

**National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Roundtable
Session II**

**Ron Kroese
Moderator**

August 2, 2015

Participants:

Fred Kirschenmann—FK
Ann Robinson—AR
Michael Sligh—MS
Chuck Hassebrook—CH
Mary Fund—MF
Ferd Hoefner—FH
Margaret Krome—MK
Francis Thicke—FT
Amy Little—AL
Duane Sand—DS
Teresa Opheim—TO
Duane Havoroka—DH

Moderator:

Ron Kroese—RK

RK: So we're going to start out, as we look at the successes and some of the challenges along the way, particularly successes that have had an impact, even on the organizations that you come from and the landscape that you're working in would be great in this session. So start with Chuck Hassebrook.

CH: I think the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition has had a profound impact, particularly on conservation policy, and it's had a profound impact on programs and initiatives to provide the same kind of support to farmers who practice sustainable agriculture and organic agriculture as the other types of farms. And that it's in everything from marketing programs to special research programs. I mean, to start out with the SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program, at one point called LISA (Low Impact Sustainable Agriculture), at one point called BUBBA—remember that? [All chuckle]. But it went much broader than that, building provisions into the large—I don't know what the latest name of it is, but the main competitive grants program at the US Department of Agriculture for sustainable agriculture and for economic opportunities. I think there's been a profound impact on both shaping conservation programs in America for agricultural conservation, but also in creating supports that mirror the kind of support that conventional agriculture has always gotten to sustainable farmers as well, in various arenas ranging from research to marketing and what have you. And sometimes I think we're starting to see the impact of that beyond farmers who call themselves organic and sustainable. I

was visiting a farmer awhile back who was a real pioneer in no-till agriculture. He was a really interesting guy. He got started out in no-till, a very conventional farmer, and as he did, he really got interested in soil health. And so now he's doing cover crops, he's looking at diverse rotations. He wants to figure out a way he can work some grass into his rotation, and it's remarkable to me. I remember reading once that change always comes from the margins, because new ideas come in on the margins, and eventually, even if you don't replace what is predominant with what was on the margin, you take elements of what was developed onto the margins into the larger part. Now you start to see that interest in how diversity and cover crops can improve soil health, moving from beyond organic agriculture to very mainstream agriculture, no-till agriculture. That's one measure of the influence that this movement and the public policy changes it's created has had. The biggest disappointment for me has been our inability to really crack the nut of the structure of agriculture. The Center for Rural Affairs and myself, personally, have always kind of had one foot in conventional family farm agriculture and one foot in sustainable agriculture, and because both have been our constituency, both are what we care about and what I care about. I came off a conventional family farm, and I believe that those farms contribute a lot to our communities and society, and our ability to really crack this ... to change this trend toward driving those mid-size, conventional family farms off the land, that has been the most difficult and most, I think, frustrating part of this work for me. I feel like I've left a lot of my blood on the floor in Washington over battles like payment limitations, to try to get government to stop subsidizing driving mid-sized family farms off the land. You know, one of the other things that was so important about that work about the structure of agriculture is it really did bridge a lot of the divides in agriculture. Again, for the Center, it was the bridge between sustainable agriculture and conventional family farms. It was a bridge between Democrats and Republicans in Washington, in all honesty. And where we would work most closely with Chuck Grassley on many issues was our chief ally. I had more face-to-face private meetings with Chuck Grassley than any other high elected official ever in Washington. I think that's been important. It's also built bridges between organizations. I remember the year we won the statutory creation of the Value-Added Producer Grant program. One of the things that led to that was we worked with the Indiana Farm Bureau and went to Indianapolis and did a press conference in a meeting in Senator Lugar's office with the Indiana Farm Bureau president. Because of that, at the time—I can't remember who was in control of the Senate? I think the Democrats were in control of the Senate and Lugar was the ranking Republican at that time, the ranking minority member. Because of that we were able to win that program. So those issues, I think, profoundly important to our communities, profoundly important opportunity for people in rural America, and they were profoundly important in bringing us together across party and agricultural types. Those were the issues where we were up against the greatest power.

TO: It's really important to remember how important federal policy has been to creating strong nonprofit organizations too, who work with farmers. We have received, at Practical Farmers of Iowa, a lot of funding over the years that have helped make the organization really a powerful one today. SARE is probably the best example. We might have had a dozen SARE grants over the years that helped us establish a really strong on-farm research and demonstration program. It helped fund a lot of field days where conventional farmers are learning from other farmers about what works on the land—just really important funding. We've had up to 40 percent of our funding come from federal programs that NSAC has worked on. The Beginning Farmer, Rancher, and Development Program—huge, huge win for NSAC and other groups, helped many

of us establish beginning farmer programs. Even sometimes programs that you might not think were especially a win, like the Individual Development Account Program was a win, getting it into the farm bill, but it hasn't been funded. I remember meeting with a staffer from Senator Harkin's office about that, and I thought—hmm, that's a good idea, and we advocated for that with NSAC, but we started our own program after hearing about how well that might work. So—ideas, you know, spreading through to other groups. From a farmer perspective, it's very clear that the Environmental Quality Incentives Program has been THE big program for our farmers, given the number of conventional farmers we have, and close behind that is probably Conservation Security, now Stewardship Program. Also many, many farmers enrolled in that. Just a lot of ways that we're a strong organization because of NSAC and the sustainable ag policies we have.

