

**Jill Auburn  
Narrator**

**Ron Kroese  
Interviewer**

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**Jill Auburn—JA  
Ron Kroese—RK**

**RK:** It's October 11, 2017, and videographer Chip Kuhn and I are at the Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, where today it is my pleasure to interview Dr. Jill Auburn, who, during her three-decade career was a key figure in advancing science and education to advance organic and sustainable agriculture in the United States. So welcome, Jill—glad you're here.

**JA:** Thank you, Ron.

**RK:** As I do with most folks I get to talk to, I ask them to really talk about how you got interested in the whole area of agriculture and sustainable ag and science in particular, going all the way back to your childhood and then up through your education. I would be very interested in hearing about that.

**JA:** Well, I didn't start out in agriculture. It skipped a generation in my family. My grandfather, Jack Culbertson, was a citrus and avocado grower in southern California. But I grew up partly in the Midwest, west of Chicago, in suburbs right next to farmland that was being converted to houses, and then upstate New York, Schenectady, New York. I was actually born in Schenectady, so I can spell that, which I think I'm ... made me a good speller, maybe.

**RK:** Needed an education just for that.

**JA:** We moved to the Chicago area and then back to Schenectady for high school. I liked being out walking around in Schenectady. I'd walk around in the woods. I've gardened, but I never really thought of working in agriculture. I was part of the sort of granola generation, maybe. I baked my own bread and I went off to college with a copy of Euell Gibbons' *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, but not formal agriculture growing. I went to ... I think I was already, always destined to be a scientist, because I liked math and science, and I was always a—show me the data, show me the evidence—kind of person. My dad was an electrical engineer, and I was the middle of three girls in the family, and pretty conventional, fairly conservative, not totally right-wing, but pretty conservative family, and traditional. I think if my dad had had any sons, I might not have been the one that he asked to help him build Heathkit televisions and radios and show

me how the car works when he took the car apart. So I think being a fairly quiet, studious, observant middle child was probably important to my becoming a scientist.

So I went to undergraduate school and got my master's at Miami University in Ohio. It was a really good school for me because it was big enough to have some graduate programs and some research going on, but I was very shy and very reserved and quiet, and if I'd gone to a bigger school, I think I might have been lost in the shuffle. This was heading off to college in '71, the year after Kent State, and being in a fairly conservative family, I was not politically active as a lot of people were that time, but I ... so it was nice to be in a quiet campus with a lot of brick buildings. But I studied psychology first, as the science of how people act and why people do the things they do sounded very interesting to me. The only thing I really remember from psychology is that what people say they will do and what they actually do are often two very different things. [Chuckles]

**RK:** Right.

**JA:** The spring of my first year I took an environmental studies class from Gary Barrett, who was an ecologist there, and that really had a big influence on me. I was just very taken by that. At some point I read *Silent Spring*, probably around that time, and Gary was doing research on the unintended side effects of pesticides on ecosystems. So not the bugs you're trying to kill, but all of the beneficials, the mice in the field—he was really an ecosystems scientist. I ended up working for him that summer where I learned how tedious science can be and how much field work is just a lot of grunt work. I think because I moved over then from psychology to zoology for my master's degree, I didn't actually do work in that field, exactly. I got more involved in animal behavior, and animals I thought were a lot easier to understand and manipulate than people. So there was a time in my life, and I could probably still now tell you more than you ever would want to know about how a tadpole knows where it's going in the pond. It's actually very interesting. If you walk up to a farm pond, bullfrog tadpoles are at the edge. They go to deep water—and I won't take an hour to explain how they know, but they know which way is deep water. They're not just looking around; they know how to get to deep water. It's very important to their survival. So my work with agriculture at that time was mostly going to farm ponds and asking the farmers if I could take tadpoles from their pond to go back and study how they learned where they were going.

**RK:** Interesting.

**JA:** Let's see—then I took a year while my husband—I met my husband through Gary Barrett, too; that's so important. And he is a, Walt Auburn, he was an environmental educator at the time, or was studying to be that. So I took a year to work while he went to get his master's degree, and that's when I found out how much pretty unemployable someone with a master's degree in animal behavior is. So I worked as a secretary, and that was pretty eye-opening. It also gave me a chance to rethink. I think I had been thinking I would then go on for my doctorate. I was planning to go to Duke and study salamanders in the Smokies, which is fascinating. They're complex, really fascinating animals, but during that year off, I thought about, well, could I do something a little more socially worthwhile. I can't remember how I learned ... I think Walt knew about this fellow at the University of California-Davis, Ken Watt, Kenneth E. F. Watt, who

was doing global modeling of world issues, of food and environment, energy, how everything connected. And because I was very good at mathematics as well as science, that really intrigued me to think that you could ... and computers were just being used. I was right in that era where you would have to submit a deck of cards to the big mainframe, but then we were just switching over to having desktop computers where you could do a lot more without having to worry about the cost of computing time. So I ended up going to UC Davis and being a student of Ken Watts, and his big modeling team had just really kind of shrunk down to much less funding and a much smaller group, which was wonderful for me, because, again, I was still a pretty shy, retiring, academic kind of gal, and I wasn't lost in a big group. I got a lot of good interaction with him, involved in some of his manuscripts, and for my dissertation I ended up doing models of something much smaller and simpler, but agriculturally related, since Davis is an ag school. I did models of where produce, fresh produce, was grown, and where it was consumed in the state, and different routing patterns for getting it from producer to consumer. So when we later got into all of the local agriculture, I could say, well, way back when I was looking at kind of how things move from producer to consumer.

