

Al Kurki
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

June 12, 2017

Al Kurki—AK
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: Today is Monday, June 12, and videographer Kyle Grindberg and I are in a conference room at the University of Minnesota's Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. We are about to begin a conversation with Montanan Al Kurki, longtime sustainable ag and food systems policy activist. Al, one of the interesting aspects of your 30-plus-year career is your work on energy issues and policies that also relate to farming. But before we get to that, I'd like to begin these interviews at the beginning, going all the way back to your childhood in northern Wisconsin, and what in your background and education piqued your interest in the environment and ultimately in agriculture, food, and energy policy issues.

AK: Well, Ron, I grew up in what has now statistically been proven to be the poorest township in the poorest county in Wisconsin, Ashland County, in northernmost Wisconsin, which was primarily small dairy farms and loggers. I grew up in a family of loggers, and all the kids were dairy farmers, so I pitched a fair amount of hay and slopped gutters and whatnot. I grew up in a family where constructive social change was very important, a family of activists, both sides of the family. My grandfather was blackballed for organizing in mines. He moved from mine to mine to mine all over the West.

RK: Labor organizing.

AK: Labor organizing. And my father suffered a similar fate in the 1950s, where he would work a job for about two weeks at a time, until the FBI came and informed the employer what his background was, which was very red. But in spite of those difficulties, my family subscribed to wanting a better world around them. Really, having grown up rural and raising a lot of our own food, as I grew older, I thought, well, what does this really mean, not on some grand scale, grand or global scale, but what does this mean closer to home? And my first experience, really, where I saw the need for change in sort of a natural resource or environmental way, was when I was logging, the national forest hatched a plan where they were going to spray power line right of ways using Agent Orange, the toxic mix of 2-4-D and 2-4-5-T.

RK: Notorious in the Vietnam War.

AK: Exactly, exactly. And vets are living with the consequences of that yet today. I got active in that issue because it sounded like a really bad idea, and I didn't want to be in the woods, and I

would hope that most of my fellow loggers wouldn't want to be in the woods at the time shortly before, during, or after that material was being used. And we successfully organized in northern Wisconsin against the Chequamegon National Forest to at least ... in the short haul they did not use it. I don't know how it ultimately ended up, but we stopped them dead in their tracks on it. And it was from that point hence that I started to say, gosh, there is something to ... maybe organizing is actually a vocation or a profession. Through my undergraduate schooling, when I just about gave up logging, I went to work for a group called Minnesota Co-Act in Duluth, and my mentor, Steve O'Neil, then, several years later went to work for the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota. We were traveling out West together and said—Al, I just got the greatest job one could ever have. I am able to apply my community organizing skills, of which we both had and understood and subscribed to as a matter of principle as well as practice. I am applying my community organizing skills in a natural resource and environmental context, and, better still, it's working with and supporting farmers. And I thought, when a job like that rolls around, I'm going to be the first in line. This was in 1983, and...

RK: And I have to say Steve was a wonderful man. I am fortunate to have known him well with the Land Stewardship Project, and he is the person that taught me the value of community organizing.

AK: Right, right.

RK: And we all still miss him very much. He now has a street and, I think, a home for homeless people named after him in Duluth. He is a real hero of our era.

AK: Right, exactly, exactly. I moved to Montana in part for largely recreational reasons. I had been backpacking, fishing, and skiing there, making this long commute from the Midwest. Finally, I moved there, originally planning to take a job with a citizen action group called the Montana Senior Citizens Association. They offered me the job; they didn't offer enough money to go with it. So late that first summer of 1984 I saw this ad in the local paper for a sustainable ag staff position with a group called the Alternative Energy Resources Organization. And I thought oh, this may have been exactly what Steve O'Neil was talking about more than a year earlier. A lot of my organizing experiences and what I had grown up with had been largely born of battling against something. What was different about what Land Stewardship was doing, and once I understood what AERO was trying to accomplish was not so much beat up on the chemical companies or not necessarily Conagra and the big boys, but rather say there's another path away from this; we can get off the bulk commodity treadmill. We just have to apply some real thought and care, not only in our care and keeping of the land, but also making sure farmers can afford to stay on there.

