

**Michael Sligh
Narrator**

**Ron Kroese
Interviewer**

December 4, 2017

**Michael Sligh—MS
Ron Kroese—RK**

RK: This is Ron Kroese. It is December 4, 2017, and I am in Atlanta, Georgia, where today I have the opportunity to interview a veteran organic farming advocate, Michael Sligh. Michael, besides being an organic farmer, you have played key roles in organizing and leading several organizations that have advanced family farm-based sustainable agriculture, including serving as the founding chair of the USDA National Organic Standards Board. I am eager to hear all about your various roles, including at NOSB and several other groups, also including your current job as a program director with the Rural Advancement Foundation International, also known as RAFI. But first I'd like to start the discussion, as I always do, for this sustainable agriculture oral history archive, with hearing about your background, how you got interested in food and farming issues, going all the way back to your childhood. I read in one biography that you started out in the world, this incarnation, in West Texas.

MS: Yes, indeed. I was born in Saint Mary's of the Plains, premature, [Chuckles] ready to come, and really come from a long line of family farmers and ranchers, and we still have a family ranch out in West Texas, near San Angelo. I guess my fondest memories growing up were spending all my summers there on that ranch, helping my grandfather. It was the kind of farm that we don't see so much anymore, but it's coming back now, where it was highly diversified and just a pleasure to be a part of.

RK: So that really got in your blood.

MS: It did, it did, and we always had gardens. I had my first garden of my own when I was about the third grade. I learned about plant breeding by saving the seed of different cucumbers and pumpkins, and they all came out quite strange the next year, because they had crossed. So that was an early lesson in plant breeding.

RK: And you stayed there 'til when? Until you went to college, or where...?

MS: My dad was the first to leave farming, so he came back from the war and went into textile engineering, so our family really roamed the South as I grew up, and so my connection to the ranch was really spending my summers there. That's really where I still consider I'm from, because we really didn't have firm roots as we kind of traveled around. He ended up as a

lobbyist for the National Cotton Council during the Kennedy administration, so I was in Washington, DC, for that administration as a teenager, and got to participate in the “I have a Dream” movement there and to see that live and participate as a teenager—very moving experience—and, of course, also being there for Kennedy’s funeral. So those were two kind of big experiences that did shape my life.

RK: Were you a teenager by then?

MS: Yeah, um-hum.

RK: And then you went on to study anthropology, I believe...

MS: I did.

RK: ...and where did you do that?

MS: I did, at the University of Georgia, and part of that was really going back to our ranch in Texas, which had incredible archeological sites on that ranch along the Colorado River. That used to be ocean bottom 200 million years ago, and just incredible fossil treasure trove, as well as Native American Indian mounds and just arrowheads all over the place, so as a child this was just something was incredibly fascinating.

RK: Oh, I’m sure it was. So, then you studied it, studied anthropology, and then you got a degree in that, and then what happened?

MS: Well, this is also a period of quite upheaval in America.

RK: Oh, yes.

MS: In the 1960s. And it was really, I was facing going down into a cellar in our old building with a bare light bulb and gluing old pottery together and ... or I could go out and try to make a difference in the world. The pull of activism and kind of the back to the land movement were overpowering for me. I, as a young, kind of brash man said something like—well, I think I’m just going to go and you’ll study me later. And we had a falling out, because I didn’t really want to just spend that time down there gluing the pottery together. Too much going on in the world.

RK: I think that’s one of the things not entirely common, but certainly not unusual, for this group of people I’ve been interviewing in approximately your age group and my age group—there was that unsettling of the ‘60s. The Vietnam War and everything just changed people’s course, and you ended up in entirely different situations often than one might think.

MS: That’s right, that’s right. My uncle was also a big influence, because he had gone off to college to become a farmer, and he was there during that period of college where you were supposed to really radically change the way farming was. You were supposed to be modern. You were supposed to use all the latest technology. You were supposed to get big. You were supposed to...

RK: Post-World War II “get big or get out” kind of thing.

MS: Exactly. And I watched that very closely unfold and the tragedy of that mistaken path. That had a big influence on me wanting to try to figure out how to farm a different way.

RK: So you ended up in Florida then, didn't you?

MS: Well, I ended up in Florida, Tennessee, a number of places, trying to farm, and did succeed in farming on a relatively big scale, and found that organic farming, as hard as it was, was very nurturing, and a much different way to farm than what I had experienced elsewhere. And I had got to see the industrial farming model very up-close in Florida, where efficiency required big operations to spray by airplanes, while the workers were still in field. To me, I thought now this has got to be wrong. We've got to be able to farm a different way. And that was a profound experience to see that up close and to see the kids playing in the farm worker housing and watching that drift just go right across them as they made their turn into the field. This is also the period of Rachel Carson, and we were all just kind of reeling as a country of realizing that we have made this choice that is one that will affect generations for many, many, many generations to come.

RK: Yes, yes. So that seeing these things, and while at the same time farming in different places, when did you move more into what we would call organizing and involved in this whole path?

MS: I'd say maybe two or three things really drove me for what I thought was going to be a short little sabbatical to fix things. One was my uncle essentially dying of a broken heart, in losing his farm and losing everything, and this was the beginning of the American farm crisis as we knew it. Most people now don't really even remember that period, but...

RK: When was that?

MS: This was like late 1970s going into the early 1980s.

RK: Got it.

MS: I think the parallel is the recent housing bubble, where we watched millions of American homeowners lose their home because they bought it when prices were high, under the assumption that they would continue to rise, and that they would just benefit from that rising price. That was the scenario in the '70s and the '80s, where the federal policy urged farmers to take on more debt, to get bigger operations, to buy bigger equipment, under the theory that prices would continue to climb, land prices would continue to escalate, and that you would have plenty of equity to back it up.