There was quite an active organic alternative ag group on campus. The student farm that Mark Van Horn ran, the growers that ended up settling in the Capay Valley and becoming organic growers there. I was actually not all that involved in that, because I was not a real hands-on. I was still much more the sort of scientist, calculator, behind the computer and often wish I had gotten a little more involved with some of those folks, because they've been real leading lights in terms of practice in California.

And then, let's see, I graduated and did some ... I didn't want to move and go somewhere else and take an academic job; I was pretty happy where I was, and my husband was gainfully employed. So I did various little projects under grant funding or post-docs. One of them that I'm pretty proud of—I don't know if you've ever heard of it; I don't think too many people have these days—but very early-on we thought organic farmers should have the same kind of market information that conventional growers had. And they didn't; you couldn't find what prices were. You didn't know what was moving through the marketplace. So I was primary with a colleague in developing something called the Organic Market News and Information Service. Sounds very grandiose, but it really was me and then later some other people, just sitting at my home computer, once a week phoning up the distributors of organic produce in California—there were maybe half-a-dozen of them—and asking them, going down a list of produce items and asking them, OK, what did you get this week? What was the selling price? And then publishing a little newsletter. And that's in the archives, probably in the National Ag Library or somewhere. It didn't last for too many years, but it was, I think, an example of trying to provide those services to organic growers. I ended up going to an actual, real, full-time paid job when the University of California started its Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, or UC SAREP, we called it. We always pronounced the "p" in SAREP, so that later on when LISA became SARE nationally, you could distinguish between the two.

**RK:** I see. And that was going before, it at least started—I always think of you as almost a founder of that.

**JA:** Not quite. I appreciate that credit. I was in on the ground floor, almost, but the first director was Bill Liebhardt, who came to us from Rodale.

**RK:** Oh, it was. I know him a little bit.

**JA:** And oh, I learned so much from him; he was such a great guy. He came ... he had started the big systems experiments at Rodale, and he came in, and, I tell you, his phone was just ringing off the hook. There was just no way that he could even return phone calls. So the first hire that he made was to hire me to run the information program. There was a feeling that even though the wording and some of the, certainly, academic talk of sustainability was fairly new, that there was a lot of information out there about how to practice sustainable and organic agriculture, a lot of it in growers' knowledge, a lot of it in the older literature, kind of pre-pesticide, and that it would be worthwhile to pull together what was already out there rather than reinventing the wheel. And because I was pretty good at computers and that kind of thing, I was hired. It was right about the time that the World Wide Web was just a glimmer in a few people's eyes. But the idea of pulling stuff together in a structured, organized form was what I was hired to do. And I can remember after my interview Bill took me back to his office and said—would you stay here just a minute more. And he looked me in the eye and he said—this is not a small thing we're doing here. We are really going to change the face of California agriculture, if you'd like to help do this. So I was totally sold, and I learned a lot from him. We made mistakes, but I learned so much from him. One of the things that I remember him saying is—I know a good project when I see him or her. So it was really all about people, investing in people. I think that's when I started to learn to come a little out of my academic and data shell and kind of look up and talk to people and understand more that a lot of that a lot of that was in people's heads and interacting with people, and not just all in books and numbers.

**RK:** I know that you were ... out there at the same time, things, the work that Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson were doing, and those kind of people, some of whom I am interviewing.

**JA:** Yeah, I met them, I'm sure ... I can't remember exactly how I met those two, but I met them about that time through those activities. And I actually was the, I think, the only university person that was on the original board of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. And I think they wanted me on it because they wanted somebody ... we were running a grants program through UC SAREP, and even though my formal job was the information program, there weren't that many of us and we all did everything, so I helped Bill a lot with the administration of the grants program. I think they valued somebody who kind of knew how that kind of thing worked. Although, I must say, OFRF was my first realization of how productive and nimble and wonderful nonprofit organizations are. Because I went into it thinking, well, before we can start giving out grants we need to have procedures and things written down and work out this and that. And they're like—oh, no, we're just ... we're going to be making grants by next spring—here we go. I remember the first what do you call it? annual report for OFRF. It was just a little pocket-size, card-size thing, not this big, elaborate ... so I learned a lot from that experience of getting involved in OFRF. Some of those early meetings were actually in my house in Sacramento.

**RK:** Really.

**JA:** Yeah, or in Davis, rather. It was a great group to learn from.

**RK:** Did you then, ultimately, be the director of the SAREP, and how long did you stay there?

**JA:** I never was director. Let's see—I started soon after it ... so '86 was the legislation, so I probably started there in about '87. And I stayed there just about a decade. I went to USDA in '98, and I went from information director to associate director. And I pretty much assumed that if and when Bill retired that I would compete to be the director. And I can remember being out to dinner with some good friends one night, saying—I love my life; I don't want anything to change. And I think within six months I had been convinced that I should apply for the USDA job with the SARE program. [Chuckles] My introduction to SARE was back when it was LISA, when it first got started. I always tell people...