So I interviewed for this position in Montana, and the farmers who were on the hiring committee said—the reason we're doing this now is we've applied the best conservation practices available, we still have our soils blowing, and we're still getting paid \$3 a bushel for wheat, which is what we were getting paid in the early 1950s. This is not working. So what was important for me at that time, moving from dairy country in northern Wisconsin to grain growing country in Montana was to listen, more than anything else listen to what these farmers who were dissatisfied with their current experience but wanted a different path out were saying. Some of

them said that was perhaps going organic in their production. For others it was simply saying—I've got to raise a larger array of crops than what I'm doing now so I'm not at the beck and call of the grain elevator and what they're willing to pay. And for others still it was just saying—I would like to be held in a little higher regard in my community because I raise livestock, and raising livestock now seems to be the target of environmentalists, and there's got to be a way that I can raise livestock in a manner that's harmonious with nature and the land. So that's what folks were saying, and my job wasn't so much to be the expert at that point, but to say, OK, how do we get ourselves together to change the land grant university's agenda to move forward on providing more opportunity for people who wanted to go organic, and, ultimately, what does that mean in Washington, DC. Closer to home what that meant is we pushed the university, Montana State University, very hard on creating a network. All of their experiment stations, requiring that they ... well, it was actually their idea, but it took months of negotiations between farmers in our organization and the university hierarchy to set up extended crop rotation research trials on all the experiment stations across the state, and we considered that to be a major victory. The little bit of time I spent lobbying in Helena was to make Montana the third state in the union that established uniform organic food standards, which actually the conventional commodity groups lined up behind, because the Farm Bureau lobbyist told stories of going into a health food store and somebody washing Sunkist off the oranges and slapping on an organic sticker. So there was some issues clearly were conventional agriculture saw some interface with what this new generation of farmers—some of whom were quite old, but new generation in their thinking—were saying. And there were major points of divergence, as well.

RK: What year was it you started with AERO?

AK: I started in 1984, and a lot of what was being done at that time was to fill the void that farmers felt was left by the university not treating sustainable agriculture, in the more broad sense; organic agriculture, specifically, as serious topics, particularly at the extension level. Researchers tended to say—is there a good researchable question here? Let's do something. So the research community was a little bit ahead of Extension, so AERO spent a lot of its time focusing on creating educational opportunities in the form of workshops, conferences, and farm tours that were geared towards getting everybody further up the curve on sustainable agriculture systems and practices.

RK: And just to explain the name, if I recall, AERO got started a few years before that, coming really out of the so-called energy crisis, right, out of the '70s?

AK: Exactly.

RK: And so there wasn't ... I mean, an energy thing kind of comes back to you later in your career, but that's always been part of the picture, too, right?

AK: Right. Well, Alternative Energy Research Organization, their members were drawn by the idea of what Buckminster Fuller and others were saying—we live on this planet with finite resources, we really have to be stewards of what we have, in terms of energy efficiency, and then making better use of sunlight. Well, a group of those AERO members were farmers that were saying—well, what sustainable agriculture is making better use of sunlight. In some ways it's

no different than solar arrays. As a matter of fact, Mother Nature here on this earth is our biggest solar array. So that was the case they made within the organization to help the organization evolve and grow into saying—this isn't just putting solar panels on roofs, it's making farms more vibrant and viable in terms of what they raise and how they go about raising it.

RK: I was just trying to think; I can't say for sure what the exact year or two was when I got to serve on the board for a little while with AERO.

AK: It was in the '90s.

RK: It was in the '90s. I think it was around '93, '94.

AK: Um-hum.

RK: And one of the things I really enjoyed was getting to know some of these very interesting farmers that were on that board and thought you could talk a little bit about that, maybe one in particular.

AK: Well, one of them, who was actually steered my direction when I was working at AERO as the executive director, was a friend of mine who played softball with John Tester, who at that point was processing some of his own meat, and he was now taking over management of this third-generation farm, which he was convinced he was going to go organic with it. He had support from his parents to do so, and so on. And John was active not only in AERO, but he and I crossed paths most frequently—I was on the first organic certification committee of the first organic crop improvement association in Montana. And I was the chair of that, and John was active in the leadership of that. That job was a busman's holiday. I worked all day at AERO, and then I looked at stacks of papers, me and three other farmers looked at stacks of papers like this.

