

**National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Roundtable
Session III**

**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
Amy Little—AL
Teresa Opheim—TO
Duane Havorka—DH

Moderator:

Ron Kroese—RK

RK: What we're going to begin with this afternoon is a look back at the farm crisis, particularly of the '80s, and just the extent of it and its impact on the groups, broadly, and then how it relates to the NSAC, or what became NSAC, in that whole federal policy effort. So, Mary Fund has agreed to start this off.

MF: OK. The farm crisis was sort of a pivotal point for our organization, in that we suddenly were hearing from conventional farmers from all across the state who were having problems—you know, foreclosures and bankruptcies and a lot of family problems, and it brought us into working with the religious communities. Churches were suddenly involved because of the conflicts at the local level. You had families doing strange things, with criticizing another family because, well, they had flowers at their daughter's graduation, and here they are in bankruptcy. So there was a lot of judging going on. People who had been worth a lot on paper and had been encouraged to borrow that money by Farmers Home Administration and by bankers—you know, get big, expand—suddenly found those loans called in. As an organization we found ourselves ... and our founder and director was an attorney, and he started looking into these things. We worked with Gene Severens at the Center for Rural Affairs and on borrower's rights, and put together manuals and started having meetings. Often the bankers in the community would come and sit in the front row. All the farmers would sit in the back, because nobody wanted to admit that they were one of those having trouble, but they were all there. So it was a grassroots crisis, and we responded by forming farmer advocate networks around the state of farmers who could respond to their neighbors who were in trouble and provide them the references to attorneys who

could help them and to free legal services where possible. And a lot of the lessons of it, I think, are in danger of being lost. The new generation coming into sustainable agriculture doesn't have a history of that, they don't understand what happened. As I was telling somebody awhile ago, Kansas Farmers Union did a session at one of their last year or year before's annual meeting, which was an evening to view a film, I think out of Iowa, on the farm crisis, a documentary, and then had a panel of people from Kansas who had worked on ... working with farmers, and there were young farmers in the audience who afterwards said—I had no idea. I thought they were just poor managers, that's why they were going out of business. And they said—we looked around the room, and here were all these old farmers with tears streaming down their faces, because they had lived through that, they had neighbors that had perhaps committed suicide or were a loss to the community. So it had a long-lasting impact on rural communities, on churches and relationships.

(3:46)

FK: I think part of the problem here is part of a larger cultural problem, and again I would try to look for the good news in terms of all these kinds of difficulties, and one of the things that I've encountered, again, as we think about the future—because one of the things that causes these kinds of ... it isn't just the immediate things that caused the crisis, it was also the system that we're in that enabled that to happen. So there was an article published in the *Harvard Business Review*, in the January-February 2011 issue, by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, who are two of our leading economists in the country. They write this article to the business community, and the title of the article is "Creating Shared Value." And their point in this article is that if you're in business—and they aren't just talking about the food industry, they're talking about business generally, but the food industry clearly applies here—if you're in business and you're still operating by what they call the old play book, which is you want to get your labor and your raw materials as cheaply as possible so you can maximize the profits in your own business, and you want to externalize your environmental costs and your social costs as much as possible to maximize the profits in your own business. And they say if you want to continue to do business by that old play book, you're not going to be successful in the future, because the quality of the raw materials that you're going to be getting now are becoming so degraded that you're not going to be able to use them to be successful and do business, and the communities in which you do business are going to become so deteriorated because of the externalization of environmental costs and social costs, that you're not going to be successful in business. So what you have to do now if you want to be successful in business is to create a system where you share value. You look at the whole system that is going to be successful based on the shared value concept. And they make a very compelling case for that, and I don't know how successful they are in terms of the actual business community. I do know that Michael Porter is doing workshops around the country with business leaders about this. But I think that the point that they make is clear. And this is where we can see this in the food system now. It's because we have those deteriorated raw materials produced as cheap commodities to produce the processed food that we have, and you have people now like Anna Lappe, who published this article recently about how companies spend billions of dollars to give us crappy food, and the public begins to understand that. So, eventually, I think that companies are going to have to pay attention to this shared value concept. Now, how can our public policies take that concept and begin to implement or incorporate that in

our public policies, I don't know, but I think it is something that we should have conversations about.