(7:41)

MS: Yeah, I wanted to build on that. I think certainly the research side has been very valuable to all of our farmers that we work with, and we work with the whole spectrum of farmers as well, farmers who are already trying sustainable agriculture, this helped them solve on-the-ground bottlenecks that they were having and give them resources to do it. And farmers who were conventional got to see something that was in research and published by USDA and gave it kind of a seal of this is something you can take seriously. Sometimes it also is a very small sentence that you're able to embed into a piece of legislation that can have a huge amount of difference, and I remember working with Ferd on defining who would be these regional committees for SARE. And in our region, where we have two and three distinct land grant systems for black, white, and Hispanic and Native American, those are very different systems, and by naming those players and requiring them to be a part of that regional council, it really, in many ways, was able to have us bring people who normally don't come to the table and really reflect our region more honestly, so that when we set priorities for sustainable ag in our region, we reflected better who our region was and were able to actually help communities that were not getting money at a state level at all. So that's a, I'd say, the model of how SARE is constructed is unique, and I think it is something we must defend over time, because internationally we still hold up SARE as one of the best models of how to do participatory research priority setting within a stakeholder community that is multi-stakeholder. And that's very unique; there's nothing else like that out there, and that, really, to me is a piece of brilliance for our movement. We stuck a little bit of language in the OREI (Organic Research and Extension Initiative) saying let's do a little bit of research on organic seeds. And if we hadn't stuck that one sentence in there ... it has spawned research projects all over the country and funded all kinds of seed development. It was just like one little sentence in there about this would be a research priority. So sometimes it is a little thing within a big thing that can really make a huge difference out in the countryside, so I think we need to always realize that it's not always the big things. Sometimes it can just be paying attention to the fine print and making sure that you nail that. We had big fights in the South trying to get the SARE program put in place, and if we had not had that language, we would not have succeeded.

MF: A short comment to add to Michael's is the sort of aside or additional benefit of the LISA program and SARE funding for research and education is that it did allow nonprofits like ours to develop those partnerships with some of the land grant and extension people that would have

been difficult to do without any money to throw on the table. So that created some partnerships that we could carry on to future work and endeavors.

FT: A quick follow-up is that I think that the research funding for SARE and for organic farming has changed the culture of the land grant universities tremendously. Before sustainable agriculture was something you did not want to be associated with. Organic was way off the court, off the reservation, but now suddenly there is money, then everybody is lining up for it, so it changes the culture immensely.

(11:45)

DH: There's a long list of programs that are in place now because of the work that the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition has done over the years. I think that one of the signature wins, everybody would agree, is the Conservation Stewardship, Conservation Security Program. And what I remember was kind of how that got done in the early part. People have been talking about green payments for years, but nobody really had defined what they meant. It was this nebulous idea that everybody liked but nobody could really explain. So we had, I guess, the audacity of saying let's figure out what that is. And we brought people together, and there were farmers and ranchers and policy wonks and spent a couple of days kind of bashing each other through these ideas, and came out with, I think, about ten principles that said—here's the things that a green payments program ought to do. So it was a huge first step to say—let's define this thing. But then we didn't stop there. The folks in DC started taking this around to folks in the offices on Capitol Hill, the folks in Iowa talked to Tom Harkin, the folks in the Minnesota Project put together this cute little brochure on stewardship incentives. And then, if I remember right, they sent that brochure around to other groups and said—put your own logo on this. It was one of those sharing things, and hand this around in your state. So that was the start of it, and obviously there was a whole lot of work to get the thing done, but it was, I think, a credit to the group that they said—you know, we can do this. And instead of just talking about what could be, we said—let's really make this happen. So I think it's a great testament to all the folks, many groups who were involved in making that happen.

FH: Going back to the SARE program, it was the first accomplishment that we had together, and I think it's still, warts and all, still incredibly important to the movement for a lot of the reasons people have said. It's done a lot. We've asked it, arguably, to do too much, which has sometimes been a problem, but it's really helped the movement so much from so many different vantage points. That being said, we've only successfully gotten it from \$4 million a year to \$22 or \$23 million a year, far, far less than where we expected to be in 1988 when we started working on appropriations for SARE. I mean, honestly, I think we thought we would be at \$50 or \$60 million in a matter of years, and here we are at a third of that. So it's frustrating on the one hand, but on the other hand, many of the things that SARE did, like fund organic research, like fund beginning farmers, like fund direct marketing stuff, we've spun off into other programs that also have a fair amount of money behind them. So if you look at it from that vantage point, it isn't quite as stark as you might think it was otherwise. And it's really an accident of history. Had SARE come along ten years later, we would have been arguing for mandatory farm bill money for it, and probably have succeeded, but because it was early-on, we are locked into an appropriations cycle on it. Which leads me to another point, off of the SARE point—just what

we've been able to do to change the way people think about the farm bill. Remember when we started and right on through till 1996, there was no money in the farm bill other than food stamps, commodities, and conservation. And conservation, of course, was only as a result of the huge battle in the 1985 Farm Bill, so it was the newest of the three, and the smallest, though today it's of equal size. But the idea that the farm bill could fund rural development, that it could fund value-added, that it would fund ag research, that it could fund local food systems—that was unheard of until we put that on the agenda, first with the Fund for Rural America in '96, and then really big-time in the 2002, even bigger in 2008 and 2014 Farm Bills. There's very little appreciation for that today in Washington amongst newer people. They assume that's the way it's always been, but that really happened because we fought for every single one of those, and we got over the hump of making that a legit item for farm bill funding. So that's, I think, really, really important contribution.

