

**George Boody
Executive Director
Land Stewardship Project
Narrator**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

December 3, 2015

**George Boody—GB
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: Today is December 3, 2015, and I am at the Land Stewardship Project office in Minneapolis. Today I get to interview George Boody, who is the executive director of the Land Stewardship Project. George, I'd like to have you start out as I do with most of the people I've been interviewing, talking a little bit about what got you into this very interesting career in the areas around sustainable agriculture. How did you get into it, I mean even from the time you were a child—what interested you and led you on this path?

GB: I was born in western Minnesota, out on the prairie, and my mother grew up on a farm between Montevideo and Dawson, Minnesota, and so I have lots of memories of going pheasant hunting on the old homestead in the fall with my uncles, particularly, because my parents didn't hunt. So that was part of my growing up. And then living in the rural community, going back there pretty often. We then moved up to Sandstone and then Cambridge on the sand plains. So there I grew up with a cornfield in my backyard. My dad was a physician, small town doctor, so he took care of lots of people, lots of farmers, lots of other people in rural communities, and then had worked at the state hospital in Cambridge, so we lived on the property, and they used to grow food and other products as part of their operations.

RK: At the hospital there?

GB: Yeah. I mean they rented it out. But anyway, so there was a cornfield in my backyard, so I played in it lots. And then I picked potatoes as a kid [Chuckles], because that's the sand plain, and that was good for growing potatoes in the farm community.

RK: You made extra money as a kid?

GB: It was just one of the jobs; but not picking the potatoes, working in the warehouse actually. So I don't know, that was part of my upbringing, along with the garden and those kinds of things. Just being out in nature. And then when I got into school I ended up working toward biology, and I got to spend some time up at the Cedar Creek Natural History Area, looking at more natural systems there. But I got involved in organic agriculture kind of in between graduating with biology and going back to school. I got interested in food then, too. I spent some time in MIT in the graduate program on international nutrition policy and planning. So we were looking at these places around the world and what the Philippines were trying to do with their

nutritional war room and all this kind of stuff. And it became pretty obvious to me that it's important to grow good food where people live, and that we needed to do that back home here, too. And that kind of led me down the path toward organic agriculture. So I got involved with the Organic Growers and Buyers Association back in the '70s.

RK: That's when we first met.

GB: Yeah. One of the policies I'm actually pretty proud of is that Yvonne Buckley and I worked with a legislator in the Minnesota House to pass the first three-year organic standard in the nation, because at that time it was one year in, one year out. That's what California was back in those days. Those of us who know something about organic agriculture know that you can't drop into it for a year and have it work. It takes a lot longer to build up the soil and get things going and functioning in a good, biologically healthy way.

RK: And then gradually that concept of the minimum of three years became even the basis that still exists under the Organic Act.

GB: Yes, so it had an impact, I think. I think others went to three years pretty close after that, but we were amongst the first, if not the first state to do that. Again, kind of looking at what's needed versus what exists and where do we need to go to in looking at policy has been an interest of mine.

RK: And continues to be.

GB: And continues to be, yeah, exactly. So those are some of the things that got me started down this path. So I was involved in ... I was an organic certifier. I was on the board of the Organic Growers and Buyers Association and certified some of the early farms, including the Ed Hauck farm, before it was lost to the insurance company, as it were—taken over. So for people looking at this video that might not know the story there, Ed Hauck was an early organic farmer. He had a beautiful farm. He put in, farmed on the contours, used public money to assist him in putting in those great conservation practices, and he, like many others, were encouraged to expand during the 1970s, and it didn't work out for him, like it didn't work out for lots of other farmers, and when the export markets and so forth collapsed. And the insurance company took title on his farm, and they rented it out to some farmer who just didn't give a hoot about the conservation, ripped it all out, and plowed up and down the hill. That was part of the early days with you and the Land Stewardship Project.

(6 minutes: 02 seconds)

RK: Yeah, that was in the mid-'80s, and that was one of the, probably the supreme example, because we have before and after shots from the air that just showed that kind of devastation that a lot of people who were even just moderately interested in agriculture started being concerned when they saw that sort of thing going on.

