative agreement with USDA to do this. USDA's been very happy, the Rural Business Cooperative Service, to have NCAT run the program for them. Their overhead is very low. We've had five administrations with which we've had excellent working relationships. But I tell you, we came, a couple times, this close to getting knocked out as an earmark. I spent a couple hours with staff on the Appropriations Committee, arguing about it. The argument that finally came through was that we were providing info to all 50 states. This was not some special little project that we had in Arkansas or some other state—it was national. And people said, well, but Bob, you're going to have to get this really authorized. If you don't get it authorized, it's very tough. So it's authorized, we still have to go back every year, though, and make our case.

**RK:** So it's authorized, and that's clear, but what isn't clear is how much money it gets each year.

**BG:** That's right, that's right. And we have to go in and make the ask every year, that's correct.

38:00

**RK:** And you're still doing that.

**BG:** We're still doing that. And the other crisis that came between the one in '89 and the earmark crisis was one where we did in one time run across an official down in USDA and Rural Business Cooperative Service who wasn't all that friendly to us. We had a meeting with him, and he had tried to go up on the website, and for some reason the website was down at that time; I mean, that happens. But he was very irritated by it. But anyways we went to one of his staff people and we saw—I want to bid this program and I want to get rid of NCAT. Well, the staff

guy who we work closely with told him quite frankly that you can't do it that easily. Anyways, we bought some time, and we were able to get help from the Hill to say—look, they're doing a good job; why do you want to do that? So we got rid of that. I wouldn't put that ... it's part of the three crises. I would say the earmark and the zeroing of our budget in '89 were the two big ones. Because we came very close to earmark, and we got cut. That was the thing. We were up to \$2.8 million; at that time we got cut back to \$2 million, but we remained in place, and we even had people volunteer to do work, and were not paid. That's how much the people liked that program. We have people with master's degrees, people with Ph.D.s, people who have been into farming. Some of our staff are in part-time farming while they're working for ATTRA. And we're all over the country now. We have offices in California besides Montana, the home office. Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, Pennsylvania, so we put up regional offices because the difference in agriculture in the regions gives us a core staff of three or four people who can really zero in on what's important, whether it's dairy, whatever the crops are.

**RK:** And, of course, practically, that makes it more appealing when it comes to be funded, too, if you can look at it as a national program.

**BG:** It does.

**RK:** Well, that's been very helpful, good information. And I wanted, also, to have you talk a little bit more about your other work you've done as a lobbyist, working here in Washington. I know that the dairy industry's been big part of your ...

**BG:** Yeah. When I started out, as I mentioned, in '85 when I incorporated my business and hung out my shingle, I was doing individual projects, and that got to be difficult after awhile, because a project has a finite time frame. Somebody would hire you to do something for six months, or you would do a survey, and I was just constantly—it was like painting houses. I was always looking for the next house to paint, and so I got a little tired of that. I had ATTRA, NCAT was a staple throughout all that period, because I had them on a year-to-year—I'm still on a year-to-year; if they don't like what I'm doing, they can get rid of me, but they've obviously been happy with what I've done, and I love to work for them. And anyways, about 1990 I had the chance to work with four dairy co-ops in the Northeast, because a guy who'd been executive director, working for these co-ops and representing them in Washington, took the job as the head of the Holstein Association. So I went to the co-op directors, because I had kept my hand a little bit in dairy, coming from a dairy farm. I knew a lot of these guys. So I went to them and they hired me in 1990 to become a senior policy advisor for—now it's called the Northeast Dairy Farmers Co-Operatives—and it represents five co-ops, about 7,500 dairy farmers from Maryland to Maine that are part of dairy co-ops, they are members of dairy co-ops. It's interesting, and I'll tell you one thing—the dairy business—and this is true in most all the other ag areas—but they are doing a lot more sustainable work. That is where I have found that that has been very pleasing to me that they have picked up on this, mainly because of the amount of coverage it gets through the work of Ferd and others, and they have become aware of it. And their customers have said—what are you doing sustainably? And even things like this—the co-ops now set up a computer system where their trucks make sure that they don't re-trace their routes, so their trucks pick up milk at this farm, go to that ... so they're saving energy, but they do all kinds of things like that. I have enjoyed working with them, and it's a nice extra piece. Those are the two things that I've

enjoyed very much. That's why I'm still working, because I like it. Even though people say—well, how do you get anything done in Washington? Well, you just have to keep pushing. We're going through one of those phases right now that is difficult in terms of expanding things and that kind of thing.

42:47

**RK:** I'd like to wind this up with you looking at your long career and where you think things ought to go now. What do you think are the key issues for NSAC (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition) and its crew, and even the ATTRA program—where are next places to go, both policy-wise in the short term, and even, maybe, longer term?

