

Mark Lipson
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

December 15, 2016

Mark Lipson--ML
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: It's the afternoon of December 15, 2016, and we're in Santa Cruz, California, at the home of Jim Clark and his wife Alison, and I have the opportunity now to have some one-on-one time with Mark Lipson, who has done so much in California and even nationally in the areas of organic agriculture research, education, and public policies. And Mark, I always like to start these interviews with a sense of—who are these people? I try to imagine that these interviews I am doing are someday watched, or whatever medium it will be, to 100 years from now or 50 years from now, and organic and sustainable agriculture are the dominant form of agriculture. People really appreciate it, but they need to know who are these pioneers and what were their struggles to get where we are today, or in that day. So, I'd like to start by having you talk about what got you into this, all the way from your childhood. How did you get interested in agriculture; what took you on the beginning of this journey? So, begin with that.

ML: Well, I was born into an academic, liberal, intellectual family. Both my parents were academics, and I was born in Berkeley, but lived all over the country. We moved like crazy, chasing tenure, I guess. But I came of age during the Vietnam War, so I was radicalized, I guess. Age 14 I was in anti-war marches in Washington, DC, so a latter-day hippie and activist.

RK: Did you have an interest in gardening or anything like that as a kid?

ML: Well, no, no. Agriculture and growing stuff, that was not at all part of my background. I actually backed into it in my life and my career by way of the co-op movement. I came to Santa Cruz to do the environmental studies program. I was a ... very early-on, saw myself as an environmentalist and committed to that and saw that as one of the great issues of the age. Santa Cruz was just an incredibly fantastic place to land at. It was the golden era of the environmental studies program there, with these just titanic figures who had helped create the environmental movement and environmental science and ecology as a science. It was a very un-hierarchical, fluid environment between the students and the faculty, and I got to do stuff as an undergrad that I could not have done even as a graduate student almost any other place. So we were working on real-world problems, right from the start. I arrived in Santa Cruz in 1977. I didn't go to college right after high school—I took a year off, did a little bit of college in Chicago at the University of Illinois, there, and then I had my first heart surgery. I was born with a defective heart valve, and then had a prosthetic heart valve put in when I was 20. So then after that I wanted to come back out to California. I was living in the Midwest, but I had hitchhiked around after college and gone up the coast from San Diego to Seattle, and had seen Santa Cruz and applied to Berkeley and

Santa Cruz, and Berkeley wait-listed me and Santa Cruz didn't, so that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me, not going to Berkeley.

RK: If you don't mind, if you can think of a couple or two or three—who were some people you would consider mentors from Santa Cruz or that area when you were going to school?

ML: Well, Jim Pepper, who was a landscape architect and planner. I was in the public policy and planning track of environmental studies, as opposed to the natural history track. Not quite sure why, but that seemed to appeal to me more. So Jim Pepper was kind of first major early influence, but Ray Dasmann, who was just one of the great-grandfathers of California ecological science. Paul Niebanck, who was the founding provost of College Eight, what is now Rachel Carson College, recently renamed, was a great inspiration and really encouraged me. So those are some of them, but there was Ken Norris and Stanley Cain, and Dick Cooley—I mean, these people who were just absolute giants, and I got to know them more socially than as their student, because they were more natural history kind of stuff. But it was a great community, and undergrad students were doing incredible real-world work. The very first thing I worked on was off-shore oil drilling, off the Santa Cruz coast here. That was the first offering or preparation to offer off-shore drilling leases, Lease Sale Number 52, outer continental shelf oil leases, and we organized a project to do an environmental assessment lab with environmental studies. So we built the evidentiary case for the potential impacts of oil spills on this part of the coast. This was before there was a national marine sanctuary. But some of the work we did actually helped lead to that. Then three of us had an internship with the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, so we were working with decision-makers and local government and learning all about those processes very early-on in my undergrad career. We were just given the premise, given the assumption that this is what you're supposed to be doing. It's not about studying it in the abstract so that maybe you can have a job in it later. This was like—this is work that needs to be done now, and you're going to cut your teeth learning about it as you do it. That attitude pervaded the program, and I was very, very, very fortunate to be able to do that. So I ended up studying ... my senior thesis was about Redwood National Park and the redwood preservation movement, and the larger lessons about the modern environmental movement from that is sort of the prototypical campaign. At the same time, during my undergrad career, I got involved in co-op organizing. We organized a student housing co-op on campus. This was the result of a discussion we were having in an environmental studies urban planning class. And the fact that there weren't any student co-ops in Santa Cruz compared to Berkeley, which had a large student housing co-op contingent. I got involved with the food co-op in Santa Cruz, and we had sort of a student-directed co-op studies program. A bunch of us were just really interested in cooperatives. So that was sort of the basis on which I got involved with Molino Creek Farm, which was an opportunity to buy this property, this piece of land up the coast with a couple people who were my professors, and a wider group. My entry into that was, OK, we're going to form this as a co-op. This is going to be a collective, consensus enterprise, and so that was how I initially connected into that endeavor, spectacularly beautiful place, and fulfilled all my, sort of Kerouac and *Whole Earth Catalog* cultural ethos. Yeah, we'll have a commune and it will be cooperative decision-making, etc., etc.