(16:44)

RK: Would you elaborate a little bit more on that, Ferd, on the SARE, why it stayed at, you know, it's only up to \$22 million—you touched on the fact that it's not mandatory, but why isn't it bigger? Who is opposing it? What's going on there, when it's such an important program?

FH: Yeah, so I think part of it is when it started the other competitive grants programs at USDA weren't particularly large, either, so it was one of a bunch of under-funded competitive grants programs. And now, fast-forward to today where what's now the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, or AFRI—used to be called the National Research Initiative and had other names, but it's now so much, so much larger, and it's where all the ag research lobby time from other organizations goes into, so now we're in a situation where we're a very small ... I would say the agricultural research establishment and its political lobbying muscle in DC don't even, they don't even think of it as being a sister program or a smaller offshoot. It's not even on that radar screen, and that's an increasing problem that we're still trying to figure out new strategies for tackling, but it is problematic, and you know it's ... look at President Obama's budget proposal for this year. He proposed, I forget what—a hundred million dollar increase? Something on that order of magnitude—or even slightly more than that—for the AFRI program and level funding for the SARE program. Until we can reverse that attitude, it's going to be difficult.

FK: I'd like to pick up a little bit on Ferd's comment about beginning farmers and very grateful for all of the work that we've done to move that forward, but I think that one of the problems that we have with that is that the general public is not very aware of the actual situation that we're facing in terms of the future of our farmers, primarily because USDA still uses 1947 definition of a farm, which is any place that produces a thousand dollars in gross sales, or would have produced a thousand dollars in gross sales if that place had maximized its full production capacity. So the general public thinks we have 2.1 or 2.2 million farms, and that doesn't sound too bad. But one of the things that Mike Duffy has pointed out, when you break down the actual statistics now, as of the 2012 census data, 80 percent of our total agriculture sales in this country are produced by just a little over 158,000 farms, and almost half of our farmers are now over age 60, and only six percent are under age 35. Now you can't project that very far into the future before we've got a serious problem. Now on the other side, on the good news side, we have this new generation of millennials who want to farm, but they need access to land, they need access

to affordable capital, they need access to the kind of markets that can enable them to get enough income to pay off their investment and have a decent life. That's really what they're asking for. And maybe we can talk about this more in the next section, but these, I think, are some of the kinds of future policy issues that we should take a look at and see if there's something that we can do, especially about informing the public about our actual situation of the futures of farmers.

(20:28)

AR: Thinking about some of the accomplishments that we've had that might be under-appreciated that aren't the big ticket items or big programs—one that comes to my mind that I have seen being important over time is I believe that our discussions and lobbying really led to the development of the state technical committees and bringing more voices into the decision making and planning around how money from the Natural Resources Conservation Service gets spent at the state level. I've seen so many, and talked to so many people who have benefitted from the types of cost-sharing that I don't think would have been available without the input through the state technical committees, including, I remember, one of my proudest moments after I left involvement with the Sustainable Ag Coalition was working for the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. So I got to be on the state technical committee when it was brand new, and one of the things that we were able to do was help develop organic cost share, cost share for organic practices, and bring Francis Thicke to the table to help. There was a small meeting with Francis and I and maybe one or two other people, talking about what that might look like, and start to plan for what kind of practices could we be planning to help support organic agriculture, when just a few years before that nobody there probably would have wanted to talk about the O-word again. Since then, as I've worked on communications with farmers through the ATTRA program with NCAT and through case studies, talking with young beginning farmers or different kinds of farmers about how those cost share monies that, I believe, that we really helped make possible have helped them, has given me a lot of satisfaction.

DS: As far as measuring success, I think it's important to measure it over time, and how much money is appropriated to a program that our coalition pretty much created is not the sole measure. There's a critical time for many of our programs, such as the Wetlands Reserve Program, the CSP Program, in particular, where they were under attack and other people were after the money, and so it's a matter of persistence in not only winning it, but being there for it. There's also a matter of continuously improving it so that it develops more of a following and more public support, which is often a thankless job with administrators and rule making to try and get it right. But beyond that, it's the importance of a coalition strong enough that when it comes time for major budget cuts, that they back off of our programs because we're a force to contend with. I really hope that people don't underestimate the value of that, because it's very valuable.

(24:00)

MK: So I want to mention two or three, again, programs that say something about how we function as an organization. One is organic. We have a subset of our community that really, daily, engages in and cares about organic, but, as a community, we have embraced it, and that's been characteristic of a lot of the work we have done. We say—I don't get wetlands, but I care