RK: Wow.

AK: Through that I know John served on his local school board and became a state Senator. Now he's our U.S. Senator, and I think he's the only farmer in the U.S. Senate, and he is definitely the only organic farmer in the U.S. Senate, and always harkens back to his roots of what it's like to be involved in production agriculture, trying to be a good steward of land, and both the opportunities and difficulties that come with that.

RK: Yeah, and he's become, as you would expect, a real champion for some of the programs that the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition has been supporting, and trying to move the agenda forward on federal policies.

AK: Exactly.

[14:01 time elapsed]

RK: Sustainable ag research and conservation and all sorts of good topics. I did want to welcome anything else you had to say about AERO, but I also wanted to talk a little bit about where AERO then met federal policy, how that happened and what that was about.

AK: Right. Well, it was clear to many but not all of the farmer members whom I served, essentially, or worked with, that at some level some changes were going to have to be made in Washington, because what they saw happening is people felt locked into raising wheat and barley because they were not only commodity crops, but that's what their base acres were tied to, so they wanted to see more flexibility in the farm bill, in terms of being able to actually add crops to the rotation that wouldn't somehow disqualify them from federal payments or crop insurance. That was a very large one. There was also ... I think what people saw is even though the state of Montana established organic food standards, there was almost dizzying array of organic certifying agencies, non-profits in most cases. Sometimes the states were taking that on, and there was no uniform, even state-to-state, understanding exactly of what it was. We were pretty close to, for example, California and Maine, which preceded us, but there really was a lot of serious thought given that we needed a national organic standard, not only to harmonize or make more sane, shall we say, interstate commerce on organic production, but also what foreign market opportunities it might offer in Europe and places like that. So those were two primary points. But there was also a clear ... there was not, amongst the farmer members, there was not unanimity on federal policy necessarily being the answer, because so many of them saw it as being the problem. So they were concerned that somehow, along the way, the vested interests—you know, big grain, big chemical, big ag in general would somehow twist this ... some programs with the best intentions in their direction.

RK: Still a debate; still going on.

AK: Exactly, and some folks really said—we've got to get good at this very close to home and be a model for what has to be done elsewhere, rather than investing our time in Washington. But that was a plurality of the members. In some ways they kept us honest so we didn't go too far up that path, and stayed closer to home, trying to build networks and expand the networks of farmers who would come to the table, even come to that AERO annual meeting, or that event on farm policy, related to sustainable agriculture. But clearly those were two big ones. Changes in the commodity program so the penalties would go away for farmers who were trying to do the right thing. And then some national standard on organics were the two big driving wheels for Montana producers.

RK: We should talk time frame in there probably, because then in the 1990 Farm Bill is when the Organic Food Production Act passed.

AK: Right.

RK: And one of the things I've heard from several people in these interviews which is rather shocking, that authorized it, but it didn't really take hold with the actual products that were deemed to be organic and the standards until 12 years later, after the authorization, before people could really say—well, this is an organic procedure, that one isn't, that sort of thing. So where

did you come in and what did you do with that in Washington? Do you remember, with the Sustainable Ag Working Group, exactly?

AK: I knew that Sustainable Ag Working Group was involved in it, but I think they were one of the players in that arena, not necessarily the sole one.

RK: That's very true.

AK: By virtue of a change in my career, about the time that you may have gotten on the AERO board, I had left by this, left the organization by this point. So exactly what that path was, I wasn't aware of its full consequences till Montana, organic farmers in Montana, and most of the organic farmers at that point in Montana, in the 1980s and '90s, were big grain farmers, they were not small produce operations, although they were part of that as well, particularly in western Montana. What happened is once the national organic program was established, and it was clear that there was going to be an option for state agencies to take over certification, there was a big push among Montana organic farmers. That's where I sort of got reengaged. And to give you a sense of what I perceive as progress—we will revisit this—but in 1990, Bob Quinn, who is probably the most famous organic farmer in Montana, and one of the biggest, called me on a Sunday morning and said—do you know what Everett Snortland, the director of the Montana Department of Agriculture just said about organic farming? He called it a fraud. Fifteen years later the state was certifying organic farms and doing an outstanding job at it. So the times, they are, indeed, a-changin'. So, yeah.