RK: It's a large piece of property, right?

ML: It's 137 acres, off the grid. So right away it was all about solar power in, you know, the early 1980s. We actually started going up there in 1978, and then the property was purchased in 1982. I moved up there in 1983. I'd graduated in 1981, and was doing some work in the co-op world. Then we started farming. Most of us didn't have those skills. I didn't have those skills, but a couple of us did. So I was learning as we were doing, and the baseline assumption, of course, was that this was organic agriculture was what we were going to do. Never any question about that, but what that meant was still largely undefined. *Organic Gardening* magazine and Rodale were still kind of the source, but there was this group called California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), which had been around since the middle-'70s, spawned by Rodale. So I started doing, just making the calls, to figure out, OK, what's this organic certification thing? What does that mean? Because we're going to start doing farmers markets and selling produce, and somehow people need to know that this is organic agriculture. So I got involved with CCOF, first just investigating what it would mean for our farm. But then going to meetings and seeing what the state of the organization was, and that was right when they were first deciding to create a paid staff position, half-time paid staff position, and my work as an undergrad and some of the stuff I had done with the food co-op and the housing co-op. I mean, I knew something about running a non-profit organization and an office and how to do a profit and loss sheet for the organization and that kind of stuff, so I took that job and became the half-time sole staffer in 1985. But things were continuing to grow and we started expanding.

RK: Then you were also continuing to farm, right?

ML: Yup, so I was farming ...

RK: And you were involved in that famous tomato.

ML: ... pretty full-time during the season. Then spending more time in the office in the off-season, but obviously having to do both all the year round, to some degree. So the miracle of Molino Creek was this story of the dry-farmed tomato. Before we bought the property, one of the guys who had been care-taking the place had started experimenting with this dry-land cultivation of tomatoes and this sort of European grape culture kind of thing, where the vines are just reliant on the moisture that's in the soil, producing smaller but much more intensely flavorful fruit. When the group of us bought it in '82 and started farming in the next couple of seasons, we inherited this idea, and one of the partners had been on the property before we bought it, working on this dry-farmed tomato, garden scale, pretty small scale. So we started practicing this and figuring out how to do it better.

RK: And scale it up, too?

ML: Yeah, very gradually started scaling it up, but that was our entry into the marketplace and a very spectacular product. I mean, the dry-farmed tomato is like nothing else you've ever eaten as a tomato. While all of us were kind of doing all of it, I gravitated more towards the ... I started doing the wholesale sales as well as farmers markets. I was very focused on getting people to understand that this was a really different kind of thing. Because they were small and not necessarily very attractive fruit, and the generic tomato market was big, watery, tasteless things, and people had no expectation of eating a tomato and having that be an incredible flavor

experience. This was before heirlooms became trendy and the variety, the Early Girl variety, which this was built on, was one of the first Burpee hybrids. It was like the prototypical garden variety hybrid. We tried a lot of different varieties, but this one had the phenotypic response to the absence of irrigation that just produced this amazing fruit.