GB: Yeah, exactly. It's an important example of what we need to do differently to not let that kind of thing happen even. Unfortunately, we seem to be in a ... recently, at least, with the run-

up in prices from 2010 to 2012 or '13 or so, commodity prices, we almost saw that same kind of thing happening all over again where grassland or good agricultural farmland with good practices was being turned into just commodity corn and soybeans, and even when it was really steep slopes and wouldn't produce more than maybe a year or so. People just ripped it out of grass, put it into that. So we've seen that cycle more than once.

RK: Yes, we have, unfortunately. Well, then, will you, after you were done with being a certifier is that when you went to the Minnesota Project?

GB: I went to the Minnesota Project after that, and to work on ground water and sustainable agriculture issues, and leadership development and also in rural communities. So I did grow up in a rural community. My dad practiced medicine, my mom was born in a rural community, so I had an interest in their thriving and survivability. So I worked on ... and that's where actually I first intersected you, I think. Well, no, I met you, I think, even before that.

RK: Yeah, you did, yeah, I remember that.

GB: Back in 1982 at that first conference on sustainable agriculture, and I had written a couple of ... a paper about natural systems agriculture for that conference, with this idea that we really do have to look to what nature is saying to us about how we need to farm, how we need to live, and learn those lessons, rather than just assume we know the right technology, or we know everything we need to know about what to do. And that's where we first met, talking about sustainable agriculture. I think that was the first conference, wasn't it?

RK: Yeah, I think it was, and I think we actually may have met when you were actually working with the Organic Growers and Buyers Association. Somehow I knew you a little bit, but not as well as we, of course, got to know each other. And then we were also able to lure you into the Land Stewardship Project.

GB: That was great. It's been a wonderful ...

RK: What year did you start there?

GB: I started here in 1990, and I became the executive director in 1993, so since then. I was involved in some of the early days, both with the development of what became the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and some of those early days, not in the development of, but the sort of functioning of the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group.

RK: Right, and I can remember the organic Growers and Buyers were part of what we called the Sustainers Coalition, as I recall, and that was sort of the group of organizations that were interested in sustainable agriculture and sustainable food systems that came together to put pressure on the University of Minnesota to pay more attention to sustainable ag.

RK: It was an interesting time. The University of Minnesota at that point was considered by most of the farmers that were involved in sustainable agriculture in one way or another as uninterested or worse. I remember when I invited Carmen Fernholz and others to a seminar that I

helped put together on organic agriculture in 1982 at the University of Minnesota, and it was a very controversial thing. Many of the faculty thought—what’s this! This is organic chemistry, right—everything we’re dealing with is organic—what are you talking about? This is nonsense. That was definitely the viewpoint, the dominant viewpoint at that time. And so it’s shifted quite a bit. Now there are many more faculty members interested in it than there were then. There’s some institutional support for it. I wouldn’t overstate that, but there’s more than there was then, at least. And MISA (Midwest Institute of Sustainable Agriculture) came along a little bit later than that—I don’t remember exactly what the dates were, but I know that we had a big, important meeting with the university on the day the stock market crashed in 1987. [Chuckles]

RK: That’s right.

GB: And Ken Taylor, of course, with the Minnesota Food Association, was kind of the brain, one of the key organizer leaders behind the effort that led to the development of MISA.

RK: Yeah, a number of people I’ve talked to in this interview process have talked a good deal about our friend the late Ken Taylor. He was a man who really understood how to use organizing and power to bring about change. I learned a lot from him, as did several of us.

GB: Yes, same here, and that notion of power and understanding the dynamics of institutional power, and what it takes to confront that and change it or modify it is really critical. It’s currently critical in the work of the Land Stewardship Project, understanding power. Because without that, how can you possibly fight a more powerful institution? They have the cards if you don’t understand that.

RK: And yet he was able to do it in a very clear but respectful fashion that really commanded respect in a sense. I always admired that about him.

GB: It’s definitely true. He was always one to say—don’t believe too much in your outcomes.

RK: That was one of his four tenets, about showing up, listening, and speaking the truth—but don’t be overly attached to the outcomes. That’s sort of his mantra.