**RK:** And what's LISA stand for?

**JA:** Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture.

**RK:** Um-hum—that federal program.

**JA:** Yeah, yeah, the federal program. My understanding—I've never gone back and looked ... I'm a ... because I worked at the university and then at USDA, I've always been the program implementer, and while I am affected by, and I'm certainly carrying out policy, I've never been on the policy development, legislative side. So I've never actually gone...

**RK:** Pat Madden and people like that.

**JA:** Yeah, oh, Pat Madden was a great mentor of mine. Actually my first proposal to LISA in that first year was not funded. I always tell people that. In the competitive grant game I couldn't even get ... but it was a proposal to do on the national scale what we were doing in California, kind of an information program. So for whatever reason, it wasn't funded. But Patrick Madden, who was the national director at the time, came back to me, and I can remember him taking me for coffee and sitting down at the student union, and he said—you know, I have something I would really like you to do. I have people identified all around the country who have knowledge and interest in sustainable agriculture. Would you chair a committee of these people to pull together an information system for the SARE Program nationally? So basically the thing I had proposed to do, but he knew all of the people in the different walks of life and the different sectors around the country that had the knowledge that was needed to do this. So he basically set me up, and I was flabbergasted to chair something, because I was not ... like I say, I'm not a big people manager at that point, but stepped up to the challenge and had just a wonderful time with people around the country, pulling together what the SARE Program, what the LISA Program, which became SARE, could do to take advantage of existing information. The National Ag Library was involved; that's how I met Jayne MacLean. I'm trying to think of all the other people that were involved. It was just a great group of people. And that eventually morphed, later, into becoming what we now call SARE Outreach—it's the outreach arm, the communications, information arm of the SARE Program.

**RK:** Sustainable Ag Research and Education.

**JA:** Sustainable Ag Research and Education.

**RK:** Yes.

**JA:** My other pathway into the national office after starting that committee was when—and I'm trying to remember what year this was—this was probably 1994, I think. The part of the legislation for that program that said there should be professional development extension outreach. You know, it had been research and education—education in the student sense, but not ... I'm sorry, no—it was research and education, with education meaning extension of the information out to the public. But there wasn't a formal program to then take those ag professionals that are out there in Extension and NRCS, which I think was maybe still Soil Conservation Service at the time, but to tap those ag professionals and welcome them into the program in a specific way that would help to feed them information and develop their capacity. So that was competed regionally when that part of the legislation was funded. I applied to coordinate that for the western states, and so did Al Kurki from NCAT.

**RK:** I've interviewed Al.

**JA:** Al is wonderful. They came back to us and they said—we like your proposal, Jill; we like Al's proposal—would you work together? A lot of times forced marriages don't work all that well, but it worked so well. It was just wonderful, because Al is who he is and had the experience, but also just to have a university person and a nonprofit person was just very true to what SARE stood for, and just very effective for all the reasons that SARE was set up that way, to be a partnership of that sort.

**RK:** You were still out in California then.

**JA:** Yeah, I basically sold half of my time from California to work with the western states, with the professional development program, and then when the national program, later, job opened up in '98, I applied for that. I didn't intend to—I really did not want to leave California, but Rob Myers, who had been the national director and was leaving, came to me, called me up—can't remember if I saw him in person or if he called me up, but he just said—Jill, you know, you've done some things nationally with the Sustainable Ag Network Information Program. We think you would do well in this job; please consider applying. I really had not thought about USDA. My dad—I told you I came from this fairly conservative Republican family—my dad, who was so proud of his daughter who worked for the university, when he found out his daughter was going to go work for the federal government, doing practically the same thing, but just the mindset—he was always a great supporter and was very proud of me, but I could just tell he just thought that was kind of different, to have a daughter who was a fed. But my dad was in North Carolina at the time. You know, you reach an age in your life where your parents are getting a little bit older. My mom was still in the Bay Area of California, but she was retiring, and she was thinking of moving to Richmond, Virginia, where her sister was. My husband's parents had moved from the Chicago area to Richmond. So, in terms of when you want to spend a little more time with your parents as they are getting a little bit older, and the idea of a job—I really had

enjoyed the Western Region of SARE so much I thought, well, these other three regions must be equally interesting, so I'll give it a try, and I applied to be the national program leader and came to DC specifically to be the national director for the SARE program. I think that was about the time it had changed its name from LISA to SARE.

**RK:** Yeah, so that's about '98.

**JA:** Ninety-eight, yup.

**RK:** So you moved out here, and then you continued to direct that program for a decade, didn't you?

**JA:** Yeah, yeah. A hair more. And after it had been about a decade—I mean, it's a wonderful program, because it has such a broad span. It's not something you ever get tired of, because the kinds of things we were funding, and the kinds of things that the growers and the people that would sit on the administrative councils, the ideas people would come up with for priority funding areas and the proposals people would come up with were constantly changing. And the scope of sustainable agriculture is broad enough that it could encompass quite a bit. So it could do organic. It, early-on, did very little in the way of marketing or value adding, but then when that became more of a trend, it could fund that kind of work. So there were changes, but still I didn't think anybody should do the same thing for more than ten years. And I thought it would be good for the program, too, to have new leadership.