RK: Well, in the meantime, to kind of take another tack, and I think it's 1980—let's see, when did the actual SARE [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education]... 1990, I guess it was—yeah, 1990, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Act passed. And that kind of pointed you in another direction with the work in the West, right?

AK: Right, right. Well, I'd like to back up just a little bit.

RK: Yeah, back up and kind of move in next to that.

AK: Yeah, again, AERO members were interested in what sort of federal policy level work might take place, but nobody saw doing them themselves, and they certainly weren't going to send me to Washington to do it. There was a group of folks from Land Stewardship Project, Center for Rural Affairs, were the two I remember, where we were sitting in Karl Stauber's kitchen in Minneapolis or Saint Paul, somewhere here in the Twin Cities, and there obviously had been a discussion where someone approached me and said—would AERO be interested in this Midwest Sustainable Ag Working Group? And for me the light bulb went off right there. It's like—oh, my gosh, this is exactly what we need is where organizations who have either a membership or serve farmers who are interested in sustainable agriculture and how it might benefit individual operations are actually going to work together to achieve something, because we were somewhat at a loss organizationally—what we could do beyond the state Capitol, and what did it mean going to DC. AERO's involvement in the Midwestern SAWG [MSAWG] was as much to offer another regional perspective to what was heavily Midwestern focused. For example, our representatives to the Midwestern SAWG were actually somewhat concerned when

wheat was talked about as an alternative crop to be used in the Midwest. It's like, whoa, wait a minute—that's millions of acres of what's happening in Montana right now. What sort of impact would changes in federal policy and encouragement of raising small grains in one area, what impact would that have elsewhere? So I think we added a different dimension to that discussion, and certainly, even as I was looking now through the roster of who was involved in that, it was so nice to see many other people who, frankly, were a little closer to being policy wonks than I was, who would stay at the table and had the discipline to tease out what different initiatives that were proposed by be it friendly environmental groups—and when I say friendly, those who weren't hostile to farmers and whatnot—or our farmer membership itself, and actually took the time to suss out what does this mean at a policy level, and then how is it expressed on the ground, and how does it actually work. And that's what struck me about the Midwestern Sustainable Ag Working Group, is they were a group of people who were going to stay at this, regardless of how difficult it was, and as a result a lot of the rest of us were able to say this is where we fit in, and this is where we part company. So, yeah.

[22:47]

RK: And then I think that led to, as you pointed out, these regional differences among allies did lead to an effort to have some sort of a western sustainable ag working group, but certainly a Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, a northeast United States sustainable agriculture group, to try to bring all those interests together so they were worked out among friends wherever possible on these policy issues.

AK: Exactly. Midwestern SAWG sort of birthed or kick-started everything else that was headed other directions. By the early '90s, I think AERO might have withdrew from the Midwestern SAWG, because it was one of the charter members and organizers of the Western Sustainable Ag Working Group. That group was very interesting because the western region is the wettest, driest, hottest, coldest, furthest north and furthest south in terms of agricultural production, in terms of our states. So it brought together a much different array of people who had a different set of issues often—not always, but it made for a different perspective, for sure.

RK: Now you're bringing back thoughts of mine, too. And one of the struggles with the Western SAWG was is California part of it or not? Because California was like a ... certainly almost a nation in itself when it comes to agriculture...

AK: Right.

RK: ... what it produces and everything, so that was always one of the issues.

AK: I think it's the fifth or sixth biggest agricultural economy in the world, yeah, so.

RK: So then, let's move now, then, to where does this Sustainable Ag Research and Education program come into this picture?

AK: Really, Midwestern SAWG and Ferd and others were really the architects of how it was originally conceived as LISA, which was an unfortunate acronym, but an accurate one.

Low Input Sustainable Agriculture, and it became sort of a whipping girl, so to speak, amongst conventional ag. And it evolved to BUBA, which was Biologically Utilized...

RK: Assets.