**BG:** That's a good question, because for NCAT and the ATTRA program, I just want to get the funding, more funding. And you know what happens here? The issues evolve and you have to be on top of them and pick them up right away. For example, when organic started to be ... you know, we had the organic program, we started to get more calls from people—I want to get certified. Oh, it's a very complicated process; you've got to take three years. And we've done farm energy; it became an issue where we've had a lot of questions. The value-added program, as we mentioned before, was put in, and that's used ... farmer's markets—all of those things. We have to constantly be looking at what's going on out there and where we can get our hand in to help in any way we can. In terms of agriculture in general, people may not agree with me, but I think it's headed, in many ways—the commodity programs have always been a big issue, the cost of them—but I think moving to the insurance programs, even there's some controversy with that, and they're voluntary. If you want to get in the insurance program, that's a better way to go than the various support programs we had over the years. Let me tell you this example in dairy. We never had a support program. We always had the program that would buy excess product off the market and store it, but that wouldn't give any money back to a dairy farmer. But in 2002, we got the MILC program, the Milk Income Loss Contract program, and that remained in place to 2014. It was targeted, capped for smaller farmers, 2.9 million pounds of milk a year, and so it worked very well, and when prices were down, they would get a subsidy from the federal government. But we've moved away from that, and in 2014 farm bill we now have an insurance program called the MPP, the Market Protection Program, in which you can get what is called ... you can buy insurance at a \$4 margin level, all the way up to \$8, and what that means is this: It's based upon your feed cost, and if your feed cost goes below a certain level in terms of your overall costs on the farm, you will get an insurance premium back. At \$4 all you do is pay in \$100 bucks, but if the margin goes down to \$4, I can tell you, you're going to be ...

45:40

**RK:** Is that \$4 for a hundredweight?

**BG:** Yes, for a hundredweight. We've advised most farmers to buy between \$6 and \$6.50, in that range, because that will protect them if there's low prices. And right now, prices are low. The problem is, last year was the first year, and a lot of farmers, a fair amount of farmers—almost half—bought up some insurance above the \$4 level. They bought in the \$6-\$6.50 range. However, the way the formula was calculated for feed cost, most of them didn't get any

payment, so they might have paid, laid out \$8- or \$10- or \$15,000, and you know, they don't like to do that. They thought they should get something back. There's a mind-set about support vis-à-vis insurance. But I see this as positive in the ag industry without getting into all these—I mean, there was so much criticism of these other support programs, and some people could get two or three different programs, whether they had a loss or not they would still get money. And we're moving away from that, which I think is a good thing. The crop insurance program itself has some warts on it, but I think it's a better way to go. But when you look at the budget—I just did a story for my dairy farmers on USDA's budget—\$151 billion—16 percent goes to the commodity programs, four percent of the budget, the \$4.1 trillion president's budget, it goes to ag. About two tenths of one percent goes into the commodity program. So it's not exactly that if we weight those out completely would it give us a big ... so I think, generally speaking, as flawed as many of them were over the years, the commodity programs have probably at least helped to stabilize our agriculture in this country—certainly not perfect, but they've been helpful. But I think now with the insurance and the way they're being structured, it's headed in the right direction.

**RK:** I think that one of the things that I'm seeing on the horizon, and I think NSAC is one of the groups working on it, this is to bring some aspects of that conservation compliance idea to that insurance too.

**BG:** Yes, yes.

**RK:** But if you are going to get subsidized by tax dollars, by taxpayers, maybe half of your insurance costs, really, up to that, then you should at least have some conservation on your land as a quid pro quo.

**BG:** And that, there has been a lot of opposition to that. We were able to get it in the '85 farm bill, which was amazing, but it was because as people thought about that, even people who were very pro either corn or soybean or what. They'd say—well, you know what? If you're going to plow up land that shouldn't be plowed up, go ahead and do it. We're not sending somebody out to stop you, but you're not going to be eligible for the program. It seemed to make sense. Now it's a little more ... these guys—oh, we got to have this crop insurance, and if we don't get it ... and now we have to do all this conservation ... I think eventually we're going to get that, eventually.

**RK:** Well, I think we've covered almost everything that was in my notes, about the policy work, things you've helped achieve, and your ongoing work. I don't know if you have any further thing. If not, we can wrap it up, or ...?

**BG:** I just find that I'm very satisfied with the work I've done over the years. I feel that I've had a small part in a big picture, and with the ag land study, with the work I did on the Conservation Reserve program, with ATTRA, and all of those working on sustainable ag in general, I feel that I've helped to make a contribution, and that's very satisfying, that I've been part of a bigger picture. But it just makes me feel good, and that's why I'm still working, because I like what I'm doing.

**RK:** That's great. Thank you very much for your contribution and this interview today.

**BG:** Thank you, Ron

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