RK: Was it a variation of the Early Girl?

ML: It was the Early Girl.

RK: It was the Early Girl.

ML: Yeah. So we were buying hybrid seed.

RK: I plant Early Girls in my garden in Minnesota.

ML: Yeah, but at that time it was dying out. There were newer and more exciting hybrids and bigger and faster-growing. But by creating this different category of fruit by virtue of not irrigating it at all—this was the amazing thing: there was no irrigation at all. It was going strictly on the moisture that was in the soil. We were working with this heavy clay loam that held on to the water really well. The land, it wasn't being cropped when we bought the farm. It had been ... it had raised some wheat many, many years ago, but it had been cattle and sheep for most of the 20th Century. It had just been pastureland. So the soil was beautiful. It was kind of acidic; we had to work on the pH a bit, but it worked spectacularly well for conserving the moisture and creating a dust mulch. That's sort of the agronomic term for the technique is dust mulching, where the top layer of soil just seals in the moisture underneath, and if you don't water it, it doesn't crack and water doesn't wick out, and tomatoes will go down, they will put their roots down as far as they can go to keep going after that water as it drops in the soil column. In doing that, it brings up all these incredible trace nutrients, and it's just the genetic makeup of the variety was such that it phenotypically responded to this condition in a way that's just very different. So, anyway, we started making a name for ourselves and this was when Alice Waters and Chez Panisse and Warren Weber and people like that were creating the whole California cuisine. You know, fresh cuisine culture, and so we were right in the middle of all that, and we'd go to these tastings and, of course, be the best tomato. [Chuckles]

RK: And coming back reacting to the “Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times,” and the whole mechanization that was pretty much in the headlines—they were mechanizing production, but then the tomatoes were hardly edible.

ML: Absolutely contemporaneous with that, so we helped people rediscover the idea of having a great-tasting tomato.

RK: That's really good.

ML: So Molino Creek structured as a tenancy in common partnership on paper, but we functioned as a consensus-based co-operative, very unique ownership agreement with limited equity appreciation, so the shares and the property could only appreciate according to the rate of

inflation. We actually created our own inflation index, because that was kind of who we were. Well, let's make our own un-consumer pricing. We didn't want to be just consumers. So we had our own un-consumer price index that was based on a pair of Levis and a can of refried beans and one hour of auto repair. [Chuckles] It turned out to be very, almost identical with the regular consumer price index, so we stopped bothering to figure it out ourselves after awhile. But that's the ... it separated the value of our ownership interest in the property from the marketplace, from the speculative marketplace, so that has always been a very unique feature of the partnership. Has its downsides, its complications, but the idea was to always keep it affordable to somebody who wanted to own a share in order to be able to farm there. Then the farming was by consensus, too. We'd joke about the fact—well, inorganic farming's hard, got a lot of challenges. Dry farming's really hard, but collective farming, consensus-based farming, that's just sheer craziness. And it's kind of true. Farming is a very idiosyncratic thing. We can have really divergent approaches that both end up at a successful place, but trying to meet in the middle and just sort of mix and match that. That really doesn't work so well. So over time the number of people actively farming in the group that way dwindled down smaller and smaller. Partly because people needed to have jobs with health insurance when they started having kids and that kind of thing, and other reasons. But it was also just the fact that it was really hard, really challenging to do that.

RK: And it's still going today, right?

ML: Oh, absolutely, still going.

RK: How many people are involved in it?

ML: There's really only one partner. There are nine shares, nine households.

RK: Oh, nine households.

ML: Fifteen adults. There's one person who's carried the torch. She keeps the legacy collective farm going and we just had a great tomato crop this year. Other things—diverse—other vegetables and fruits, but ... and then there's a couple of the partners split off and just wanted to do their own operation separately, and really just wasn't working for them to try and do it by consensus with the rest of the group, because they just had their own specific ideas about what they wanted to do. So now they lease ground from the collective, so there's two side-by-side row-crop operations, one that's sort of nominally still owned by everybody, but operated by one person, and then the other that's separate business owned by two of the partners with a lease from the whole group.