AK: Something to that effect, yeah. And that didn't fit well, but somebody did stumble on what was at least the current Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension program. And to some extent, SARE, by virtue of that program being heavily farmer-focused and farmer-driven, the chief architects of that, whether that be the advocacy groups or those folks in DC who bore some responsibility to administer it, had the wisdom to break it up into being a regional program that would allow for these regional variations. I think Midwestern SAWG and, over time, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, really deserve a lot of credit for not only designing it, but making sure that that was an emphasis of the SARE program; that is, it's farmer and rancher driven in terms of its research priorities, in terms of how farmers and ranchers are actually engaged at a number of different levels, and even in some instances for on-farm field trials, that they're grant recipients as well. So they're involved at a governing level, they're heavily involved in the selection of what is funded, whether it be at universities, non-profits, or elsewhere. And I think to this day that's the strongest suit of SARE, because what it has done over time, it has drawn ... sometimes I think sustainable agriculture advocates have made the mistake—or in the early days in particular—have made the mistake of making organic agriculture and sustainable agriculture synonymous. That isn't necessarily so. And what the SARE program has really achieved by having this big tent is drawing in people who may still use herbicide, but they have cover crop rotations that would make organic farmers blush. And drawing people—I would say in general the sustainable agriculture movement is ... I think bipartisan isn't even the word. Nonpartisan is maybe more appropriate. Some very conservative people subscribe to good land stewardship, and they are right next to hippies who are selling off the back of their truck to push the stereotype out as far as I can. And I think SARE has done a good job over the years with advocates on the outside saying how do we serve a broad, if not the mainstream of agriculture, a very broad segment that wants to see change on the farm that's going to benefit farms and the environment and the community.

RK: I'll venture a little bit off the topic here, but one of the things that gives me some cause for optimism is while there has been even something of a divide among the, really, ultimate allies in sustainable ag and organics. What's bringing people together, now in the last few years, particularly, is soil health.

AK: Yes.

RK: Everyone agrees that that is so critical. There are different ways to achieve it and different technologies, different approaches, but that's a wonderful movement, I think.

AK: Yes, yes, exactly. And by virtue of it gaining some momentum, even SARE now, that publish materials on cover cropping in particular that were gathering dust—you know, I mean, they were good publications; they certainly had a readership. They're blowing the dust off of that, now having a whole new readership, and a group of people are paying attention. So SARE's been sort of out on the cutting edge on quite a few issues.

RK: In our conversation on the way over here today, you've also mentioned that ... we were talking about funding for SARE, which is always one of NSAC's main efforts is always to try to keep the funding, trying to get these programs to be mandatory and to get the funding every year. But this year, despite President Trump coming in and the efforts to cut the budget, you said SARE actually came out well.

AK: Right. It got a \$3 million increase, which slightly more than 10 percent increase, in a year when everybody was anticipating the opposite taking place. And that was a function of Congress saying this is a program worth supporting.

RK: I think that's another one of those causes for optimism, which we certainly, we all need these days.

AK: That's right.

RK: So what did you actually do with Western SARE? Were you like an extension agent or what were you doing?

[29:32]

AK: When I went to work for NCAT, one of the responsibilities that, actually, Ron, you bear a great deal of credit for, you and Jill Auburn in particular, saw that ... how do I describe it? That there was still ... to really establish some true partnerships between university, particularly extension and research and the non-profit community, there had to be some visible representation of that. And when NCAT bid for...

RK: Which is the National Center for Appropriate Technology.

AK: ... bid for administering the new professional development program title, which was funded finally in 1994—it's one of the three SARE titles—it was Jill Auburn and Ron Kroese who suggested maybe we should partner on this; there might be an important synergy here, which turned out to be exactly the case. There was not only a value ... there was symbolic value in that a non-profit organization which had a commitment, a long-time commitment, to sustainable agriculture was teamed up with somebody from UC Davis, and eventually the University of Wyoming, the person who replaced Jill. There was not only some symbolic value in that, but actually the program ran better having two perspectives, and two people available to answer questions when the other wasn't around. I mean, sometimes it's just logistics that make it work. So that was a pretty important role. My place in that was administering, or assisting in administering, the professional development grants program, which has a regional competitive program and then direct grants to state extension to conduct more state level activities. And I also conducted a lot of program evaluation work for the western region and the southern, and even some midwestern region SARE programs, to assess what sort of impact they were having on the ground, particularly with farmers and ranchers.

RK: So it was not really too different than, say, being a program officer for a foundation or whatever, some of the same or similar duties.