(12:55)

GB: That’s right. Those are good tenets to proceed. So the early of MISA, again, it was ... I remember this meeting; I think it was the 1987 meeting. By that point ... my memory of how this got started was that the dean of the University of Minnesota, College of Agriculture, at that time, came to one of Ken Taylor’s events, an urban-rural dialog, kind of a gathering of that, and spoke about—oh, aren’t these vegetable farms nice, but, you know, we deal in real agriculture. And that was the opening, that was one of the openings to engage that dean in talking about—well, there is a broader picture than that. We need a fuller understanding from your college to deal with the breadth of agriculture that really exists in this state. And to deal with the fact that what’s wrong with the situation, that farmers are telling their kids to get out of agriculture, because there’s no future. Because that’s what was definitely happening in those days. It was in the ‘80s after the crash and so forth. Anyway, that led up to this meeting in 1987, and I

remember Gene Allen, who was then the dean. And I like Gene, he's a really fascinating person. But anyway, he got all excited in this meeting. It was carefully structured, as anything Ken Taylor was involved in would be, to present different points of view. We were talking about soil and earthworms, and the value of earthworms, for agriculture anyway. And Gene said—well, it's those earthworm channels that the pesticide runs down, gets to the water. [Chuckles] So there it was—what's the problem—earthworms or pesticide use? So it was exactly the opening we needed, that led through a further process, to Gene, to his credit, providing the money that formed Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Ag.

RK: And then to further credit you and several others, I looked recently at the people that have served on the MISA board. It was set up so that at the table there would always be people coming from the sustainable side as well as from the university—if we're going to say sides—from the university view. And over the years that has been an effective model that's sometimes hard to maintain. It hasn't always worked all the time. There's been struggles along the way, but that was a fundamental aspect of why MISA continues.

GB: I think so, and we certainly have had problems along the way. We have had some losses along the way. We have lost some battles, I would say, particularly with Dean Muscoplat, a later dean, fired Don Wyse. We tried, we worked really hard, to overcome that, but we were never able to. He prevailed, essentially. So that was a big loss. And I think right now one of the ... what MISA has done is not kept everything inside MISA, but it's led to the development of other things. So without MISA I'm not sure we would have *Green Lands Blue Waters*, which is one of the ways that we advocate for more diversity in agriculture on the ground. And that's a multi-state, multi-NGO, university effort. I don't think we'd have it without MISA, which was the base from which it grew. Similarly, the Regional Sustainable Development Partnership side of the U grew out of MISA. So there's a number of things that have spawned from MISA, and it's kind of the creative place for that to happen. Even though it may not get the credit, it probably deserves it for that kind of approach.

(17:14)

RK: Well, let's talk a little bit about your work with Land Stewardship Project related to both state and federal policy. In your judgment, what are some of the areas that have been taking on some of the policy issues and that have been successful or been attempted and not successful. I'd like to get your view on that.

GB: I think it's fair to say that the SAWG (Sustainable Agriculture Working Group) you helped to create with Chuck Hassebrook in the Center for Rural Affairs that became, then, the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and the other working groups in other parts of the country, and that led, then, to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. I mean, out of that creative organizing approach has come some policies that are still on the books. EQIP came from that, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. So that's a key delivery program for conservation practice money and technical assistance right now.

RK: And I know that one of the major roles that Land Stewardship Project has played with policies is with the Conservation Security Program, which now is called the Conservation

Stewardship Program, and the benefit being going to farmers who actually are practicing stewardship practices on the land.

GB: It points the way to the future, though it may, itself, not be the future, in the way the program has come to be constructed now and implemented. It still has good parts, but I think it points to the future in a few key ways—and you’ve probably heard this from other people you’ve interviewed, but that’s one of the principles is rather than paying people who are doing it wrong to do something right, so to speak, why don’t we incentivize people who have already got a start down the conservation pathway, and help them do more, and make sure that they can continue to do that, because all the other commodity programs are essentially stacked against that, and provide incentives to go toward maximum production of corn, soybeans, wheat and rice and so forth. So that’s a key principle. When we go to the marketplace to go shopping, we go to buy what we want, hopefully, or we try to—not what we don’t want. So it’s kind of similar to how the market’s supposed to work. And then it provides ... it’s a payment, essentially, for public services, rather than an installation, a way to install practices. It’s a payment for the public service, in essence, or hopefully it is.