RK: I see. And just out of curiosity, do you still manage to get your hands dirty yourself?

ML: Little bit, yeah. We've been planting trees, fruit trees, for the last few years. That's a pretty purely collective effort that is less about any business plan than the happiness index. Although, we've planted so many trees now that it really needs a business plan.

RK: Are they fruit trees or fruit and nut trees?

ML: Yeah, yeah, fruit trees. And in a few years there'll be so much fruit that it won't be hobby scale anymore. So I farmed fulltime for some years and halftime for many years. In '97, when I was deeply into *Searching for the O-word*, and then the first proposed rule hit, at that point I just kind of went fulltime in the non-profit work, and that was just ... it just needed to be done.

RK: It was the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF).

ML: Yeah, I was at OFRF at the time, and that was the mission, was those things. And then in 2000 I got diagnosed with cancer.

RK: Oh, I didn't know that.

ML: Right after the election in 2000, and so I spent the next two years in treatment and recurrence, had two recurrences following initially going into remission, and ultimately went into having to do high-dose chemo, which destroyed my bone marrow, and had to do a stem cell replacement and reboot the bone marrow. So that was two years fully in treatment, and a year or so slowly coming back after that. So that altered the trajectory of things that we were doing at OFRF. Fortunately, I had recruited Brise Tencer, who is now the executive director of the organization, as my policy, program colleague, and we threw her in the deep end of the pool for the 2002 Farm Bill and she was just a superstar in response to that, and was very well-prepared, educationally and personally to take that on. She would sit with me in the chemo lounge, doing my outpatient chemo and we'd talk about—ooh, what about this, what about this? [Chuckles]

RK: It probably helped your healing, keeping your head in that place, I would think.

ML: A little bit, yeah. I mean, I was just very, very gratified to know that all our work was just not going to fall apart because I got taken off the table. So I was very, very fortunate in having her and the rest of the organization, of course. I got tremendous support during that period from everybody.

RK: Bob was still there at that time, too, right?

ML: Oh, yeah, yeah.

RK: Very much there.

ML: So I came back to OFRF and we started working on the next farm bill, '08, and had big success there, not only with organic research funding but that was when we started making inroads into crop insurance and conservation and organic data collection. So we were expanding the portfolio of policy work out of OFRF.

RK: Maybe even the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program? I don't know if you were involved in that, but so many beginning farmers are looking ...

ML: We were part of the large coalition under the NSAC umbrella, primarily, and then around sub-organic coalition of groups. So Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program was certainly part of that, wasn't something I spent a lot of time on, but I was going to Washington a week a month, during that period. We had a part-time staffer in DC who was located in the NSAC office, who was our boots on the ground all the time. But I was going and staying on guest rooms and couches and...

RK: This would be in the mid-2000, 2005?

ML: Well, this was 2007 and '08, for the '08 Farm Bill.

RK: Before you want to move on from there to your other work, but I wanted to make sure, it occurred to me this is an opportunity to have at least a little bit about what OFRF is. What are its key programs now? It's grown over the years—what are key things it works on?

ML: Well, the genesis of the organization was to have a grant-making program for on-farm organic research—farmer-driven, on-farm organic research. The policy program was an adjunct to that, but because of the opportunities that we had and the success that we had, sort of became sort of its own division, wasn't strictly related to the internal grant-making program. We were trying to get tens and hundreds of millions of dollars for public support for organic research. Obviously there was cross-pollination between the two parts of the organization, but the grant-making program of OFRF and its communications about those results to farmers has continued to be the mainstay of the organization. That's what it exists for.

RK: What did OFRF ... did it get any money then from the federal government to give away? It didn't did it.

ML: No.

RK: I didn't think so.