**RK:** Well, you know, I wanted you to ... SARE has been coming up a lot from a number of people. You know, I interviewed Al, and, of course, others that, I mean, even like Don Bustos. When I talked to him in New Mexico, he talked about how much his SARE grant changed his operation. And then, over the years, Ferd and the Coalition have been trying to keep SARE and get more money into it and everything. It's been very important. But maybe you could just talk a little bit about what, exactly, SARE did as far as benefitting moving sustainable agriculture through the research and education mode. That would be useful, I think.

**JA:** Right. It did so much. It was such an innovative program. So, for several reasons: First of all, just to have a national program that was funding sustainable agriculture gave it legitimacy. Scientists will go where the money is, and if you have some money and you put it out to do certain things, it gets a level of respectability that ... there were people here and there that were studying this, but not nearly enough, and it gave it legitimacy. But way beyond that was the way it was structured. So there were several things about the way it was structured that were just so foresightful, so advanced. One was that farmer knowledge was important, and that NGOs, that people from all walks of life, all different perspectives, had something to bring to the table, and not just to advise you, advise the staff, and then go home, which was a little bit ... UC SAREP had some of that same flavor, but still those were advisory committees. In SARE the regional councils were actual decision-making councils. So you had farmers and NGOs and university and government people all sitting around the table making decisions. And the national program leader was there as a part of that group. And certainly I would speak up if they were proposing to do something that would not be legal or really would raise horrible questions when it got back to DC. And I think people respected the national program leader and would ask that. So it was a

collaborative, but the decision making was really at the regional level in those councils that were real citizens. And particularly in the West—I mean, we in the West felt so far from Washington, DC. How could somebody in Washington, DC, be making decisions about ranching in the West? So they have a council that could ... it had to stick to the basic definition of sustainable agriculture and the basic guidelines around the program. But they could really do what was best for people in the West. So that structure of shared decision-making and shared responsibility, I think, was just an amazing thing about the program.

**RK:** I think it's what the farmers ... I've heard a number of people talking about how it really honored the farmer and the knowledge that was there, and you could build on that and support it, and when the people like Bustos wanted to try something, there was respect for his ideas and things like that.

**JA:** Absolutely! And that's where so much of the innovation was coming from. Not that scientists don't innovate as well, but that interaction between the scientists and the producers. And the idea of those farmer grants—I wasn't ... check me on this, but I think it was the North Central Region that came up with the idea of the farmer grants first. But it spread to the other regions very quickly, and that was one of the best things about having four regions. One would come up with an idea, the other would take it up. But the idea of funding farmers directly to do their own research, and it wasn't always ... we used to worry a little bit that a report of a farmer grant might make people think something would apply more places than it might just on that farm, so there was definitely a role for the larger research and education grants to take some of those farmer ideas and test them out on a wider scale. But the creativity that came out of some of those farmer grants, and the new enterprises that came out of some of those farmer grants, and just the excitement was just wonderful to see.

**RK:** Yeah, and I think because you've kind of said this, but the idea that, then, I think it stimulated a lot of other research, and like in the land grants and things like that, too, that ...

**JA:** Oh, absolutely, yes.

**RK:** That when you account how much the budget was and things like that. But SARE was not that much money, but I think it stretched out into larger pools and made a difference.

**JA:** It absolutely did. I would often hear from people—oh, well, SARE didn't fund my research, but I found another source of funding, or it got me on a path of doing something different. So, yeah, I think there was a big multiplier effect there. And just the respectability that it got. I mean, the National Academies did a big study and then did another study some years later. So there are lots of things added to the credibility. But just having a grant program, I think, was really key.

**RK:** And I got to interview another person who speaks highly of it—it was coming to mind when you were talking—is Garth Youngberg. He went off and started the Institute for Alternative Agriculture that was working in that science area and getting journaled science in this institute.

**JA:** That was so important to the credibility. I was actually on their board.

**RK:** I thought so.

**JA:** When I got to DC, I had to resign from the board fairly early-on, because it was kind of a conflict of interest to be a fed and to be on a board of directors. But oh he ... talk about a single person who just has a huge effect and was kind of out there in the wilderness a little bit by himself for awhile.

**RK:** Yeah.

**JA:** That report and recommendations on organic farming that he...

**RK:** Yeah, he was one of the authors of it.

**JA:** ... spearheaded was ... well, before he went on to found the institute, was an amazing piece of work, too.

**RK:** I got to interview Bob Bergland, if you look on the list, the secretary of agriculture under Carter, and he's still with us in Minnesota. We talked to him a good deal about being the secretary when that report actually was commissioned, and study, and then actually came out right as he was ready to leave his position in 1980. So that was a very interesting part of that discussion, going back to...

**JA:** Well, I know we'll get to this later, but you had said to think about in preparation for this: what has gone well, what are we proud of, what ... I know I thought, at the beginning of my career, that by the time I was at this stage, by the time I hit retirement this would be everywhere, so part of me is just really thrilled to see how much things have grown, how many things have become more widely accepted, but part of me is—oh, really, is that all we've done? [Chuckles]

**RK:** Yeah.

**JA:** So it's a push-pull.

**RK:** I think that's ... I ask almost everybody that question, and that's kind of the main, that's pretty much the answer. It just seems like such a good thing, and it's accomplishing so much good, but it's sure a struggle to get it to become like any kind of a dominant paradigm in agriculture in this country.