RK: Including the benefits that go to wildlife and pollinators. I’d like to have you actually touch on that. One of the areas where I’ve seen, observed you being a leader is that sort of farming in the wild view. The book that you partook in the authorship of, would you talk a little bit about that?

GB: This touches back on MISA. So, one of the early projects that MISA helped fund was something we called the monitoring project, and it was with six farmers who were rapidly advancing in their understanding and practice of rotational grazing or management intensive rotational grazing. Essentially that’s a way of grazing livestock on the land, a critical feature of a healthy agriculture, get them out of the confinement operations and back out onto the land where they can do what they evolved to do. And anyway, they were learning quickly about their practice of management intensive rotational grazing, moving them quickly for maximum health and regrowth of the vegetation, as well as ...

RK: You don’t damage the land; you actually benefit it by grazing.

GB: Exactly. And what we were looking at there as well—how, exactly, does it benefit the land? So how does it benefit a stream to actually have cows right along the stream, not just excluded from it? There’s plenty of examples of where that’s done badly, but there’s ways of doing it so that the stream actually can be healthy. And we did the research with our colleagues at the University of Minnesota and agencies that showed that that’s actually possible. And the fact that led to published papers showing those, documenting those benefits, led to the Environmental Protection Agency allowing management intensive rotational grazing to be an approved practice for fecal coliform reduction in the streams in southeastern Minnesota, so that led to an official, kind of, acknowledgment.

(22:34)

RK: So those were refereed papers?

GB: Refereed papers, peer-reviewed papers. So that was a little bit of about the work in the monitoring project, and we said, well, if the farms are doing so well here and individually in places on the landscape, what would happen if you could actually change it on a landscape level, not just individual farms here and there, and that led us into doing modeling on that, and that we called “Multiple Benefits of Agriculture” paper. So looking at where on the landscape we especially need grass or longer crop rotations or wetland restorations, and looking at before and after. Changing corn and soybeans to those practices. What do we estimate the run-off to be before that and after that, and then looking at the economics of that as well. So that was a pretty exciting paper, and that led us to be able to go back to the monitoring project, because part of that was about looking at the fish in the streams, and how healthy are they. In the Multiple Benefits Project we did that by estimating the length of time the sediment would hang in the stream, and then that makes fish sick, depending on the species, and so we estimated that. And we showed that roughly a ten percent change in more grass on the landscape would have a huge benefit and would cost the public less in payments through the farm bill.

RK: I remember meeting farmers when I was at Land Stewardship Project. A couple of them stick out in my memory, particularly that the real measure for them who on their farms were fortunate enough to have a creek going through their property was to have it leave their farm cleaner than when the water entered it.

GB: Absolutely. And so Dan French was one of those farms. Ralph Lentz was another. Mike and Jennifer Rupprecht were part of that.

RK: The Cedar Summit Farm ... Dave and Florence Minar were part of that.

GB: Right. So on all of those farms where most of them had streams, we measured the shape of the stream and how healthy it was for fish and how many organisms were living in the bottom of the stream and the chemistry in the stream when it came into the farm and when it left. And even where the cows had access in a careful kind of conservation planning way, we could show improvement in the streams when it went through their farms. That was published in the places with Brian DeVore’s writing again, like the *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer*, which is a key magazine that’s influential in the state for people who believe in conservation, including the agency people. So that led to a lot of interesting and controversial discussions. Some of our environmental colleagues thought we had gone AWOL.

RK: Just the idea of with the animals in the stream has always been such a no-no, to really get a look at it from a different perspective and then manage it. It does take good management.

GB: It takes good management, and you have to have conservation planning in mind. Well, one upshot, and a connection back to the policy is that we were able to take some of that data in 2001 to Washington, DC, showing the predictions at a landscape level as part of the, some of the conversations with the House and Senate offices, Dave Minge’s office, and so forth, to show them that something like a Conservation Stewardship Program that led to this kind of change in the landscape could be beneficial. So it was a little piece of the information we had to document why this program might make sense from a policy standpoint.

RK: And just for the sake of getting this on record, there was also a book that you participated in too, wasn't it, around this ... what was the name of it?