about them because you do, and I will write my letter and I will call my member, and we've done a lot of that, and that's the virtue of any coalition is that we don't have to each know everything or care about everything. We have a level of trust in the quality of the thinking behind the processes behind our policy development that enables us to yield ground, accept, and get with the program, even when it's not our own strongest suit. That's been important, and organic is one of many examples of that. But we, as a community, work with others. In fact, we've spawned offshoots. The National Organic Coalition, I think, has been a perfect example. A former staffer with the National Campaign, who led it, Liana Hoodes, and a lot of her work, and then there's been a long, strong coalition with Michael Sligh and others, really building a lot of work which we have had staff working actively on and moving. So that's a whole area that's been really critical, I think. A really interesting, to me, example of the flexibility that this coalition has shown—when you consider the funders fund us to do certain things, and they don't always fund us to do things that come up during the year. So, a perfect example of that was about, what, I guess four years ago, I suppose? When we had at one of our meetings a loud resounding message that we needed to be working on food safety and people looking at each other—food safety? Where do we get funding to do that work? No, don't worry—we got to do it. And I really think that we need to stop and notice that level of responsiveness. Ferd and the staff said—well, we have no funding right now to do the work that you are saying we need to do. We hear you, however, and really sought funding, worked like dogs to get more funding, and operated without sufficient funding, and really became the determining factor in the Food Safety Modernization Act passage and then implementation. Without us, there's no question that the whole food safety apparatus, which is such an impact on small farmers and also medium-sized farmers and organic farmers would be very different from what we ended up with, and I think that's a really inspiring opportunity to see that agenda setting, which has been one of our distinguishing traits. I think one of the things that NSAC's been known for is what some people call a hyper-democratic process of agenda development and distillation, but there are times when we've said—OK, we've made that our agenda and we hear you. We're going to shift and add onto that. And then the last thing I just want to add to a point that's just been made about, Duane, about implementation and rule making. You know, this point about, I think, Mike, what you made about paying attention to fine print, we've done that very well. And I tell you, there's no finer print than rules. They could put you to sleep in a sec. We have been given information on how to become effective with rule making. Had it not been for NSAC, none of us would have ever submitted public comments, and as a rule, as a consequence of NSAC, we've had a lot of impact.

(28:14)

AL: Just like to look at the big picture—I don't know too much about specific policy programs, but about our capacity for change, and I think there are a couple of things we need to recognize. We are operating in a broken system. The system is very broken. Everything from we have decision makers we're trying to influence, and those decision makers are in place because of a broken system, money, elections. I think we need to very much recognize that in that broken system we can work for incremental changes, that somehow we need to keep recognizing that the system is broken and we sometimes need to re-tool in different ways. In addition, I agree that we're at the beginning of the next step. We are at the end of the beginning, and we've made very much progress in the movement for local, but that's only the end of the beginning, and it's not

enough. So we need to address more of the barriers to sustainability, new barriers that arrive once we've come to that. And also I think a big challenge is race and equity. I don't know the answer on how to address it. I don't think that we are going to correct it, but somehow I think we need to find a way to work on it without losing the non-racial issues that we work on and keeping those in there at the table while working on race and equity.

RK: Good. So, Ferd, do you want to have a last remark on this part, and then we'll move in ... you've already touched on it some, you know, in the areas of priorities going forward, but let's hear a wrap-up on this subject.

FH: Just some random comments more than wrap-up. Picking up on something Francis said earlier about his experience at USDA and what you could say and not say, and what the culture was like, and how it's changed over time, and I agree with that, it has changed for the better. I addressed how we try to knock down the barriers that are preventing more diversified, sustainable systems from being in place, and I think we've succeeded to a significant extent on not only knocking down barriers but with EQIP and CSP and other programs, actually putting some incentives in place, on the one hand. On the other hand, I think back to something Garth Youngberg told me when we were first trying to do that campaign around the 1990 Farm Bill, and we were pushing for what became the Integrated Farm Management Program option, and he said—you know, you can put that into law, but speaking as a political scientist, I will tell you that, and knowing something about the culture of the Ag Stabilization Conservation Service, it's going to be really hard. They won't even understand what it is you're trying to do and what you're talking about. I listened and I understood what he was saying. I didn't discount it, but I didn't think it would be the challenge that it is, and that program did some things. It was a really long, difficult fight, and then, luckily, in some ways, in 1996 we got full flexibility, and we played a really key role that people tend not to remember to get grass-based agriculture part of planting flexibility. And so that sort of went away as an issue, and we started focusing on first the Conservation Farm Option, and we couldn't get that off the ground, and then Conservation Security Program, and Conservation Stewardship Program, thinking that if the ASCS, FSA side of things was difficult and they didn't get it culturally, what we were trying to do, that somehow NRCS was going to be easier, [All chuckle] and let me tell you that has not been the case. Right up until right now we have a new CSP five-major-point campaign as they are going through a major change in Conservation Stewardship Program, starting for next year, and we're still at some of those same basic issues that we were working on in 1988 and '89, in terms of how difficult it is to move agencies that are populated by people who think about agriculture in one particular way. And so I just think we've made enormous strides, but Garth's message is always in the back of my head. It's more than changing the statute and changing the rules—it's changing the people and the culture that's so big. So I think segueing forward to the future, that's part of it. And then another big barrier in the sort of knocking down barriers is picking up on what Margaret said. So here we were, we had never worked on food safety, we had never worked with those committees in Congress, we had never worked with the Food and Drug Administration, and we had zero, zero money in the budget for it, but we adopted it, and we set off on a legislative campaign. Mind you, who would start a legislative campaign when the legislation's already halfway through Congress, having just about passed the House by the time we got started? It was kind of insane. So with zero budget and very few Hill contacts and not all that much knowledge of the underlying statute, we launched in there. And against the united