**JA:** Yeah. I do think ... I think this is another benefit of the SARE Program—it was so unusual at the time, but it has reverberated out and affected other programs, and certainly through the advocacy of the National Sustainable Ag Coalition and others—this hasn't happened automatically—but there wasn't an organic research program. SARE could fund that. There wasn't a specialty crops program. And as these programs have come along, they have borrowed many of the elements of the SARE Program. Not every program has borrowed every element, but certainly the organic program has very strong farmer involvement. The Specialty Crop Research Initiative has very strong focus on a systems approach, which was always a hallmark.

And sustainability is woven through many of these programs. I know a lot of folks are skeptical, think the word sustainable has been co-opted or is so broad that it maybe doesn't have a clear meaning. For me it's important that it be broad, and that it be a goal. So I have a lot of respect for organic agriculture and the people who practice organic. That's a very important part of sustainable, and an important way to work toward sustainability in many, many settings. But I do think that sustainability includes more of the social dimensions, which many organic farmers care about and work on. There's a lot of overlap between the two. But I do think that thinking about it as a goal, and that there are multiple ways to achieve that goal, even if you never intend to be organic, that mainstream farmers can use cover crops, can do things to improve their soil, can do things to improve working conditions for their labor. There are just so many things that can contribute toward sustainability. I think it is important to have that big, shining goal that in some ways is unachievable in a perfect sense, but that everybody can work to. And as our knowledge and practice improves, you can always get better, and nothing will ... if you have an idea for how to be more sustainable, SARE can find a way to work that into the research agenda, whereas another program, for example, the IPM Program—Integrated Pest Management—can't do a whole lot outside of pest management. So I've always thought that one good thing about SARE was that as long as you focus on that goal, and as long as you're doing good science, there's a lot of flexibility to learn and grow in it.

**RK:** Oh, good, that's very interesting, very helpful. And now I know when I move on—I would like to move on, because you have some really good other things in your career.

**JA:** Sure.

**RK:** So you did that for ten years, and then you went to work—was it at USDA with the Chief Science program?

**JA:** I stayed in USDA and actually kept my regular job, but the legislation for what became the Office of the Chief Scientist passed, and said that it should be staffed, that the REE secretary should be the chief scientist for the department, so there was a single voice speaking for science at USDA, and that that person should have an office that is staffed by people who are senior scientists from around the department or elsewhere that go on detail for one-to-four years to support that function. So I went on detail to that office, intending to—I don't know what; probably go back to NIFA at some point, since it was a one-to-four year, it was actually...

**RK:** And NIFA is...?

**JA:** NIFA is the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which is the agency I spent my whole career at the USDA.

**RK:** Which included the SARE program.

**JA:** Yeah, SARE was one of the programs. Exactly. SARE was one of the programs that was actually ... I called it the agency with the unpronounceable acronym. It was the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service when I joined it—CSREES. But the same legislation that created the Office of the Chief Scientist changed, really started, the National Institute of

Food and Agriculture, but carried over to it most of the authorities and responsibilities that had been with CSREES. So it wasn't just renaming the agency—there were a number of changes there, but I was still on that.

So at the Office of the Chief Scientist that was a great learning experience for me. To get involved in science policy, science coordination within the department on a whole range of topics. The one that I had the most involvement in—I mean, I certainly could represent sustainable agriculture and sort of look out for some of the programs that were happening in the various agencies around sustainable agriculture, but the thing that I did that was most interesting, because it was a little different was I was responsible for a chunk of time for the scientific integrity policy, which is a very important thing that was happening across the federal government. President Obama had said, in his science advisory had said, every agency should have a written integrity policy about how politics, basically, doesn't interfere with science, and that scientists should be free to speak out about the implications of their findings, as long as they stuck to the science. And that's always the tricky part, because you always want to go a little beyond the science to the policy. You know, I skipped over when I came to DC, David Schlegel was a Western SARE—the original director for Western SARE, or LISA at the time. But he said two things: when you go to DC, I'm going to give you two pieces of advice. He said—fly in and out of National Airport—it's the most convenient. But he said, more seriously, he said—there will be things you cannot say or do as a fed. As a university employee there was academic freedom, although in a politically sensitive program you still were very careful. But there are things you cannot say or do as a fed. I could not get involved in lobbying, in policy. I can't share information about the budget when the budget is behind the curtain. You will lose your job for doing certain things. So he said—there will be things that you cannot say or do as a fed. Just know that there are people who can say and do them for you. And that was really, I mean, NSAC, the National Sustainable Ag Coalition, was really the people that I felt the most confidence in. That they, Ferd Hoefner and the gang there, were doing the policy thing, and I could implement, and we could have them come brief our meetings on what was going on, and I could share with them everything I was allowed to share, but there always was that little bit of a line. So that's what the scientific integrity policy was, in a way, meant to clarify is what the role of a departmental scientist could be and should be. And those policies still are in effect. I don't think this administration has done anything to disturb those, and maybe some of the departments may have done some things that I don't think fit with them too well, but I don't think we'll go there in this...

**RK:** No, but I did have to say I was sort of thinking about our current Trump administration and that the difficulty scientific facts versus alternative facts that they've put forward have difficulty separating those to some people. You know, it's like there is that going on.