GB: *The Farm As Natural Habitat*. Dana Jackson and her daughter, Laura Jackson, co-edited it. Brian DeVore on our staff wrote a number of the articles about farmers and their particular stories, about why it was so meaningful to them, what they were actually doing. And then I wrote an article about policy and about the need to shift our thinking from just land retirement programs on conservation, which, up to that time, that was the main focus. Well, if we want to protect land, we just need to get it into the Conservation Reserve Program. That's a good program, but we need to do this on working lands, on farmland, as well. It's not enough just to retire, and we could never afford to retire as much farmland as we would want. And, anyway, it doesn't have to be retired if you have longer crop rotations, if you have good grazing, that land can still be used to raise food and achieve conservation benefits.

RK: And I think that I see that as a very forward looking effort, because now, of late, the decline in pollinators, the dangers that are starting to emerge from the neonicotinoids—neonics—in the seed and the lack of any milkweeds in the fields and things like that, that there needs to be a working land solution for these things that will actually benefit wildlife, including insects.

GB: Absolutely, and one way that we think about that is we need more continuous living cover. That's a sort of mantra from *Green Lands Blue Waters*—it takes green lands to have blue waters. Because if you've got brown lands in the fall and the spring, you're going to get mud and soil in the water and lots of runoff. And that's exactly what we are getting through the industrial agriculture approach, so we need diversity on the landscape. It's not all going to be organic—doesn't have to all be organic. But if we could raise more animals on the land, and that might mean raising fewer animals in total, but the meat or the dairy products would be higher quality, probably more healthy for us, have the kind of fatty acid balances we need for our own health anyway. We'd be better off and the land would be much better off. And when you remove animals from the land and put them into confinement, then you tend to limit the feed sources down to corn, soybeans, alfalfa, maybe a few other things. And that's one of the problems that we've got.

(29:34)

RK: I think about other policies going forward, I know that one of the areas that can help move that healthy working lands would be improvements in crop insurance, as I understand it, that it's a priority going forward for Land Stewardship Project and its allies involved with the National Sustainable Ag Coalition. Yeah, it very much is. It used to be that the main emphasis was on commodity programs where you paid for market failures or in other ways subsidized commodity production of corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, in particular—a number of other crops, too, but those are the biggies. And now that kind of action has shifted more toward crop insurance, and crop insurance, like most of these programs is probably a good idea. Most of the farmers we work with that are at some scale probably use it, and they would be foolish if they didn't. So we need programs like crop insurance, because agriculture is a risky business, and climate can't be controlled, and it can have a major impact on losses and so forth. But the way crop insurance has

been designed now and developed by the industry, by the corporates. I am sure Cargill is behind this; the big insurance companies are certainly behind this. The major commodity groups, nationally, are behind this. It almost pays more when the price is high. What sense does that make? That's not a public purpose, and that leads to concentration of ownership, because there's no caps on how much can be paid, so the larger you are, the more you get, which enables you to get even larger.

RK: It drives the land prices up.

GB: Yeah, and it drives marginal land out, especially during high prices when you are even insured for high prices, you can afford to bring in marginal land. And there's other aspects of the program that allow a yield on this really poor ground to be merged with your best ground, so it looked like it was really good ground from a yield perspective, when it isn't. So you were insured based on that top-notch yield, rather than the poor yield you're going to get on poor ground. So there's a number of aspects of the program that are problematic. It wasn't tied to conservation at all. There's been some movement in that, but not nearly enough. So it's a priority to fundamentally shift how that program works. And I think what we're aware of in Land Stewardship Project, particularly, is we're in a time now where we have pushed corn and soybeans, for example, on so much of the landscape that we're just seeing major dysfunction in the way the water flows across the land and into rivers and the nitrogen that goes into the waterways and down to the Gulf of Mexico. We're beyond simple fixes—if we just tweak this or tweak that in the corn/soy bean system—that's not going to be enough. I think we're seeing that in practice, we're seeing that in monitoring, we're seeing it in good modeling, in the modeling that we're doing, that we did with the multiple benefits. We found something similar, and similarly the follow-up work that we're doing within the Chippewa Watershed District.

(33:29)

RK: Talk a little bit about that Chippewa project.