RK: Definitely. Michael, did you have any ... maybe comment about ... when I think about the farm crisis, my window tends to be the Midwest. How about your part of the country?

MS: I think in many ways Reagan presided over the outcome of bad policy that came before him. He really did pick up that and, as was pointed out, he was responsible for stopping the Bergland report on "A Time to Act." He stopped the USDA first-ever report on organic, both of those, fired Garth, and said—no, we're going back to this approach. And many farmers were told—if you want to be successful, you have to be more efficient. If you're going to be more efficient, you must get bigger, and you've got to go borrow some more money, and that's where you got to go. And so farmers would go in and say—I want to borrow \$50,000, and they would say, well, land values have skyrocketed—your equity in your farm, you can borrow \$150,000. And the farmer goes—well, geez, \$150,000, really? Yeah, you're worth it. You can do it. You can get big! And that was the policy, and that's what the credit encouraged them to do. But not all farmers were put in that position. Minority farmers in the South and organic farmers in the South and folks who wanted to do something different or look different were discriminated against in another way where they actually wouldn't get the loan. They would go and apply for the loan and look for the increase in money and would actually not get it, or if they got it, they would give it to them too late in the season, so they failed and they still got their farm. And many of us had to get involved in that issue and bring a lawsuit against USDA on behalf of minority farmers to try and rectify that. I wish I could tell you that we have closed that chapter, but in many ways we have not. They have just become more sophisticated in the way they discriminate against farmers. So this is not something that just happened in the '80s. This is something that we're still dealing with yet today. You're an organic farmer and you want to borrow money? They highly discourage you not to, because that was a crazy idea. I think that's an important piece. I was thinking the other day—people could hardly, scarcely believe that we would have had 10,000 farmers on the mall at USDA, and we did. And we had them driving crosses on the mall and saying—this cross represents every farmer who went out of business as a result of your policy. We had this petition, and we were going to take it to Dan Blockhead—no, Block, excuse me—and make our case to him. And what their response was is they called out helmeted police on horseback, and I've still got pictures somewhere of them like hitting us with clubs on the mall while planting crosses on behalf of farmers. I mean, can you believe that? It's hard to believe that that would be a history that is not known very well.

(10:29)

FH: So this was, obviously, all part of the context in 1988 and '89, as we were getting started. I think part of the problem statement we were trying to deal with was how to mid-scale family farms who have made it past the worst of the crisis—what's the future? How do they, can they stay in business? Do they have to get bigger and more specialized or not? So to me, coming into that setting, that was the hopeful thing. That was what got me so excited when I came to Wilder and Madison in those early meetings was this idea that there might be this moment in time when farmers would listen to something that said—hey, what about controlling input costs? What about increasing value in the marketplace through differentiation and value-added? Maybe this is

the way to go. A lot of people were doing that and are still in business, so clearly it's worked for some. Whether it changed the landscape, I think, is a different story, but I just think that was important. And it was something that I then took away. I'm thinking back to the early '90s, after our successes in the '90 Farm Bill and people started paying attention to us because before that nobody knew who we were. You know, started getting invites—come speak to the National Corn Growers Association annual gathering in Washington, and those kind and Farm Bureau and others. And I would inevitably, as soon as it got to questions and answers, get the very first one usually was some derogatory statement about sustainable agriculture, and you're out there to ... whatever—destroy the universe. So I would always fall back to that—OK, so what you're saying is strategies as farmers, thinking about strategies to lower input costs and increase your return in the marketplace—what part of that do you have difficulty with? And that would always change the tone in the room—almost always. [All chuckle] I can think of a few cases where it didn't. But anyway, I just think that was an important part of the approach that we were taking to ... beyond the farm crisis.