ML: No. In fact, we were pretty meticulous about that. There were times when we were talking with people at USDA about would it be good to use OFRF as a re-granting mechanism to just sort of reduce the overhead at USDA and have a more farmer-driven component, but that didn't really work with the legislative authority anyway, and we didn't really have a very hospitable administration. But the portfolio, the body of work of the foundation grants, became, evolved into more of a seed grant role. Having farmers be the researchers was great theory, great idea, but not always so successful, both in terms of designing projects that really provided valid empirical data. And just in terms of time that needed to be put into writing it up and that kind of stuff. So gradually more and more of the grants became university researcher driven, or university researcher conducted, driven by farmers and farmers' needs, and direct participation in the design, but not carrying out the research studies. But on farm, always, yes. And then getting those researchers a little bit of money to start working on organic legitimized them in their institutions and enabled them to leverage other funds, and then when we got federal funds specifically for organic research, they became the competitive researchers for those funds, because they had a grounding in real, on-farm, organic research and what the growers' needs

were. So over on the policy program side we were very focused on how the money was going to be spent. Once we had achieved getting some money, then it was about, OK, what's the process going to be for running this competitive grants program within USDA, and farmers have got to be part of the panels, and it's got to be done in conditions that are certified organic, none of this sort of comparison stuff. We ruled that out, or we lobbied against that being used, or those funds being used that way, said, well, our mission is to improve organic agriculture. It's not to keep proving that it can be competitive. Because that just treats it as this black box that's never going to improve and change, and we need to do it better; we're still just in the infancy of knowing how to operate this way. We created, after the *Searching for the O-word* and using it as a platform for getting public resources, we created the Scientific Congress on Organic Agricultural Research, the SCOAR project., and that was an attempt to get researchers and farmers together to build the agenda and to really talk about, OK, what's good organic research. Now that we've got some money and we've got legitimacy to have organic research at all within the system, what would good organic research look like? That's been a much tougher challenge—I don't think we've solved that yet. That's partly because of the limitations of the university and USDA system.

RK: The changing conditions—you throw some things like climate change into the works.

ML: Yeah, and there's a tendency of the university research enterprise to just sort of try to fit things into the same box. It's like, well, the plant pathologist is going to do this kind of study, and the agronomist is going to do this kind of study. We haven't really succeeded in figuring out how to systems-level research. Even though we've pushed the envelope on that within the federal organic research program, and it is enshrined in the language of the program, really figuring out what that means and how to get out of the restrictions and restraints of the university system and the expectations of the USDA research agencies—still very problematic. As Willie Lockeretz used to say—well, show me your holism! [Both chuckle] Even though that notion of holistic research and holistic farm management has been around a long time, we are still utterly, really, failing to evolve our science and our scientific research enterprise to do that, to operate on that level.

RK: Well, then, I know that you moved on, I believe in 2010, to where you actually came to Washington more to live there and stay there for awhile and work in the administration—tell me how that happened and what your position was, what you did.

ML: In 2008 I worked on the election quite hard, took most of October off that year to go to Ohio and campaign and then shortly after the election, our friend Kathleen Merrigan, who was at Tufts University at the time, running the agriculture-food-environment program there in the Friedman school, got asked by Tom Vilsack to be the deputy secretary, the number two in the department. That was, I think, higher than she was shooting for at the time.

RK: She told me that story, yes.

ML: But absolutely appropriate to her experience, after already being inside USDA, running the biggest agency, sub-agency, there, and her whole career was really pointed towards something like that. Kathleen and I had remained close over the years, and she called me up on the farm and

said—I want you to come to Washington with me. I was all recovered from my cancer. I was a few years out from my divorce, so I was single, and my kid was in college, getting close to graduating, and I had been at OFRF for 11 ... 13 years at that point, and so ... this was late in 2008, barely 2009. I said—yeah, I'll do it, I'll go. It took another year-and-a-half before it actually worked out for me to land there, so it was June of 2010.

RK: Was that because of just the wheels grind slow in Washington, mostly?