GB: Well, again, it grew out of this notion that we have this modeling. We had first the monitoring and then modeling that showed there's some real benefits to diversifying the landscape. And then in the Chippewa, which is in western Minnesota. It's a major watershed in the Minnesota River basin, so it's kind of at the top of the Minnesota River basin, and the Minnesota River is one of the major contributors of pollutants to the Mississippi River. So there was years of good monitoring data that compared the different sub-basins within the Chippewa, some of which had 35 percent perennials, some of which had less. The ones that had 35 percent perennials met water quality standards. And the ones that were 25 percent weren't. So that's the difference, that's where the ten percent idea came from.

RK: Because it's called the *Ten Percent Project*?

GB: And that's where it came from. This is suggesting to us that if we could convert about ten percent of the watershed toward perennials of some kind—grasses, wetlands, forests, could be productive agriculture perennials, that we think we could meet water quality standards. So the project is continuing to do that kind of in-depth monitoring of the streams and so forth. We have

tile line monitors in a few places. We engage farmers in a kind of way of looking at narrative, I guess you would say. So farmers, when they go to the coffee shops and when they are meeting with the elevators and the commodity groups and the people who are selling them technology, what they are hearing is it's all about economics. You may have heard the term—we have to feed the world. And that's not really a narrative, it's a message built on the narrative that says—and the way that we're going to do that is corporate controlled technology. That's who owns it, that's who delivers it. That's who develops it. So what we're trying to do is to go to farmers and say—what are your values about stewardship that you really deeply believe in. Or about the future of the community, the rural community that you're part of. And what you want for your land in the future. And then start building from that. So to give them a chance to break away from that, it's all about economics mindset, and open up what they really believe, and then link them together with other farmers who express some kind of interest to that way, and then help them with incentives, doing things like the Haney soil test where we can look at the microbiological activity in the soil. So doing that before changing to cover crops and then afterward and seeing the differences. Or ways of improving grazing, so we get conservation benefits from that. And then they can grow more animals on their own grass. And we can improve deteriorating grasslands that aren't being properly managed, whether by the Nature Conservancy or the DNR or US Fish and Wildlife Service, because they don't have animals on them. And that's ... grasslands evolved with animals, and they thrive with animals, if they're managed properly. So we're trying to engage farmers to make the kind of changes that would lead to more continuous living cover on the soil. So we've got about 12,000 acres changed with a variety of things, easements, converting corn and soybeans to pasture land in some cases, that's more marginal corn and soybean land. So that's where we're looking first—where is the steeply sloped, where is the stuff right beside the streams that really do need to be in something other than corn and soybeans. And then looking at cover crops as a way to get more cover on the land. So we're engaging farmers in that way, and then we're doing the modeling that's trying to show that we think we can probably achieve some water quality standards with about ten percent more perennial coverage in the watershed, which is about 110,000 acres, or so.

(38:05)

RK: And you feel like there are farmers out there starting to hear this? Do you feel somewhat optimistic? I know it's young—it's three years old or so.

GB: I think so. Farmers have made the decision to shift management on 12,000 acres. I mean, there's been conservation program benefits; it would be helpful if there was more market pull to help with that as well, but those are individual decisions by farmers or landowners to do that. We're engaging women. A lot of farmland now is owned by so-called absentee landowners. They may be local, though, and many of them may be women who essentially inherited the land when their husbands died, so they now own it themselves, where they owned it together before. And what are their values? Is it just the value of the rent check? In some cases that may be the case, but in some cases they believe ... they want more of a value. They believe in more about the value of that land, if given a chance to express that. And then given the means to say—and here's how you write a conservation lease. And here's how you kind of talk to them, be prepared when they get mad, or whatever's going to happen, if they don't respond well to that. So, really, helping people get the tools to both learn and get excited and curious. You know, Aldo Leopold

talked about conservation's got to be about more than utilitarian—it's got to be about curiosity and wanting to learn about what's going on, and so that's the approach we're trying to take in this. And then tie all this together with the modeling, the good science, both with historical and future climate predictions built in and monitoring what's going on in some of the fields and some of the streams. And then we're trying to affect the way other people do their models, because mostly they ignore perennial agriculture in it, or they treat all of perennial agriculture as alfalfa. And a well-growing pasture is very much more productive and interesting than alfalfa. Alfalfa's good, but it's not the same as a well-functioning pasture with twelve, sixteen species in it.