opposition of both the produce industry by the major trade associations and the consumer groups, all of them, we took on eight Senate amendments on the Senate floor. We won all eight of them. And then, two years later, FDA is writing the rules, they sort of more or less ignored most of those amendments. Major grassroots campaign now; thankfully, we had a little bit of funding—not very much, but a little bit—and we got FDA to do something that is fairly unprecedented in the federal government, which is to re-propose a proposed rule. And while not perfect, they’ve certainly come a lot closer to where they needed to be, so that I think is a testament to how much we address barriers, or could be barriers, in that case, to what we’re trying to accomplish, and how we can pull grassroots and DC policy together almost on the fly in this particular case, and succeed because of ... we could not have done that, had we not been through all the other legislative battles that we’ve done and how the model and how the grassroots and how all that has come together. We couldn’t have dreamed of doing that without that kind of track record, but I think that in terms of the responsiveness to what a new set of players from newer member organizations of the coalition bringing forward and saying—this is critical—and then addressing it, and doing it. The jury is definitely still out; the thing hasn’t been implemented yet on the ground. We’ll see what happens—much could still go wrong, but we’re clearly in a much better place than we would have been had it not been for those interventions, so I just wanted to call attention to it.

(36:45)

CH: Ferd’s comment reminded me of one thing, and it speaks to the importance of the broad set of relationships that are developed among all the players in this group, and how important it is to have those relationships that transcend some of the boundaries we deal with. Ferd mentioned getting planting flexibility in the ’96 Farm Bill. If my memory serves me correctly, part of the way that happened was we were getting told—no way the cattlemen will allow that—and we made a call to David Burkholder, who runs a commercial feedlot in central Nebraska, was, I think, at the time, maybe, the head of the National Cattlemen, but was also an alfalfa dehy guy, and called him and said—hey, this doesn’t make any sense—and he got the cattlemen to say it was OK. I mean, I just ... having those relationships where we transcend, where it’s not just the sustainable ag people, but it’s us in relationship with other people, trying to be straightforward and honest and decent to each other, even as we disagree on some things, is really important, and makes a big difference.

RK: And has been a key to success. It’s a great way to, I think, put a little bit of a period on this part of the discussion and move more deliberately, now, towards looking towards the future. I’d like to have, say, the next half-hour be devoted to that. Be thinking about, like, what is really needed in the big picture of moving into sustainable agriculture in the United States. I think we’ve stayed pretty focused on the United States. And then, what’s that going to take, both externally, big picture, and also what’s it going to take for NSAC? How’s it going to achieve what it needs to with the continuing struggle with limited resources? We certainly aren’t going to solve that here today, but I’d at least like to get some of them highlighted, and we’ll do the same format, two or three minutes, and then we’ll pop over to somebody else and do what we can with this next period of time. Margaret’s already spoken some, but Mary raised her hand, so if you don’t mind, we’ll start with Mary and go from there.

MF: I'd just like to start with saying that one thing we haven't recognized is that everybody is sustainable now. The language has changed. I remember working with the dean at the land grant who said—sustainable isn't even a word. It's not in the dictionary—I don't know what dictionary he was using. [All chuckle] But everybody is, and so it has changed the definition to some extent. Monsanto is sustainable, and all the other companies, all their advertising is geared toward that, so I think we have to think about that as we move forward and have to keep pushing—not that we want to get involved in the whole definition thing, not at all. But keep expanding that definition and keep making sure that we're talking about ecologically based, biologically based farming systems. And again, system is a real important word to that. A couple other comments to make quickly—challenges, the whole issue of conservation cuts in a time of climate change—I don't think we've mentioned that yet today, what's going to happen. Here at a time when we should be paying more attention to soil health and adaptation and so forth, and water resources, they're cutting the programs. I think that's part of that sort of public education, getting it out there that these are the problems of agriculture and food production. And another challenge is the attitude among a lot of farmers that we work with, conventional and otherwise, is a strong anti-government attitude that—I don't need any more government programs to tell me what to do. Part of the problem is that we need those programs to also tell people what not to do, but we continually want to focus on voluntary programs. I think that's necessary, but to get there we have to have a really strong awareness among not only the farmers, the conventional farmers, the sustainable, organic farmers, but consumers as well—what it takes on the land to actually produce food.

(41:26)

FK: I'd like to put two things on the table as we think about the future. First of all, at least in my experience, working with my own colleagues in sustainable agriculture, we're still pretty much focused on how to make the current system a little less bad. That's not going to take us productively very far into the future, because everything that whether we're organic or conventional or CSA or whatever kind of agriculture we're doing, we're doing it on the basis that all of the inputs that we've been using, which have been relatively cheap and abundant, are simply not going to be there. The fossil fuels are not going to be there cheap. If you take rock phosphates, as an example, back in 1961 we were only paying \$80 a ton for rock phosphates; now it's \$700 a ton. And all the statistics I've seen, we only have about 20 years of rock phosphate reserves left in this country. And then we're using up our fresh water resources and we've got more unstable climate, so we really have to start thinking, now, about a future that's very, very different, and then how do we have a sustainable agriculture under those circumstances. So I think we have to, in our public policies also—and I know this is going to be very difficult, because people aren't ready to think about that, but at least we need to think about how are we going to reframe ourselves as we move into this new future, to really rethink the way we're doing sustainable agriculture, and I think one of the resources that I've seen recently that are very, very helpful in this is a book by Ehrenfeld and Hoffman called *Flourishing*. Their whole point in their book is that we currently think about sustainability, again as I've said, in terms of making these few modifications, you know—if you just use the right light bulbs and you buy a hybrid car, etc., then you're kind of there. That's not going to prepare us for the future. So how do we begin to at least think about what kind of public policies we want to promote under those circumstances. The second thing, which is the good news side of what I want to think about in terms of the future is that—and this was about ten years ago, one of the many