ML: Yeah, it was the what kind of position was it going to be, and sort of Kathleen having to navigate her role within the department under the secretary—I mean, she wasn't the boss. Things were very preoccupied with implementing the new farm bill and everything else that was going on at the time. So we finally figured it out in kind of early 2010, and so I gave my notice at OFRF and took a nice vacation in Hawaii and landed in DC in June of 2010. So I was the first organic and sustainable agriculture policy advisor in the office of the secretary. I was not a political appointee. I was what they call a term appointee, so it was a career GS-14-level job, with only limited term that that job classification would exist. Initially a two-year term could get renewed once. So my initial intent was to stay there for two years. Ended up renewing it and staying for four. And then another seven-eight months after that before my replacement was ready, and they ended up making it a permanent position, but we wanted to have a pretty seamless transition, so they renewed me, got OPM, Office of Personnel Management, to make an exception, and stayed until October of 2014. So I went in there with this job description and expectation that the main thing I was going to do was move organic through the whole department, beyond the national organic program. So the national organic program, the regulatory and certification program of USDA, had been growing for 10 years by that point. But that was the only clear home for organic in the whole department, so they had to field all kinds of questions. I take that back—it wasn't the only home, because we had created the research program as well, but that was just very kind of straightforward, focused on running this competitive grants program. It wasn't serving other parts of USDA with respect to organic or defining itself that way, let alone dealing with crop insurance for organic and that kind of stuff. So the 2008 Farm Bill had some of these new policy mandates for USDA with respect to organic and for helping to implement those things and just otherwise normalizing organic within all the reaches of the vastness of USDA, that was my primary mission that Kathleen brought me in for. Simultaneously, the secretary and Kathleen had created this Know Your Farmer Know Your Food initiative to kind of do the same thing with respect to local and regional food systems, to normalize that throughout USDA, make that part of the portfolio of all the agencies, and sort of driven, or anchored, with several farm bill mandates and mandatory and appropriated monies for a handful of programs, but the Know Your Farmer Know Your Food initiative and the taskforce as an administrative mandate within the department was told to go further, not just restrict it to these farm bill programs, but just make it a normal part of all these other programs. So I became one of the co-leaders of the Know Your Farmer Know Your Food initiative at the same time that I was chairing the organic working group. There had been a loose, informal organic working group in the department that we had helped instigate when I was at OFRF, because we were cultivating organic knowledge throughout the department, so I had a number of connections already with people who were on the inside, but the secretary and the deputy made it formal, said there's going to be a USDA organic working group. Every agency in the departments got to have a representative there and report on what they're doing for organic and how they work with the

other parts of the department on it. So I was playing a lead, facilitating and convening role on both those areas. At the same time I was dealing with all the sort of political clearances for all the regulatory stuff coming up from national organic program, where I was sitting in the office of the undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs, which oversees the ag marketing service, where the organic program lives, so all the rule-making and decision-making for the organic program that required clearance at the political level was also coming through my desk. Very early-on I also got drafted by the deputy to work on the coexistence initiatives within the department. The secretary was very committed to trying to solve the schism around biotechnology and de-escalate the warfare between biotech on the one hand and non-biotech and organic on the other hand. So there was a very vigorous internal infrastructure underway when I landed there, which Kathleen was co-chairing on behalf of the secretary. She was co-chairing it with Roger Beachy, who was the director of the National Institute for Food and Agriculture, the whole bundle of competitive research grants programs within USDA. So Kathleen put me in there as her surrogate in those internal processes, which acquired a higher profile publicly when USDA was on the verge of approving the genetically engineered alfalfa, the Round-up Ready alfalfa. That decision loomed very large as kind of the first new departure from corn and soy GMOs and opening up a whole new front, and specifically of great concern to the organic sector, because the organic dairy—that was the gateway product for the whole organic industry. Organic milk was the big economic and consciousness driver for consumers around organic foods. So I ended up being staff to the coexistence effort, which got embodied as a renewal of this advisory body called the Advisory Committee on Agricultural Biotechnology for the 21st Century—otherwise known as AC-21. As the voice of organic agriculture within the top level of the administration, I helped facilitate that process and worked on who was going to get appointed to the board and what the agenda would be. My title was apt—I was a policy advisor; I was not a decider of anything. My job was to speak up and say, well, this is what organic farmers would say, and this is what the organic sector needs, and these are the concerns. It was rarely decisive, in and of itself, but the fact that that voice was there every day made some kind of difference. I don't know exactly what. But every day I got to feel like it was a good thing I was there, for one reason or another. With the organic working group we were doing stuff across the whole department. My days and weeks were just this institutionalized ADD. [Chuckles] I never got to work on any one thing for very long at all—it was just this constant churn of working with different agencies and different things that would come in.