**JA:** You know, I stayed on. I retired as I was about to turn 64, and I had always thought I would retire, and that was last spring, last April. I always thought I would retire at 62; that's how things were kind of set up for ... A lot of people in NIFA stay on longer, because we love the work. But I stayed on a couple years longer because I really was enjoying the work, and we'll get to the Beginning Farmer Program, but I had just started with that, wanted to keep that going for a few years, give it some stability, and I was really liking the work. But as a person I'm happy to say that I don't think that NIFA has too much interference from above. It really is a science agency,

and the science, the best science gets funded, and there isn't, that I've seen, and that my colleagues so far, anyway, have told me—I don't see interference. I see direction coming down from—focus on this—or—we want to see more work in this—but in terms of the integrity of the science, I think it's very solid. So if you have to be in the federal government now—obviously, it's clear where my politics are, even though I came from a Republican family—it's a good place to be within the department, because they really do care about science, and you're fairly insulated from the powers that be that are doing political things.

**RK:** And it doesn't have a political appointee at the top of it?

**JA:** It does. That was a big change in that same farm bill that gave us the ... that's a really good point. But that, our political appointee, Sonny Ramaswamy, is a wonderful former academic. He knows and he fully supports the scientific integrity of policy and he ... so he can interact like a political appointee does, which is, I think, the reason that the writers of that legislation wanted a political appointee, because an agency that doesn't have a political appointee heading it doesn't have quite as much heft.

**RK:** That's what I thought.

**JA:** He can interact as a political appointee, but yet he's a solid scientist, and he respects the scientific integrity. I mean, as a program leader you have to feed the beast, I called it, you know. A call will come out for what are you doing on this or that or that administration priority? So you need to feed up and make sure that people higher up are aware of what you're doing. But I did not experience, and I think there's minimal, if any, at NIFA, really interference with the science. I think that's one of the good things about a program like SARE. As long as it's there, Congress funds it, people carrying it out, there's enough worker bees in that agency and in the department that know and care about this stuff, I think you can ride out some of the ups and downs of changing administrations.

**RK:** And the fact of, I think, even politically, from SARE, a lot of the farmers, they come from all different places in the political spectrum as well, even in that program.

**JA:** That's true, that's true, yeah.

**RK:** So that's another aspect of it all.

**JA:** Yeah, yeah.

**RK:** And speaking of farmers, so the last couple years, then, you went to work, you worked with the Beginning Farmer...

**JA:** Yeah, let me do one more thing from the Office of the Chief Scientist, because I would be totally remiss to leave this out.

**RK:** Please do.

**JA:** So, working in that office was also very soon, within six, eight—within a year of going to that office. I went to that office during the sort of changing administration. But Kathleen Merrigan came in as deputy secretary.

**RK:** Oh, yes.

**JA:** So that was a great highlight. I was not directly working for her, but in some ways I was, because, you know, the deputy secretary wants something, you respond. So two things that I'm very proud of, working with her. One was small but, I think, important. She invited, soon after she was in her office, she invited me and Cathy Greene from the Economic Research Service. I don't know if you know Cathy, but she was at USDA before I came, studying organic agriculture in the Economic Research Service. And she's had a whole career of doing really clear-headed economic analysis, data collection around organic agriculture. And she has been just a bulldog to keep that research program going—to start it in the first place, when nobody was doing that kind of thing, and then to keep it going. She's a very quiet, hard-working worker bee. She gives talks and things like they all do, but I can relate to ... she's kind of nose-down, usually, just doing this work. And ERS is pretty good about sticking to their role of economic research and not getting too far off the reservation in terms of bigger policy. But Kathleen invited her and me into her office and said—I would like you to convene a group around the whole USDA, somebody from each agency and office, find out what they're doing in organic agriculture, and what they think they could be doing in organic agriculture. So Cathy had just tremendous ideas and subject knowledge, and she had connections with people because of the analysis she'd been doing. But I had a platform from being in the Office of the Chief Scientist. I could reach out in a way that she didn't feel, even though Kathleen had asked her to, she still didn't quite feel from where she sat in the department that she could quite do that sort of reaching out. So the two of us in about a month's time convened a committee—because I think Kathleen only gave us a month, maybe it was six weeks, but she said—how fast can you do this? So we pulled together a report from all of the different parts of the department, and people came out of the woodwork who were interested in organic or had been doing a little bit of organic and were thrilled to see this kind of thing happening. It had to be vetted through their leadership, so you couldn't be too much off the reservation, but we did just an internal report. This was not for the public. I don't know if it got shared publicly or not, but what it was was a setup for Mark Lipson. So little did we know that Kathleen was working to get Mark Lipson to come in to work on organic policy across the department, and he could hit the ground running for a whole lot of reasons, because he's who he is, but we could hand him a set of people and a document of what those people had said they thought was going on and could be done. He went well beyond that very, very quickly, but it was a fun little task to do.