conversations I had with Bill Heffernan, whom you all know, who did more research than anybody else in terms of the concentration in the food system—and about ten years ago he told me, he said—if the industrial food system were to choose an appropriate logo for itself, it would be: Just eat it. He said we've created a culture where we simply have passive recipients, and so people go into the restaurant or into the supermarket, and they buy whatever's there, and they don't have any questions about it, but he said—already ten years ago—he said, that logo is rapidly disappearing, because we're now seeing the evolution of a new community of what he called food citizens, and these are people who are actively engaged, and they want to know where their food comes, they want to know what's in it, and that's the new community that we have to think about. So as I think about this, as I said earlier, coming from North Dakota, I've never been terribly optimistic about what could happen at the national level, and, of course, Ferd and others have changed that in my mind now, but I think that we need to begin thinking about, now, how we are going to take advantage of this new community of consumers, and, as you all know, many of our major food companies are already beginning to do this. We've even got companies like McDonald's now, who are changing the kind of food that they're going to use in their restaurants. So right now I think we all understand that the primary control of our public policies, particularly in Washington, comes from the vested interests. So you've got the input suppliers, you've got the food processors, you've got many of the commodity groups, all who have made huge investments in the current system, so they're going to do everything they can to keep the current system going as long as they can. Of course, they have all the campaign funding, etc, so they pretty much have control of what, in the larger picture of things, is going to happen in it. But as this new community of food citizens emerges, which is primarily in our urban communities, you're going to see the development. And what you are seeing, to some extent, this population of voters who want to see changes. Therefore, I would predict that within the next ten years you're going to see more of a balance between the food citizens and the vested interests, and then I think there's going to be much more opportunity to make the kind of changes we're all envisioning and thinking about, so we should begin thinking about preparing for that kind of future.

(46:26)

MS: I wanted to follow up on the challenges, looking ahead, and, clearly, I think Fred pointed to part of the elephant in the room is that at the macro level, a lot of what we have done has really been about a pro-democracy movement, if you will, with a little-d. Where I go home to the family barbeque and we have these big debates, because I have a wide family with a lot of political different views in West Texas, and one of the areas where we can find common ground is when we start off with this argument that government is bad, that we just need to get rid of government, then we go back a little further and say, well, maybe the reason government is bad is because of the power of special interests in taking over the role of the government, and that's where I find the common ground. I think that we can make common ground when they understand that it's really the special interests that is undermining the democracy in terms of being able to get someone to vote right, or being able to get someone to actually carry out some policy that is in the interests of the public good. So I think Fred is right that we're at this teetering moment between private gain versus public good. Partly, I think, we have to be careful that we can shift into a proactive mode and not be caught in a reactive mode. This last farm bill was horrendous. I mean, it was herculean that we came out of that process with the programs still

somewhat intact, because the attack from the other side was so vicious. So, in looking into the future I think we have to have more cross-movement coordination. We've got to tap into these food eaters and these urban players who may have no immediate understanding of rural America, but without those critical partners—not necessarily to become part of NSAC, but to bridge that—because, you know, we're not going to get to the shores of sustainability through environmental stewardship alone. We have to address justice, and so we don't want NSAC to take on too much, but we have to cross those barriers and build those relationships if we are to really get at the structure issues, because that's what it's going to take to really turn that lever.

TO: The local food movement has really expanded dramatically in recent years, and the number of groups in NSAC who are food-related has expanded as well. One thing that's a challenge for our future is to keep farmer-focused. Here's a good example: fruit and vegetable producers I know are either not profitable or netting very little, and why is that? They just don't get enough for their product. What policy solutions are there that can help? That is the real elephant in the room. We all love local foods. We all want farmers markets. But if you can't make a living doing that, it's a big problem. The crop insurance issue NSAC is already taking on. They have not had crop insurance, for the most part. That's a big help. Where else in the policy area can we help in that area? We need more people eating fruits and vegetables. We need to get those into our school systems, we need vibrant programs in hospitals—all of that, but the farmers are just not profitable.

(50:23)

FH: So a few things: one, picking up on Mary's point that everybody is sustainable today, and that really has changed the conversation for good and for bad. The looking forward policy part of I get. I get questions all the time—you weren't at the sustainable supply chain x, y, or z event. Every single month, some place in the world, usually at some expensive place in the world, there is some sustainable supply chain for x, y, or z commodity or whatever. I mean, they're just happening all the time, and that has percolated into the funding community, which is probably more interested today in funding supply chain policy initiatives—they're not policy initiatives, they're marketplace initiatives—than they are in funding policy initiatives. In no way, shape, or form am I knocking supply chain initiatives, but I do think that we have a task ahead of us, is to try to figure out what the intersections are, for good and for bad, between policy and supply chain initiatives, especially those that are sustainable in name only. So, I think that's an emerging area, and I don't know who has given that a lot of thought. I certainly haven't, but I'm really interested in it. And then building on what Fred and Theresa said about local-regional food and food policy, that's also ... I feel like we've come full circle. In the 1970s, there was this big focus on let's talk about US food policy, and that sort of went away. Now it's back again, really big-time, and when I go to some of those meetings, I always go in with one expectation about what I think it's going to be about, and it turns out the agenda is really different—it's rarely ever—even the word farmer might not even turn up in the discussion. You could sit through a two-hour meeting and nobody's even talked about production, so that's another big area. Just like the supply chain thing, I think there's going to be more talk about creating a better US food policy, and food almost treated as a vacuum from the rest of the supply chain, so I think that's an area we need to look at. Another one that probably gets too little play, but is really important is just the downsizing of the government in general, but of the USDA in particular. USDA is ten