AK: Similar, yeah.

RK: And we should probably say the reason I, Ron Kroese, was even involved in it is that at that time I happened to be the director of NCAT from into '93 up through about '97, and when that was going on and where we reconnected and where this all started happening.

AK: Right.

RK: So, when did you move on from the Western SARE? And you've stayed with NCAT, and you can talk a little bit about ATTRA. We do already have an interview already done with Bob Gray, who has been so critical for ATTRA's funding, representing it in Washington, DC, but tell me more about ... kind of take us through your ATTRA and your NCAT work. What is ATTRA?

AK: Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas. To keep it simpler, NCAT speaks more about now being the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service. It just rings a little truer and more complete.

RK: ATTRA had that awkward name, but there was some reason for it.

AK: Right, right.

RK: I think it was to avoid the word, phrase, sustainable agriculture. [Chuckles]

AK: It probably was. Fortunately, times have changed on that account, too. I still, about a third of my time is still spent working for or with Western SARE. My work with ATTRA has been primarily on farm energy issues, particularly when energy prices were ... fossil fuel energy prices were extremely high, farmers and ranchers really wanted to see if biodiesel, making biodiesel on the farm, was a good idea, and the thing that NCAT has done well is often everybody gets excited about a given renewable energy or a biologically based technology, but what follows in the wake is a series of hard questions that have to be answered. Will this actually work? Will it pencil? Is it something I can do without burning up all my family's time or my personal time?

RK: Or in the unintended consequences that could result.

AK: Exactly, exactly, yes. So one of my responsibilities was to find out who within the nation was experts in this area, because I'm not a chemical engineer. I don't burn or make biodiesel, but there were farmers and scientists who were front and center on this scattered around the country. I got to know those people so I could make proper referrals. In Montana we set up a project where we actually funded mini-grants for farmers and ranchers to buy, or cost share, essentially, on oil seed presses and biodiesel processors. Well, that roared along for three or four years. People were real pleased with the results. Some people are still making biodiesel. Some have switched to burning straight vegetable oil, for example, rather than having to go through the chemical process. And my job was to essentially make sure that nobody took a real beating on

experimenting with this, which was real important. Again, we had farm tours around it; we had farmers who had tried it speaking to folks about it, saying—boy, don't buy that Chinese press unless you're prepared to reengineer it, essentially. Spend more money and get something that's a better quality. I mean, very practical questions—don't burn Arby's French fryer oil, because you'll burn your tractor out, because there's something that, even when it's filtered, something that they put in it that burns out diesel motors. You cannot do anything with it. Very practical stuff like that. So what I was cycling back to, through my work at NCAT, was really to say not only ... yeah, again, what renewable technologies, what makes sense after the bloom is off the rose, after you've penciled it all out, you've made the investment, is this going to work or not. So.

[35:45]

RK: You're still with ATTRA, right?

AK: Yes, yes.

RK: And with NCAT's programs. So what are you focusing on nowadays?

AK: Well, it's shifted. More recently I've been doing more work on another federal program that has had some difficulty getting traction in Montana was the Rural Energy for America program. Montana was consistently under-subscribed. Our state was turning dollars back to the federal government, and what NCAT did was create a series of workshops that took people through the application process to make it 1) not so scary and 2) not so onerous, and really describe what the technologies were that people were buying and applying, whether that be irrigation efficiency, solar, and actually have applicants who had successfully installed these technologies tell their story. Well, Rural Development in Montana was so impressed with that model that they've now picked it up and adopted it themselves to keep the program visible and used and accessible to farmers and ranchers in Montana. So that's been a lot of what my work has involved. My work with ATTRA has also stayed around ... people still have questions about oil seeds—what should I do with them once I raise them? Is fuel the proper way to go, or are there markets for them? So that's a small amount of my assignment. But a lot of my work has evolved now into food systems work, where what we're trying to do, inasmuch as farmers are raising the crops, is like raising crops in a sustainable manner, and wanting to see a reward for having ... yeah, a reward or premium for that. How might they crack institutional markets to create a floor so they can count on selling to local schools or hospitals and the like for at least part of what they raise. Really starting to say, OK, within the food system and the value chain as it's described, farmers are here, but how do they establish solid relationships with other people, be it distributors, processors, all the way to the consumer, that are meaningful and rewarding to them, so they capture more of that value that is sometimes lost to the infamous middleman. So that's a lot of my work now, both with public schools in Montana and with tribal communities, as well.