CH: Looking back on the 1980s, I don't think that I realized at the time what an extraordinary time it really was. It was extraordinary for human suffering, particularly for those farmers who happened to have debt, because it was really a debt crisis, and those people had debt because they had bought land or gotten started recently or whatever—they really got hurt. It was also extraordinary for just the focus of America on agriculture in a way we've never seen since. I remember when I was organizing on our anti-corporate farming law in western Nebraska. One Sunday morning I was staying at a board member's place, and I turned on Meet the Press. On Meet the Press is the secretary of agriculture. George Anthon from the *Des Moines Register* is one of the interviewers. They have agriculture on Meet the Press! I don't think that's happened since. So it was an extraordinary time. It made the issues we cared about, family farming, more kind of put them on the agenda, and that was one of the things that was truly extraordinary about it. The other thing it did was it did make farmers who found that the current system wasn't working very well for them, it made people more likely to explore options. I remember being at the gas station, in Walthill and Lloyd Stansberry, a farmer I know who's a very conventional farmer, the guy says—you know, they're trying to raise fertilizer and chemical prices on me, but I'm going to show them—I'm going to rotate. [All laugh] It was a time when all these issues came to a fore. Farmers were looking for solutions, and the whole nation was watching.

(14:30)

AL: In the Northeast where agriculture is very different than the rest of the country and our seasons are shorter, we always depended on somewhere else for most of the food except for dairy was big. Farmers, just like everywhere else, were looking for something different, and we've lost ... we have so much less farmland—we have lost so much of that during that time. Farmers realized in the Northeast they had to be diversified was the only way they could survive. And so that was something that came out of that, particularly in the Northeast that was really important. We had foreclosures and we did penny auctions and things like that, but that was mostly on the dairy farms.

MK: I just want to make sure we don't forget the funders. And thinking back to that period of time, it was a period of education of funders, too. We had a lot of funders whose idea of the

environment was the Grand Tetons, whose idea of agriculture was what they ate in a restaurant. They didn't understand farming as an environmental issue, and they didn't understand rural issues as agriculturally engendered, and they thought of a lot of ... there were funders for whom rural issues were largely Native American tribes or ... they knew, but they didn't get the confluence of these issues, and this was a period when it began to shift, I think. We began to have funders whose program officers slowly but surely began to get it. And this was an important part of, I think, laying the foundation for our movement, because people started to understand that. And I think we couldn't have had a movement that built later, had we not had funders who began to be re-educated, who were willing to be re-educated.

RK: As we're looking for people to ... myself, to interview, and think about funders, such as Vic DeLuca with the Noyes Foundation caught on very early to this, and I wanted to make sure to include him in this process. Mary?

MF: The farm crisis brought it to the forefront that farmers were supposedly feeding the country and the world, but the farm crisis proved that they weren't feeding themselves, because we had churches helping take food boxes to farmers who could not buy groceries or pay their utility bills. There was no food in those bins, and if it was there, it belonged to whoever the lender was, so any money that came in, they got the checks. The farmers had nothing that they could fall back on, so it was sort of the very first steps toward that realization that commodity agriculture is not the food system that we've claimed it to be.

MS: I think that we also have to understand that was the start of Farm Aid as well, where we had the music community, many of whom had deep roots in agriculture, pay attention to this issue, and were able to build a coalition with the country music industry, again, to highlight that issue. We're coming up on the 30th anniversary this fall in Chicago of that whole thing, which, without Farm Aid, many of the kinds of work that many of our organizations did, particularly in dealing with farmers who were in crisis—I mean, we have our ... our best outcome of that was taking farmers who were in crisis and then making them advocates to go and help the next farmer in crisis, and that has been a very valuable outcome of this, because the farmers knew better than anyone how they were being screwed by that system. So I think we have to give a real shout-out to Willie and all the Farm Aid folks to recognize what an important role they played.

(19:08)

RK: Once again, we've got a nice segue there over to this section that I think was basically Margaret's idea, about who were some people that we at least want to get on the record that made contributions to this that maybe even aren't here physically on the planet anymore, but even more so are around and are here today or that sort of thing. So, I'd like to spend a little time on that, and Margaret, you might kick us off with a few folks you were thinking of. We've mentioned some already.

MK: You know, I'm gonna let Ferd get started, because he's got a far better memory, and then it will trigger it for the rest of us, but he's a far better trigger than I.