percent smaller than when the Obama administration started. That might create shouts of joy from some of our libertarian parts of our community and some of the anti-government attitude out there, but from a program delivery point of view, here we are fighting for our programs, making sure each agency is paying attention to us, and if you take out those human resources, then we no longer have internal champions. It's quite likely that the people working on our issues are not going to be at the top of the list in terms of who gets downsized. And we had a secretary of agriculture and a president who say—we have to cut the farm bill conservation budget, because we don't have the people to deliver it. That's a real problem. I disagree with their analysis, but the fact that they will say that publicly is a real problem for us. So I think that's a problem. And the last point I'll make is that we, I think, as an organization are about to start a several-year concerted effort to reform crop insurance, and it will be, if we decide to go forward with it, it will be a really major undertaking. We've had a social contract on the commodity side. It hasn't worked perfectly, but there was targeting, there was means testing, there was conservation requirements, so we've got conservation requirements back into crop insurance as a result of the 2014 bill, but none of those other things are there, and talking about reforming a social contract on what is now the largest ag subsidy program ever is going to be a massive undertaking. So if we're serious about that campaign, that's not super-longterm, but more midterm, but it's going to ... rest assured everybody, it's not like we're going to go out there and win it all in the next couple of years. It's going to be a long-term effort if we're really going to try it. And it's at a \$9-to-\$10 billion-a-year program. We'd better pay attention to it for access reasons, for structure of agriculture reasons, for conservation reasons, for environmental reasons—all of it. It's all impacted by it, so I think that's going to be a biggie.

(55:34)

AR: Well, as we think about the future and about, maybe, this generation, the founding generation of NSAC, handing the reins over to the future, two things that seem worth just thinking about, to me, although they maybe go without saying, but I'm not sure of that, and that is that process is maybe almost, or even more, important than policy, sometimes. And I think NSAC has been a really incredible example of that, and that is the process of relationship development and trust building and sharing resources that brought members together with the farmers to build courage and hope that change could be made. That, I think, have really made this so unique and powerful. And so I think it's important to think about how to hand some of that forward to the future. And then another piece of that that I've often thought of through the years is that, to me, I've always so had as a touchstone—it was Barry Commoner's first line of ecology that everything is connected. To me NSAC has really helped sort of implement that in the world, to help us connect and connect our issues with other issues and see where the overlaps are, see how what we do on environmental policy affects how people are living in communities out on the land and social justice and energy—so many things. So I just think that it's important to keep those principles in mind as we move into the future.

MK: I was thinking along very much the same lines. I was thinking about leadership development within our community, and, the fact that everyone sitting in the room came from—and we're all white—we all came from, to one degree or another, privilege that we probably didn't examine very carefully, and we've been invited, in fact obligated in recent years, to understand in new ways. It carries a whole lot of new obligation for us, I think. As a movement

we defined the issues as they were brought to us by the people whom we worked for, and those were mostly white people. They were mostly people not dealing with historic racial injustice, and yet those people who weren't our immediate constituents were affected by the work we did. They were unknowing stakeholders of the work we did. And I think it brings a challenge to us as we think about our future—how do we speak to, engage, and help cultivate leadership and find new processes that are honorable, just, hope-inspired processes for people who have historically experienced repression, injustice and have had very little hope, in many cases. How do we bring them into this process, this democratic process of understanding the interrelationship of rural and urban, of consumer and production, of government and citizen, and have it be not just a crazy mess, which it could be. We've often dealt with some crazy messes, and we need to make sure that as we go forward it is a fully engaged and responsible process. So that's a very important process, but I think we have not historically had as strong an understanding of as we have now. If this past year didn't inform us all about privilege and racial privilege and other kinds of privilege, that we really haven't been listening or caring the way we need to. I also really appreciated Michael's comments about our doing what we have done in a democratic structure, based on assumptions about democratic process, and we have been able to go to Chuck Grassley and talk with him, and we've been able to cross bridges. We are currently operating in a period where some of the elections and our democratic electoral processes are creating a different face of Congress, and we need to understand how we can find our power, notwithstanding that, and use it. It's a tough one. That's going to be a really hard challenge for us, but we can't give up on it. We just have to know that we're having a very different Congress than we've had. The last thing that I'd like to say is that we do need to cross bridges and find constituents who are mainstream farmers. I really appreciate the idea that our issues can serve a lot of people who often just blindly follow whatever their commodity group tells them to think, or their farm group tells them to think. In fact, a lot of our agenda can serve a tremendous number of farmers in this country and a lot of consumers in this country, and I would love to see us use the assets we have, like some of the conservation programs. I love, for example, Theresa talking about EQIP and how powerful it is in the lives of the farmers with PFI, and I find that in Wisconsin, too. Southwest Wisconsin's got a lot of farmers using EQIP and CSP, so let's use the programs we've got to find that common ground with farmers on a person-to-person basis to help us get out of the boxes of policy prescriptions handed to them, and help them find the common ground that allows the kind of conversations, Michael, you have with your relatives in West Texas. I think that's going to be a really critical part of our future.