The other big chunk of what I did there was work on food safety. Right when I landed Congress had just passed the Food Safety Modernization Act, SB. 510, which was this revolutionary overhaul of responsibilities for policing food-borne pathogens. FDA was supposed to publish that final rule within two years, but it was late in 2011 when they even just started really getting traction on it at all. So I became part of the core of policy analysts and policy advisors within USDA who were detailed to assist FDA in their rule writing, because as FDA was creating the drafts of all these different rules to implement the law, OMB, Office of Management and Budget, would send them to USDA and said—OK, USDA, give us your comments. So I was one of the core senior people who were providing those comments back to the FDA, and then meeting with them to hash it out. So that would involve reading thousands of pages of draft regulations and really being able to know, down to the paragraph, where the issues would be, especially for small farmers, but for the produce industry, generally. So it was very valuable that I was coming from California, I was familiar not only with the organic produce industry, but with the larger produce

industry in California. I had been on my local Farm Bureau board for a number of years and knew folks in the produce groups. So that was very challenging, because FDA is a very hard agency to push. I think we created a pretty good ... we had a pretty good relationship in the end, and they were getting a ton of pressure, and obviously when the law went through and the exceptions that got put in for local food production and being consistent with the organic regulations, it played a very necessary function in the development of those rules. Again, it wasn't always decisive. We didn't get our way. They ended up having to re-propose the rule. After they put out a final rule, the backlash was still so severe, that they ended up having to re-propose it and that's when I earned some "I told you so's", because the way they rewrote it was more in line with what we had been telling them, in some cases.

RK: So you basically feel, do you, that you are glad you did that, and that you got some important things done.

ML: Absolutely. It was obviously the pinnacle of my career, so far at least. Had another challenging episode. Six months after I got there I was back in the hospital for another heart surgery to have a new valve replacement and more parts replaced around my heart. But I was very, very lucky. I got the top guy at Johns Hopkins, who is one of the top three heart surgeons in the world, and so had a little detour not that long after I got there. That was in like March of 2011, and I started going back to work in June. So it was a little hiatus which altered the trajectory of what we were able to do, but again got great support. That was about when the farm bill activity started, because the '08 Farm bill was supposed to expire in 2012. So around 2011 they started working on that. That cycle was unusual, because Secretary Vilsack said—USDA is not going to make proposals on this farm bill. We're going to help wherever we can, but it's up to Congress to do that. So we weren't generating proposals, but we were reacting to what was starting to come out of the congressional committees. So I don't know if you recall, but that ended up being kind of a false start. The Senate passed a bill, the House failed to pass a bill, blew up over food stamps, over SNAP program. So then 2013 they came around again, and they almost got to it and stopped, and then they came back again and finished it in 2014. Of course, we didn't know that they weren't going to finish it either of those times. So we were doing full-on fire drill, and there were a number of organic provisions that, very specifically, I was responsible for advising on and working with the congressional liaison's office on what was our response going to be to this draft and what evidence could we bring to make a counter-argument for why they should do it differently. We had the shutdown in there in October of 2013, which was devastating, really. That was just so crippling for that game of chicken to be played, because it was just an ... and the year before they'd gone right up to the brink, and the amount of energy and time and money wasted preparing for that within the executive agencies—just incalculable. It's just absurd that they do this in the name of good government and efficiency, blah, blah, blah. But they're just taking a wrecking ball to the work that the agencies need to do. You can't just pick up where you left off after something like that happens. It's like you got to start further back and reboot and recalibrate. It's just enormously wasteful and very discouraging. Then the sequestration thing is just kind of hollowing out the agencies from the inside, attrition on positions and stuff. It was a very, very challenging time to be there.