**RK:** I'm really glad you told that story.

**JA:** And the big thing that people know about is Know Your Farmer Know Your food. And that was a wonderful initiative to be involved in. I played a supporting role; I chaired the committee for awhile. Kathleen was really the chair, but if she couldn't be there, I could convene the group. And she had some wonderful people. Lucas Knowles was the political staffer that really got it going. Elanor Starmer was the person that she brought in who is now with her at GW, but was just a brilliant person that she brought in after Lucas left. So most other people did a lot of the

work, but I had a role in it, and the idea that if you want to do something different, you don't have to wait for legislation, you don't have to wait for anybody's approval, you can just say—and it was kind of like the organic report, but in a bigger way—it was kind of what kind of programs do we have that are doing something in this space, and, more importantly, what programs do we have that could be doing something in this space. And then it became—if they are doing something or could be doing something in this space, are there little tweaks that the deputy secretary could get people to make to make those programs serve local and regional food systems even better. So that was just a thrill to see people come out of the woodwork again and to see high-level administrators and lower-level worker bees all working together to make stone soup, really. I think it accomplished a lot, and showed people a lot of the connections among different programs that separately had been working. So that was a big, a big deal.

But, I also was acting director of the Office of the Chief Scientist for, I think, two rotations, so almost two years. And then they finally were ready to compete it, to have a permanent director, and I hadn't thought about it until now, but I guess that was kind of like when I was at UC SAREP, and everybody assumed I would compete. I remember this was over Christmastime one year. I remember just talking with my husband about, you know, I should want to do that. It's a great position. Kathy Woteki was the undersecretary; Ann Bartuska was the deputy undersecretary in REE, both very supportive of sustainability. Ann Bartuska, especially—when she was in the forest service she had done tons of sustainability work. She was very supportive of the social dimensions—they both were. So it was a great environment for a lot of reasons, but it just wasn't me. Wasn't me to be coordinating a bunch of science topics. I really love doing program work, and I wanted to go back to NIFA. So I went back to NIFA. This must have been ... I should know, but probably 2003? Thereabouts. No, I'm sorry—2013; 2013, roughly '12 or '13—gosh, losing a decade there. I don't think they expected me back [Chuckles], because for a while they didn't quite ... because Rob Hedberg had taken over the SARE program and was doing a great job. And I say that's another great thing about SARE is it has a structure that, as long as you don't mess it up, somebody else can come in and the program does well. So I, what did I do? I got involved in AFRI, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, which is the big flagship research science program at NIFA. It's made up of a lot of different programs. It has the small-midsize farm program that Denis Ebodaghe leads, primarily. Denis is one of the unsung heroes of NIFA, in terms of involving small farmers and understanding the holistic approach for small and mid-size farms and involving minority-serving institutions and NGOs. He's a hard worker and one of those people behind the scenes that gets a ton done. So Denis, I worked with Denis on that small-farm program within AFRI. I worked on the rural development kind of social science programs of AFRI. And I'm not a social scientist by training, really, but I've always called myself a social science sympathizer [Chuckles] because you're trained in ecology if you have a systems approach, but also with sustainability, the human and social dimensions are so important that I had learned a bit about that over the years. So I worked in AFRI a bit, and then Sureshwaran, who had been running the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, that funds organizations to do outreach and training for new farmers. He moved on to head the education group at NIFA, and left a bit of a gap there. And I jumped into the gap, and with Denis Ebodaghe, and now Wesley Dean, who joined us a couple years ago, managed that program. And that was a whole heck of a lot of fun, because it was a lot of the same organizations that had been involved in the SARE Program. It was a lot of nonprofits or the extension side of universities, or those working together, doing workshops, training, student farms, incubator

farms—you know, all kinds of programs for new farmers. And agriculture has become such an exciting thing that young people want to be a part of. That was just a really fun program to be involved in.

**RK:** And I know it was one of the priorities, because of several of the groups within the NSAC coalition, and NSAC played a role, and always is in there, trying to get more funding and that sort of thing for the program.

**JA:** Yeah, oh, they, I mean, NSAC, none of this would have happened without NSAC, all of these programs, the list of programs that they have advocated for, and the people that they have brought together in that effort over a long period of time. Nothing could have happened on the inside without all of that kind of activity on the outside—absolutely.

**RK:** Yeah, yeah. Well, good, you've taken us through, I think, up to your retirement, right, more or less?

**JA:** I think so, yeah, yeah. I think so.

**RK:** Well, that's really good. Well, I would like to kind of get, then, I guess, to my usual final two points that I ask people. One of them is, if you want to deal with it, what are you sort of disappointed about, or missed opportunities, or anything like that? And then moving toward, kind of paves the way for what next. What do you think should happen next?

**JA:** I've always been an implementer. I'm not sure I'm the biggest, most creative idea person. I think I've been very lucky to be at the right place at the right time to implement some of these programs, so I'm not sure I have the most creative ideas for the future. I do think we've made steady progress. But I think, as we were saying earlier, it is a disappointment that the whole world hasn't taken this up.

**RK:** Yeah.

**JA:** I mean, the world has in some ways. There's more progress outside of the US, in places, than there is here, but ... so it may just be that science can only take you so far, and voluntary action can only take you so far. I'm trying to think ... who's the ... Elinor Ostrom was the, I think, the only woman that won the Nobel Prize for economics. I remember reading a paper of hers, oh, a decade ago or so, called "No More Panaceas." And this is really a digression, sorry, but...