FH: Well, we just adopted a new strategic plan for NSAC that the organizational council will be talking about this afternoon, but that reminds me that, I think, the very first strategic planning process we did when Ken Taylor was sort of a lead committee chair for that process, so just really I think back to all of his contributions frequently.

RK: I wouldn't have this grant if it hadn't been for Ken Taylor, because he was the spark behind the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Ag. Fred, did you have anything you wanted to say? Any person or anything? You mentioned Dave Vetter this morning already.

FK: Well, you know, it would take a long ... I'll make up a list and send it to you. [All laugh] There are a lot of heroes out there that often don't get recognized, and I'll be happy to share them with you.

[Participants saying goodbye to FK]

AR: Well, we've been talking about quite a few names that I had on my list already. Garth Youngberg and for me personally in my beginning, Margaret O'Dell with the Joyce Foundation funded the work that gave me a chance to start working in sustainable agriculture. Also, I wanted to remember, and I'm embarrassed that I can't remember his last name right now, but Victor, with the Land Stewardship Project.

[Several voices]: Victor Ray.

AR: Right.

RK: He was certainly important to me.

CH: Couple people we haven't mentioned yet. One is Willie Lockeretz. Willie, of course, did some of the pioneering research on organic farming. While he was a physicist by training, I think a nuclear physicist, in fact, but he ended up doing that, working in sustainable agriculture instead. I mean, his intellectual contributions were really profound. Another one was Bob Warrick. Bob was a farmer from Meadow Grove, Nebraska who was chairman of the Sierra Club Agricultural Committee, and Bob was one of those guys who ... you need all kinds of strengths, and Bob was a guy who would just blurt out stuff. I remember one time he blurted out at a board meeting—we need to hire a lobbyist at the Center for Rural Affairs—in the state legislature, and we did, and it turned out great. He's still going at Oceanside, California, now.

MS: I'm glad you brought up Vic DeLuca in the Noyes Foundation, because they certainly were the ones that believed in us when we were going to create the Southern SAWG, and if it hadn't been for that support, we probably wouldn't have got off the ground. I certainly want to mention my old partner and mentor at RAFI (Rural Advancement Foundation International), Betty Bailey. Certainly we've mentioned Roger Blobaum—he certainly needs to be in this circle of folks who had big impact. Kathy Ozer, Ben Burkett. Hal Hamilton—there's quite a list if we actually gave it a little bit of thought. I'll come back to one more.

FH: I really wanted to tell this while Francis [Thicke] was still here, but I think most of the people at this table know this, but probably not too many others, but Francis was at USDA for four or five years, and was absolutely ... I mean it couldn't have worked out any better. It was so important to us to have somebody on the inside who totally got it and he ... I don't know if he volunteered or got assigned to be on almost every 1990 Farm Bill implementation committee inside of the department. There have been so many other people at USDA and other agencies that have been real champions for us, and that's a long list—I won't try to go down that road. But, I think, a shorter list are the list of congressional super-champions. We've worked with lots and lots of people, and people have introduced and sponsored different amendments for us, so it's a big team, but the super-champions is a pretty short list. Senator Leahy from Vermont. Senator Harkin from Iowa. Jim Jontz from Indiana. Chellie Pingree from Maine, bringing it to the current day. On particular issues, people like Chuck Grassley and Byron Dorgan and others. They are also part of our story. We don't achieve any of these things unless there is somebody on the inside that's willing to work with us. You know, we were incredibly lucky in that ... 1996 Farm Bill is the exception, but for '90, 2002 and 2008, we had Leahy the first time, and then Harkin those last two times. I think we can rightly take credit for a lot that happened, but, obviously, that was really key. If they were not chairing that committee in the Senate, we would not have been able to do all these things. So they are certainly champions.