RK: Are you finding some support actually now within the land grant institutions, some scientists working with this program instead of ignoring it or laughing at it?

GB: Yeah. No, we are, and also ARS, so this project is one of the USDA's research arm, the National Agricultural Research Service, one of their national, long-term ecological research sites, the only one in Minnesota. So we got that in as kind of part of that network. So that's another way of looking at policy, besides the big, important legislative policies, which are crucial, like crop insurance and shifting that. We want to shift how researchers understand and think about and what they pursue in terms of diverse agriculture.

RK: Right. I know there needs to be work in improving the cover crops, for example, that can be used in a northerly climate. I've heard that a number of times, as a research priority to achieve this kind of thing.

GB: The Land Stewardship Project at a state policy level is pursuing that change with the University of Minnesota and Don Wyse and other faculty, in conjunction with MISA and *Green Lands Blue Waters*, to get money from the state to do public research on minor crops, so to speak, but that can be new kinds of cover crops.

(42:04)

RK: I have to say, too, looking back and somewhat here in my own past, this discussion of narrative, which you, I think, talking about it brought to mind, you know, that the roots of the forming of Land Stewardship Project in 1982 was, while we didn't call it that, is really changing the narrative, and but that as honoring the notion of stewardship as a fundamental basis for a healthy agriculture and trying to get that elevated. And there we were thinking ... a lot of our alliance ended up trying to link to some of the churches that still had this, at least, a legacy of the notion of stewardship as being part of a responsible farmer's obligation, or a major part of it.

GB: I know, and now with the Pope's (Francis) encyclical, what an amazing statement about that. I mean, I think many other parts of the church sort of strayed from that view, in between the '80s and the Pope's encyclical, but he, I think, brings us back there.

RK: [I have had] the opportunity to meet with Sister Mary Tacheny just last week at Mankato, who we'd worked with back when we were getting this Land Stewardship Project going, and there, too, that harkened back, interestingly enough, at least partly, to a visit by the Pope in Iowa, and a lot of the bishops' statement, called "Strangers and Guests," and it's interesting to me to

see that something's happening again after about 40 years in that arena, coming from the church. It's interesting.

GB: It is, it's really fascinating. This Pope is leading on many different levels, I think. And here he's connecting poverty and inequity, social inequity amongst humans to the way that we look at nature. And that's powerful. I think that's one of the things we're also trying to do here, and one of the things that I think sustainable agriculture and all of us together have evolved, because those were separate dimensions earlier. I don't think by intention, but just we came to the different focuses. But now they're getting tied back together, and that's very powerful, because the shift in power is not going to come from alliances with mainline agriculture groups. They're not going to, they don't want to change. They don't feel they have to, so we've got to get the power to change from different collaborations and different alignments and movements. So I guess one thing to say about narrative—and you may have talked about this earlier with other folks, but I think it's a dimension of power. And we're humans and facts are really important, but oftentimes, I think, as humans we make decisions based on whether or not something fits our story, our understanding of the world. And we'll dismiss facts that don't, too often. I mean, we as humans, and certainly decision-makers do and leaders do. So we have to operate at both levels. We have to operate always factually, but understand that we can shift the story about what's possible. I think that's exactly what you were talking about with what Land Stewardship Project was trying to do in the early days. Stewardship is possible—it's not impossible even in the 1970s climate of plant fencerow to fencerow. And we need to make more of that possible, and that's a large part what the narrative work is about. It's not just simple messages, because we could spend a lot of money on messages that would kind of fall flat. But we need to deeply touch with people's values, and then help them see the story that they hear all the time, that we all hear all the time—like it's all about economics. That's the coffee shop talk. You're judged in how well you're doing, or how black the soil is, or whatever it would be. So we need to shift what's possible in terms of helping people understand that they're hearing that—that may not be aligned exactly with what they believe. And what then is it that they want, and how do we talk about that? And then how do we tie these individual success stories together so they're not just separate events, but they're part of the growing thread of change.

RK: And then that thread of change could lead then, also, or incorporate the policies that need to happen to serve that change.

GB: Absolutely. I think part of that narrative work, then, that LSP and colleagues, many of them in NSAC, but not all—National Sustainable Ag Coalition—are trying to get at is we ... Right now, somebody like Colin Peterson is not going to be able to go against crop insurance even if he really wanted to and get reelected.