RK: So it still remains a very farmer-centric, you might say. It's not drifted from that as friends have come and gone, it stayed to that.

AK: Right, right. Well, yeah, NCAT's emphasis still remains that farmers and ranchers have to see a benefit from all this food systems work that's going on that gets very complex and sometimes pulls you into the public health world, or talking with nutritionists rather than grain millers. It's a different landscape, but it requires ... I think what we've seen in the evolution of the sustainable agriculture movement is inasmuch as the farm is trying to achieve a system that works, it also reflects in changing our food system to being one that works. And you can define that very locally, bio-regionally—I would say they are the two most appropriate levels. But I know NSAC has been involved in rewriting of, I think, the Child Food and Nutrition Act. So it opened the door to more schools being able to purchase locally, or at least being able to understand how they might be able to do that. So I would say all of us involved in the sustainable agriculture movement at one point or another are going to ... have or are going to be looking at that larger landscape. We can't engage consumers one at a time, but we sure can engage schools, hospitals, day-care centers one at a time.

RK: As , as you were talking here, I think we'd be remiss if we didn't talk a little bit about where does climate change come into this picture, thinking about that. Are the farmers thinking about this? I know it's controversial like I've read ... you know; you read in polls about why you don't really talk about climate change. You can talk about the unusual weather and things like that, but...

AK: Um-hum.

RK: ... there certainly's got to be some thinking going on in that whole issue of sustainability and climate.

AK: I would say both within NCAT and the ATTRA program, and SARE, there's a growing recognition that it has to be addressed, but you're right. In some ways it is the language that's wrapped around it. I still know farmers who get pretty upset when you talk about farm adaptation to climate change. Weather variability or a different phrase, it's still pretty important, but it's on a lot of people's radar, and sometimes it's expressing itself, particularly in more brittle environments like the West, with semi-arid and arid regions where people are having to ... they can't count on natural rainfall in those semi-arid areas like they used to, which is telling them—oh-oh; we got to do something different here. Do we adopt a technological approach which might mean shifting to irrigation, or do we find a way of better capturing what moisture we have through cover cropping? And what's happening is, I think, the climate debate on farms is already starting to play out in people making different choices in terms of making their soils capable, healthy enough to capture more water and retain it for longer periods of time and applying other technologies that may be appropriate at some point.

RK: Build more resiliency is one of the phrases you hear over and over nowadays, I think.

AK: Exactly.

RK: Well, this has been really fascinating, and I've enjoyed hearing about the things you've worked on. A number of them have been part and parcel of successes that have been happening to advance sustainable agriculture. I'd like to have you talk a little bit, if you would, though,

about if you have any feelings about sort of missed opportunities or any kind of disappointments you've felt, or anything along those lines? Should-a, could-a, would-a kind of thing?

[42:36]

AK: I think I described one of them early-on. I think the sustainable ag movement could have had a little bit more traction if the advocates for organic agriculture hadn't immediately wedded sustainable and organic together, because I think that was an act of exclusion that was unintended, but was one, nonetheless. I think the movement grew a little slower, perhaps, as a result. I can only guess about that. But I do know in some instances in Montana I talked with farmers who, after I left AERO said—you know, I went to a meeting of AERO farmers, and it turns out at that particular meeting they were all organic, and they said—what are you doing here? And that's unfortunate. This should be a, and I think it probably has become in many places, a more welcoming community. But I think with maybe some of the people who really took their lumps in the early going, they now ... maybe they carry a chip on their shoulder. And maybe that's even changed in the decade since I heard those sorts of stories. So in the early days I think we could have been a little bit more expansive and inclusive about what sustainable agriculture really meant, and how we all know that it's very individual farm-based, and we know that social movements have to start where people are at, not where many people would like to think they should be. And I think that would be, in retrospect, one thing I would say we could have done a little better along the way. But on the other hand, it's made for a pretty principled and focused approach to this, and I think it's forced sustainability—the word sustainability, you always wondered has it been successfully green-washed or co-opted, but I think it's forcing, by virtue of making sustainable agriculture and food systems part of the policy and practical discussions going on, we have now forced a lot of people's thinking into saying—what lies ahead? What is going to keep agriculture sustainable in the face of climate change? In the face of continued population growth? In the face of imports continuing until energy prices get so high that that becomes unsustainable, no longer feasible? And I think what that's done is ... I know in the western region, and I hate to be provincial about it, but what that means is some of the issues that lie ahead of us, the unfinished business, so to speak, includes one of my concerns—and I hear it over and over again from my colleagues at ATTRA, in particular, is we have a lot more small farmers than we had a decade or two ago, and that's a far more diverse group in terms of who it is—more women, more minorities—but profitability and quality of life issues still are major concerns for those small farmers. Are we as a society prepared to say it's time to, whether it's through indirect subsidies or whatever, are we finally going to pay the true cost of food for people being good stewards and aspiring to lead at least middle-class lifestyles? I think that's a very important question that lies ahead of us.