(25:21)

MK: I was heading down a similar road of some congressional people, but you did a great job there. I will just say I have an assortment of people. Some of them are farmers and some of whom are organizers and all sorts of folks. Jim Lukens has been really important, and, especially, I find, really in the South. He has been a national leader, but he's been really important, I think, in the South. Dan Specht—we wouldn't have the Conservation Stewardship Program if Dan Specht hadn't been a farmer willing to put in the long hours, I think, on that and many other things. Jill Auburn is one of those people who is a luminary within USDA, always willing ... continues to be willing, I'll say, willing to stand up and be counted and help push our agenda forward. Jerry DeWitt, likewise—one of those folks within academia who used his social capital, continues to, I know—I sit on the NCAT board with him, and he continues to do this kind of work in his retirement. But he's amazing, and always was. And then there are a bunch of organizers. I think of Dave Butcher. Funny, these are folks who, honestly, just tirelessly worked and got so many things done that you just kind of forgot that they actually just went way over what they were paid. And he's one of those kinds of folks, I think, it would be very meaningful to him. Cathy Ruth, another perfect example of that. Liana Hoodes—I mean there is quite a long list there, and I don't know ... we can't possibly cover all those folks, but Steve Etko—think of all the things Steve has done when he was a congressional staffer, and then when he became a member of the movement. So those are a few more.

TO: There are a number of farmers who have been critical for NSAC, and Margaret mentioned one—Dan Specht. His very good friend Jeff Kling is another one. He is just a policy tiger. I was at his house a couple weeks ago trying to interview him about his farm legacy, and he was constantly going into the policy arena, wanting to talk about this and that. Other people like Ron Rosmann and Maria Rosmann his wife. They are not only probably our greatest showcase farm in Iowa, but they're really knowledgeable about policy and always willing to help out. There's

also the next generation—the children of the Rosmann’s, the children of my board president, Dan Wilson, other offspring in the PFI (Practical Farmers of Iowa) membership are also very interested in policy and getting involved, as have some really brand-new members the last two years or so, and some of those are quite conservative Republicans, which is wonderful for NSAC to have available.

(28:25)

RK: I thought about something, too, that we haven’t talked about much—somebody might want to add it, too—is the religious community. Really, what got the Land Stewardship Project going was the National Ag Land Study, that Victor Ray was concerned about, and then, a little earlier, the response, having the pope come over to Des Moines, and then that kicked in the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. I served on the board for awhile with Joe Fitzgerald, another name there. And then the Lutherans picked up on a really strong church statement, so there was an aspect at that time of a really strong push from sort of the grassroots part of the mainstream churches that was really important to the early days.

AL: Oh, would you recognize Brother James Andrews from National Catholic Rural Life—he did a lot to inspire the religious community to be involved. Elizabeth Henderson from the Northeast, she is very active. We really should recognize Kathleen Merrigan—not so much an elder of ours, but very active in helping move us along. Kathy Lawrence.

(29:50)

AR: Speaking of farmers who were involved since early days and then for a long time, Dwight and Becky Ault in Minnesota, who actually—I am kind of proud—came to involvement through the Izaak Walton League, and I think they were at maybe one of the first fly-ins that we did. So a memory of them, of Dwight, that I’ll share. He could get very passionate and emotional, and he wasn’t afraid to speak out too. I can remember going to meetings with legislators at that first fly-in when he and Loni Kemp, from the Minnesota Project, and I were helping usher our farmers around, and he got pretty verbal, and with no holds barred at one point. I remember Loni like pulling him out of the room and myself kind of praying that, well, even if it is a little colorful language, just pray that it could have an impact for the positive over time. I really do believe that over time, many years, that Dwight’s colorful personality has had a lot of impact for the positive, and also that NSAC was really meaningful to him and changes that he brought to his own farm and farm family.

FH: Ann mentioning that first fly-in recalls two things for me: one, the person who did the lion’s share of the organizing was not me, because I didn’t have time for it, but Tammy Wellstone did a great job of organizing it. That’s still, even though we’ve done somewhere close to 50 fly-ins in our history, that’s the second biggest. It was the very first one we did. It was kind of out there for us to do that. But the funny story that goes with it, of course, was that young farmer that we had representing the great state of Montana, who had—not at the time, but today—has that very nice little short haircut. I had done the briefing on commodity reform. I remember this like it was yesterday, and was everybody had their little handouts they were going to use on the Hill visits, and he came up and he said—well, I guess I’ll do that if you really want me to, but I really just

want to get rid of these programs altogether, lock, stock and barrel. [All laugh] And when he became Senator Jon Tester, and the first time I got to meet with him one-on-one, I said—do you remember that Sustainable Ag Coalition fly-in, and do you remember what you said? And I repeated it to him, and he said—don't ever tell the story around this town. [Everyone laughs] On camera.