RK: You actually stayed on longer than Kathleen did, then, didn't you?

ML: Yes. She left shortly after the beginning of the second term. I had intended to be leaving around then, too, but we didn't want both of us to leave at the same time, because I was carrying the ball on Know Your Farmer and all of this other stuff that we had been working on. So it was really necessary for me to stay longer. It was very different after she left, that's for sure.

RK: I bet. And then you stayed on till 2015, was it?

ML: October of 2014. But like I said, they made my position permanent, but still with that kind of hybrid nature where it's a career position but serving in the office of the secretary with all of the politicals and advising the political appointees. So it's a very unique role to sort of be in that crossover between the career people and the political people. That's a big structural and cultural divide in USDA, and a lot of times it's not a very good connection. There's obviously the generic thing of the politicals come in and say—hey, we want to do all these things differently, and the career people say—you don't know what you're talking about. You don't even know what that means, to do it differently, because you don't even understand what we do now. But I was very gratified, grateful, for being in that role, being able to work both sides of that split. It was helpful to the career people to have me there, and it improved the advice that I could give to the politicals.

RK: I don't want to belabor this much longer, but then, with the permanent position, there's somebody in that position now?

ML: Yeah, yeah.

RK: And will there be somebody in there after this last election, 2016, permanent?

ML: The virtue of that position is that it's not a political appointee; it's a career position, even though it sits over in the Whitten Building with all the politicals. So at least for the initial part of the administration, yes, that position will be there, and that's the continuity that there will be at the political level—that's the only continuity that there likely will be at the political level. There's a fantastic person doing that job, somebody I worked with closely while I was there, and she was extremely well-suited, and in some ways much better than I was, to operate in that role. Just being a more methodical and better time manager. [Both chuckle] Hopefully they will respect her and allow her to help them fulfill these ... these things are in law that have to be done, and also are serving a constituency of American agriculture and consumers that needs to be represented.

RK: Right, right. Then, finally, just to bring closure to this, then—when you left Washington, now you're back, and now, briefly, what are you focusing on now?

ML: I'm back at the farm. I had a house-sitter at my place while I was living in DC, so now I'm back at my place on the farm, doing a little bit of stuff there—just for the farm, not the day-to-day farming operation, but kind of the legal, administrative stuff. I have an appointment as a research associate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, CASFS, so I'm kind of the old, wise guy up there. It's not a salaried position, but they give me an office and staff privileges. And what I've been trying to do

is to re-cultivate the idea of an organic policy studies component to what the center does, related to the environmental studies department, as well. So that's still proceeding along. I've been consulting to pay the bills, working on a couple interesting national level projects as a consultant, and various other pro bono kind of things. I'm on a couple of different boards and one of which is the Organic Center, which is also a research entity, sort of a parallel or sister group to OFRF, more attached to the organic manufacturing and processing end of the industry more than the producer end. The Organic Center is dedicated to research on the environmental and health benefits of organic foods and organic farming. So I'm on the board of trustees for that, and locally I'm on the board of a group called the Homeless Garden Project, which is a 25-year-old horticultural training program, teaching job skills and life skills for homeless population in Santa Cruz. It's a very unique, very hopeful project, very practical-oriented to solving homelessness by preparing people to have jobs. Homelessness as a result of poverty, as a result of not having a job. So that's very, very beautiful garden operation and CSA—urban farming is really what it's about, but that's the vehicle for job training and getting people out of being homeless.

RK: Well, thank you for all your time this afternoon and taking us through your amazing career and all the service you provided to the country and to organic agriculture in particular. We're very grateful. Thank you.

ML: Well, thanks. I'm really grateful, too, for having been able to do it all, and it's fun talking about it.

RK: Good. Thank you.

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