(1:02:08)

FT: I'd like to focus in on a more specific issue and make some suggestions, Ferd, to plant some seeds, maybe, for policy. And that is water quality comes and goes, but now in the Midwest you're hearing a lot about water quality, and you've all heard about the Des Moines Water Works and nitrates. They're suing the water districts and this is like a crisis, what's going to happen here. My suggestion is that look at the Farm Bill '85 where conservation compliance came in, farmers were required to have a soil conservation plan, and they have to meet T [soil loss tolerance level] on their farm. Aside from the politics of T, they all do it, and it's not a big problem. I'm suggesting we need a T for nitrogen and T for phosphorus on every farm. And the thing is that the reason is that science today tells us that we've been mistaken. NRCS has nutrient management plans, and that basically says—don't apply more nutrients than the crop needs. But

the research showed that will only account for ten percent of the nitrogen. Most of it is the fact that corn and soybeans are inherently leaky, they're going to leak nitrate whether you do it right or not. And so we need something new, and this might even be getting at the structural change—that we need cover crops, we need perennials, we need something different, but most farmers don't even understand it in Iowa. They argue against it and the Farm Bureau puts out the disinformation campaign, so it's total confusion. But if we could have it required in the farm bill that every farm has to meet... and we know that in Iowa we need to reduce our nitrogen by 42 percent, reduce the phosphorus by 29 percent. We could take the water quality research data we have, put together a model like a Universal Soil Loss Equation, and we could have, farmers put in their practices and then spit out—if you're going to meet T for N or if you're going to meet T for P, and if you don't, you've got to put some new practices in there. And so we could actually, in a quasi-regulatory fashion, which farmers may accept, we could really make some progress and achieve something like that. I'm just thinking I'd throw that out to you guys who are doing all the work. [All chuckle]

DS: I'd just add a little bit to what Francis just offered in terms of this flash-point of this rural-urban division that's happened through litigation. Essentially, customers of the Des Moines metro area's water works were facing a \$160 million infrastructure cost, and their board identified that litigating against the polluters was probably a better use of their resources than jumping into \$160 million infrastructure investment. From a standpoint of building rural-urban support in cooperation, it's the wrong direction, obviously. At the same time, it's the lowest income who have the most at risk if we don't make polluters responsible for doing more of their own cleanup. The element I'll add here is that the nutrient reduction research done through Iowa State University identifies that we can do everything possible working with farmers, and that still won't be enough, because we actually have to do treatment within a landscape scale, that it's going to take targeted riparian buffers, it's going to take targeted treatment of wetlands, it's going to be a very large investment. And so I think part of the upcoming challenge for Sustainable Ag Coalition is, because politicians are so bad at planning, setting goals, prioritization, accountability, that we have to be the ones to be technically sound and to speak the truth of—the science says. The easy answers are not going to do it, and we're going to continue to have flash points, because we've not basically come to grips with the reality of what's going on here.

(1:06:09)

AL: I believe we really need to recognize that to make the changes we envision we have to think about our movement and NSAC is not the movement that is very key in it. So while we're being strategic in building alliances and partners, we need to help keep NSAC being very strong and shoring up what it can do and staying focused, and at the same time use that trust that we have identified that has worked and extend a little bit on what we're working on that might not be in our immediate bucket. So those kinds of strategies, as well as scraping at the broken system to try and improve it. So that kind of three-pronged thing is staying focused, keeping our organization strong, recognizing that the movement is bigger, so having alliances with others, and working to change the system that is really broken. I think those are important things for us to move forward in the future.

CH: One of the keys to this organization is its people, which is one key is that we work to keep active farmers engaged. That's always going to be important. And the other thing—for every organization that transitions from its founding staff is the most critical point in its history. And I think this organization has benefitted so much from Ferd, and so much of its strength is invested in his intellectual and relationship capital and respect for his knowledge of issues, that we as an organization—it's really going to be critical to be serious about the transition that has to occur when Ferd decides it's time to stop. And that's really critical to the future of this organization.

RK: That's a very, very good way, I think, to end this in a way, because, in fact, that was really what sort of sparked the fact that I got to thinking about how we needed to have a gathering in this archival process, because didn't want to lose the wisdom, not only from Ferd, but from all of you, as we try to figure out all of this, how we're going to go forward to advance sustainable agriculture. So thank you very much for that, and thank you for all your comments and cooperation.

[Applause]

RK: Can we go off camera now, or ...?

MK: Well, I just want to say, I have one ... one of the critical players in NSAC's development, and later in its funding, and in its support for many years and in many ways was you, Ron Kroese. And it feels funny to me to have you on the other side of the table when we're talking about early founders, when you were such a central founder. I'm hoping somehow we're given an opportunity to focus upon some of that in this documentary. [All laugh] Now ... [Applause]

RK: Yeah, and the answer to that part is that this is sort of a ... this came up kind of at the last minute. I was just going to do all these individual interviews with everybody, and then Ferd told me—hey, there's a bunch of people coming; we ought to take advantage of it. So there's a lot more folks that are going to be interviewed and then somewhere along the line I'll be interviewed. I'm going to interview the folks at Land Stewardship, George and Mark Schultz, in particular. Dana Jackson. That will give me a chance to kind of come into it at that process. I've been thinking about that some, too, and I would feel bad if I weren't part of that archive. So thank you.

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