RK: When I think about the Land Stewardship Project, a lot of our organizing at that time happened to be the opportunity, I guess you could say, presented by the insurance companies being involved in the investments that got a lot of farmers in trouble, and so they made a ... being huge insurance companies that nobody liked too much anyway, they made a really good target for organizing, and some of the destruction that they did, some of the farms that we had photos of and everything, and that effort was led by Steve O'Neil, the late Steve O'Neil, another great organizer with tremendous heart and it was really important. At the Land Stewardship Project I learned from Steve that if you're really going to succeed, you have to know how to organize. He was from Chicago, an Alinsky-trained organizer, that made just a super impression on my life and now on our organization. Somebody else? Michael.

MS: Going back to the farm crisis for a minute, in terms of people that may have not ... in organizations, I mean, I think if you're looking at a larger interview list, you need to look at Farmers Legal Action Group, which has played such an enormous role in the ag movement, in always being the legal ones to turn to to help us. With the black land loss issue, Randi Roth there was actually sequestered in the top story of a building with I forgot how many attorneys for nearly a decade, going through all, every single one, of the black lawsuits in order to establish the settlement, once the lawsuit had been successful. I am sure Randi never got any credit for ... I mean, really, she had to be in total seclusion, could not talk about a thing for nearly a decade. And I don't know if your crew is here, but having Shirley Sherrod come later this week, her story is quite powerful and would be ... well, we're actually going to tape it for RAFI, but we would be happy to share some of that footage, or somehow link to this, because her story is quite a powerful one.

RK: So you're taping her presentation here, right?

MS: Yup.

RK: Great. I wondered about that. Wonderful. We're open now to kind of continuing this track, so let's also, if other people have anecdotes that, either about people or whatever, let's bring them into the picture, too.

(35:33)

MK: I used to sit on the ag board for the state of Wisconsin, and I went in one day and I just sat there ... they always had a public, you know, like a comment and how, you know ... a chance for board members to sort of pontificate a second. And I went in and I just couldn't speak, and I was just crying. And they finally said why, and I had just come back from Washington, DC, and the next morning I got news that Tom Guthrie had died over the weekend. And then on Tuesday or whatever it was, it was the day we had our board meeting, and I just learned it like a minute

before I walked out the door to go to the meeting. That whole day I just sat there with Kleenexes, just sobbing. It was just so sad. And I said—I just came from a dysfunctional city, which unfortunately is our nation's capital and the seat of Congress, and it's so discouraging to me, and I'm remembering a man who crossed every bridge there could to be crossed. He was a person who really worked with the land grant institutions. He was active in his farm bureau. He was, you know, fully bipartisan; in fact, probably brought a lot of Republican presence into our movement. I'd love to think if we have a few other folks like Tom in the works, sort of politically of a different persuasion, who chimed in, in a very powerful way. I thought he was really an important change-maker in that way. And actually later-on that day and the next two or three meetings, people would come up to me and say that had been really important for them. It was awkward as hell for me, but people kept saying that was so important, and, you know, the head of the Farm Bureau, policy director, came up and said—you know, that was a moment that I've got to remember. Let's work together.

AR: I just feel like it's we're saying names that are important to us. Two that really set the stage for us, even though they weren't very involved in NSAC, just maybe a tiny bit, was, of course, Bob Rodale and Jim Hightower, too, who both, actually, did attend some of our very earliest meetings, and who I got to meet, who were huge heroes that I got to meet through NSAC's earliest days. Paul Johnston, too.

AL: We should recognize Paul Wellstone, who was a leader in advocating for farmers during his short life.

RK: Well, I think we've pretty much got it. This was what I was hoping would happen this afternoon, so I think we'll call it a day.

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