**RK:** No, this is fine.

**JA:** If you're an economist of a certain sort, you think markets and incentives will fix everything. If you're a political scientist, you think it's a matter of political institutions and laws. If you're a sociologist, anthropologist, you think it's people's culture and norms. And, really, it's all of those in different mixes, depending upon the setting. I think that's maybe why something like SARE worked so well, because it could be at the level of people who know how their own community, their own environment, works. But I guess science can only go so far, and I think

maybe some of this does need more regulation to kind of cut off the tail of some of the bad actors you need the innovation at the upper end from the science. I don't know, I think we have a lot more to do to really understand the human and social dimensions of this. And I think a lot of us came into this with an environmental perspective. We care about the soil, farmers care about the soil, the natural environment, the wildlife, but really, I think, most people more think about the people side of things. You think about yourself, your family, your community, and then the environment is out here somewhere. So as much progress as we've made in bringing in the human and social dimensions into sustainable ag, and, oh, I have to credit Southern SARE. Jeff Jordan, the Southern coordinator, and Doug—oh, shoot, it's not coming ... Texas ... oh, I will come up with that name and give it to you, because it's a very important one. I was just talking to somebody about it ... Doug Constance. Doug Constance has been a real leader with Jeff in bringing in—he's been on the administrative council for Southern SARE—leaders in bringing in the social, human and social dimension, because they're in the social sciences. But anyway, I think, as much as we need that in agriculture to be truly sustainable, I think it is the human and social dimensions that will bring larger society into supporting and caring about sustainable agriculture. A case in point: Nancy Creamer at NC State—another person that it would be great for you to interview, because she's been in the university setting her whole career, but she's been very policy aware, very policy active, and I remember her telling me probably about ten years ago when we were doing Know Your Farmer Know Your Food, and that was getting started, they did a statewide plan for getting, I think it was, ten percent of North Carolina produce to come from local growers. And I remember her saying she'd been trying to get sustainable agriculture on people's radar screen her whole career. They were doing systems experiments, soil quality, cover crops, sustainable pork, all of that. But it was when they started talking about food systems, and that connection between producers and consumers, that things really took off. So there is a lot of movement around local and regional, but I still think there's more that can be done around other human and social dimensions that will kind of help to imbed sustainable agriculture more broadly in society and get more support for science, regulation, cultural changes.

The other thing that I'm really, really excited about, really proud of having a small part of is just mentoring new people who have come to NIFA, and the fact that we've had graduate student awards, and that the faculty that we have funded have mentored students. There are so many people out there working in this space that I don't know, I've never heard of. When I started I probably knew most of the leaders, and there are so many people out there that are doing this work and that care about and will take it the next step. I'm very optimistic about that. And I think we should be investing as much as we can in students in the next generation, which SARE has done through graduate student grants, but SARE has really been research and extension; it hasn't been as much the kind of higher ed course curriculum, which maybe that's something that could use some work.

**RK:** Good, good. Well, I think you're on firm ground. You know, this morning we interviewed former Senator Tom Harkin, and he talked a good deal about how he was so proud of where his work—he was the chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, as well as under ... until he retired in 2015. And then he's also always been on the ag committees, and bringing those issues of health and agriculture together and having them manifest in improved programs for snacks in schools and food in all sorts of ways is really one of the ways of really reaching deeper

into people and solving some of those issues and building a constituency toward it—how little kids getting good, fresh food in schools can influence their parents' buying habits, that sort of thing.

**JA:** Absolutely, and I know you've interviewed Kate Clancy, and she's been such a leader in food systems. And Gail Feenstra, my former colleague at UC SAREP was another leader in the whole food systems area. I think some of us maybe took awhile to come around to that, but...

**RK:** I think so. Well, good. I'm very happy with this interview and everything you've said. I guess I would like to add I know you're retired, but I hope you're not really retired, and that you'll open up to being a mentor. I'm sure you'll be called on, if you aren't already, to continue some work that will continue to move these things forward.

**JA:** I have told people that now I'm retired I can advocate.

**RK:** Right.

**JA:** I've taken a bit of a break, and it's been four-five months. I've been active as a Virginia Master Naturalist, which is a great program. I don't know if they have it in Minnesota, but it's not in every state, it's in maybe half the states. It's similar to Master Gardeners, but it's for natural ecosystem work, citizen science, or ecological restoration. You take training, and since ecology was my roots, I took that training last winter and cooperative extension is a big part of it [Unclear] in Virginia, along with resource agencies, and got involved in a couple of breeding bird surveys. Bird watch—I mean the connection between bird watchers and agriculture—that is an area that is so ripe for exploitation. But I've been doing the bird watching part and the breeding bird surveys, taking a big of a break, but I've told folks I can advocate now, and I do intend to get more involved in Virginia. I never felt that I could, even though I lived in Maryland and then Virginia, I didn't feel I could get too involved in one state's activities, because I was doing this national job, but ... it would be a conflict of interest, but now I'm looking forward to getting involved in more things, locally.

**RK:** I think you're coming close to following the advice that I've always heard. When I retired from the McKnight Foundation, was—don't do anything for six months, 'cause you're going to get a lot of people asking you to do stuff, and then figure out what you're going to do. So I think taking a break is a good idea, too.

**JA:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**RK:** Well, good. Thank you very much. It's been really nice interviewing you.

**JA:** Thank you, Ron, and thank you for doing this whole project. I mean, not just with me, but I looked at some of the others, and, boy, I want to read them all and watch them all. A great set of people you've been interviewing. I'm honored to be among them.

**RK:** Thank you.

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