RK: Well, I think on the disappointment sort of side of it, I ask almost everyone we've interviewed about that, and almost everybody kind of comes back to that. One of the things that NSAC and the movement, and certainly people like Ferd Hoefner and Chuck Hassebrook, who have been so important to the effort over the years, are concerned about is the deeper structural issues of agriculture haven't really changed. We have still the dilemma of a sustainable organic, or whatever you want to call it, operating in this thing right next door to a system that most people agree isn't sustainable for the long term, and how long can that contrast, that conflict, happen. That's one of the things that I think points to my next question is—what now? What do

you see needs to happen to try to move away from that and get at some of the deeper issues? Big question.

AK: Big question. I hate to sound almost cruel and cynical about it, but I think what will call the question quickly is when fossil fuels aren't hovering, as oil is, around \$50 a barrel. I think when we were pushing \$100- and \$125-a-barrel oil, the discussion was starting to shift. I remember over 25 years ago—no 30 years ago—a farmer from Idaho calling me and saying—I want to learn how to raise cover crops in rotation, so when commercial fertilizer hits nine cents a pound I'm ready to make the shift. Nine cents a pound is cheap these days, and yet we still continue to support, through our tax dollars and our consumer choices, we still continue to support a very energy-intensive farming system. So how policy affects that, I'm not 100 percent sure. But I do know higher energy prices are going to play a role in that. I would say maybe closer to policy matter where we can have some effect, and I know is a big concern, is in spite of more new farmers on the landscape, our farm population continues to age. For, particularly, those farms and ranches in the middle, the transition is difficult at times, at best, and a lot of farms and ranches disappear, are bought up by others, or are bought up by out-of-state landowners who are former Major League baseball players or paint fortune heiresses or whatever. How policy might affect that I think is sort of fertile ground for us to explore. Are there more intentional or purposive ways of creating inter-generational transfer of land from people who want to farm from those who want to get out of it. Because you also find a lot of farm kids, they're still being discouraged by their parents to stay on the farm. We've got to find a different dynamic, and maybe policy plays a role in that. I would say another issue where policy may have a place—it's coming at states in the West, and I would say the western Midwest as well—are water management issues. Not only how spongy are our soils to capture what little moisture we're getting, but how do we deal with enormous swings from flood conditions to extended droughts, and still produce food, I think is a major issue. Plus water allocation in the West—communities in the West are ... urban communities are buying farms and essentially drying up those farms to water golf courses and make sure people have water to flush their toilets. I don't know if that's the model for the future or not. There's some innovation now taking place in that, where farms are being asked to sell their water, let's say, four-to-seven out of ten years, so the farm doesn't go completely fallow and does raise some crop. But how that is going to be managed, I would say, in the Northern Plains states and the West is our next big policy matter, and how it's going to be resolved, because, as Mark Twain said, whiskey's for drinking; water's for fighting. I don't know how that'll be solved, but that's the big challenge. Three I'd see—inter-generational, profitability in small farming, and water use.

RK: Thank you, Al. It's been a very interesting discussion. I really appreciate getting your perspective. If you have anything else you'd like to add, we can. Otherwise, I think we've really got it here, and I'm very pleased with the way this has gone. Hope you are, too.

AK: Well, thanks for the opportunity.

RK: You bet.

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