RK: You mean against the ... in other words, Representative Peterson's political career could be threatened if he took on the establishment in the crop insurance.

GB: Because more people would line up and say—what are you doing?—than would say—I think that's what you need to do. We need to change that dynamic in the countryside, in his district, and in many other districts. So that he, then, has the freedom to be able to say—well, I

think we need some change in that. And, to his credit, he has supported some of the changes in the Conservation Stewardship Program and so forth.

(48:31)

RK: Right. And as I understand it, that came about ... he came to realize that he does, indeed, have a constituency out there. It may not be the dominant one—but there is a constituency that demands to be listened to and deserves some attention.

GB: Absolutely, and so we have to build that constituency, and his understanding that it's growing. And that's true to get change more broadly as well. It isn't just in agriculture, because Cargill has how many—30 lobbyists, at least, in Washington, DC? Probably Monsanto does and Farm Bureau does. We need to shift the dynamics in the countryside.

RK: Well, very good. I think we've really covered the things I wanted to cover. I wanted to check in with you, though, to see if there's anything else you'd like to say, or anything more about like the future, particularly where Land Stewardship is headed. I think with this whole narrative idea you've made it quite clear, but do you have anything else you'd like to add for the record?

GB: Well, maybe just two things. First, let's just say thank you to you and Chuck and people in the early day that had the vision to say we need to cooperate together to have an impact in Washington, DC. We've been lucky to have somebody like Ferd Hoefner there, who still keeps his connections to the ground, to the countryside, in front of him, hasn't lost that. That's really quite amazing. So it's been a credit to have many, many leaders throughout the time that it really helped bring this to the fore, and had the vision to bring it to the fore, and to keep it moving, keep it going. So, just to say that. And I think, in terms of where we're headed, we need to do much more to build the base of people that are really active and involved in this. We see that as a critical thing. I think we want to get continuous living cover, if you will, more perennial cover, more animals on the land. We have to really get that happening with farmers, as much as possible, so that when the change in policy comes, they're ready for it. They're receptive to it; they're ready to go, rather than fighting it. And we just need that for the health of the landscape. And I think the other thing I would say is that, you know, there's a lot of effort by the industry, the food industry and the agricultural industry, to fight back on this level of narrative, because they know that they're losing ground, so to speak. You can see that in various processes that are going on. There's the AGree process—I don't remember what the acronym stands for. There's the confab that's had recently with Cargill and General Mills and Hormel and other leaders bemoaning the kind of change in consumer behavior. So, I think we need to keep strong, and keep working on that narrative level so that people understand that much more is possible and that much more is needed, and that's what they ... and if it is what they want, that they'll align with it.

RK: I want to touch on a little bit more ... I don't know what the percentage is now, but when I go to the picnic in the summertime at Land Stewardship Project, and these nice big crowds that come out for this incredible picnic potluck, a lot of those aren't farmers. There's urban people increasingly interested, and it seems to me that that's part of it, too, that that role and that interest

of people who care about the food they eat have to be taken in, are part of this picture, and can drive some corporate changes, too, by just their buying habits.

GB: And it is. I mean, McDonald's is having to go to cage-free eggs. It's not because they really wanted to, I don't think—it's because they know they need to, because they're being asked about it or it's being demanded of them. And General Mills, sales of some of their products are declining and they're having to try to understand what a healthier product is, because people are looking for something maybe less processed, or some people are, a growing number of people are. So it's very crucial. At LSP we have these, we think of them as tandem, sort of pairs of approaches, and one of them is that we're a farm and rural organization, and that's where our power for change comes from, but we're closely aligned with and linked to a very active urban membership. And I think they want to be part of it because they see that active farm and rural base as well. I mean it's a match. Another one of those is that we focus on the practical, like what we're doing in the *Chippewa Ten Percent Project* or training for beginning farmers, which has been a very successful program, and there's policy aspects to that, too. And then, looking at the policy components of that, or fighting the worst policy, like the siting of factory farms, and trying new things, the best something like *Forever Green*, funding from the University of Minnesota to work on cover crops. So those are powerful approaches that got started with your leadership. Here at Land Stewardship Project we've been trying to build on since then.

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