RK: And at meantime the interest rates were very high at the same time, so people got under water, as they say now, with that situation, too. And then when the crop prices didn't come up like that, that's when the fit really hit the shan there.

MS: That's right, and the difference was that when you lost your farm you not only lost your house, but you also lost your job; you lost everything. So that was powerfully motivating for me to want to go do something to fix that. And the other was this thread that we thought, well, as hard as farming is, this is not where the problem is. The problem is that the system is kind of rigged. The power dynamic, such that a farmer trying to get a fair contract and being able to get access to the market and being able to make a living wage, is very much stacked against him, probably mostly because of bad policy, and because of a power dynamic. And so I was very interested to see if we could just simply switch the reward system so you rewarded farmers for the right practice, and you discouraged the wrong practice, and we opened up those kinds of policies or reward transparency and fair contracts and restore competition to agriculture. I also got a little pamphlet in the mail from an outfit I'd never heard of down in Pittsboro, North Carolina. This fellow Cary Fowler had written this little pamphlet saying something is really going on in the seed industry, and he had this chart—this is like 1974 or something—and it showed all these chemical companies were buying mom and pop seed companies up. And he was saying—why? Why are they buying that? What is this concentration in the seed industry? Why is this happening, and what does that portend for the future of agriculture? So I would say those three things drove me off the farm to go work for RAFI, and the first job they gave me is they said we want you to help organize a tri-racial farmers' organization in the Carolinas that will advocate for a national moratorium on farm foreclosures and develop legislation to reform the credit situation so these farmers can't be in that situation again.

RK: I think that was 1983.

MS: Yeah, right. So, we did that, and these farmers, many of which had never sat down at the table together—black farmers, Native American farmers, Hispanic farmers, white farmers—because they all had a common problem. They all were being foreclosed on. And many of the non-profits of the time were very smart about how to do this by FOIA-ing USDA to get all those lists of farmers who were on the foreclosure list, and then we would go out and ride circuit across the countryside and go knock on those doors and talk to them about could we help them come up with a strategy to help save their farm. And we were able to save many farms, but we weren't able to save all the farms.

RK: I was involved with that somewhat myself with the group that I worked for called Land Stewardship Project, and we were particularly focused on some farms that were taken over by big insurance companies, and then not taking care of them. I know your work, then, also meant it not only was hard on people, this happening, but it was hard on the land, and we needed to do something about that as well.

MS: Absolutely, and, particularly in the South, the other component of this was just incredible discrimination against minority farmers. Many of them never got the loans in the first place that the white farmers got, which was a different kind of jeopardy. You could have jeopardy by having borrowed too much money. You could have jeopardy by not having access to credit, or by getting the credit and—well, gee, the credit just came right after when you were supposed to plant. So you didn't have a great opportunity to have a good crop, because, really, the timing was all off for you. So we were involved in helping to encourage that national class action law suit.

RK: That's the Pigford?

MS: Yes, and many, many groups took the lead on that, but that was certainly something that we saw as critically important to try and make right this injustice. Unfortunately, we still feel that there's a long way to go at USDA to really remove structural discrimination.

RK: Oh, yeah, and even with that lawsuit, it wasn't just a matter of filing some paper and setting back and watching things happen. It took something like 20 years, right, before the money finally did come? I think it was even Obama administration, right?

MS: Yeah, and in many ways, it was too little, too late. Many of these farmers who were already middle aged or older weren't able to return to farming. Much of that land had rolled back over, and others had bought it. I think it's part of the scar on the American landscape.

RK: Yeah, definitely, definitely. Well, then, I'd like to have you pick up somewhat on the organic side of things, will you? You got involved, I know, ultimately in the Organic Food Production Act and then the resulting materials work. Talk about that, will you?

MS: I think what motivated us partly was the experience of having seen industrial agriculture up close. I also got to do a little stint in the Caribbean and saw how it worked there, which was even more horrific in terms of the dangers and exposures of workers and farmers and the whole kind of plantation system of agriculture that portends for no hope for local people to have good access to healthy food. We also realized through the farm crisis that saving farms was very important, but after you saved them, what was it they were going to do to be able to get the kind of reward to be successful? And it was clear—we were very involved in the Save the Family Farm Act in the mid-80s, and where we failed to win consumer and low-income community support was they were saying, OK, so what do we get out of this? We're interested in healthier food. We're interested in knowing where our food comes from, and we want to see those kinds of initiatives and reward that. So, we were involved with Weaver at the time, and trying to get this passed in, what, '84?

RK: Yeah.

MS: And he had a young staffer, DeFazio, so that didn't work.

RK: He's still a representative, I believe.

MS: Yes, he is, one of ... a champion.

RK: But that didn't work out then but...

MS: No, it didn't. And then we were able to work on a couple of takes at SARE, in helping to create SARE, and the Federal Credit Reform Act of, like, '86. So we were getting some traction in trying to deal with these barriers and kinds of credit problems and beginning to raise the specter of reward for agriculture that was linked to better practices.

RK: And I know some of this comes into where you worked with like the Southern SAWG, the Sustainable Ag Working Group, which became the National Campaign, and, ultimately, NSAC. They were allies in that effort.

MS: Yeah, I think that experience was really dictated mostly by the fact that our region in the South you had many farmers trying to farm a different way, but they didn't know each other, and they were isolated. So our thinking was—gee, let's see if we can link these farmers and these non-profits together. And we also wanted it to be multi-racial from the get-go. So we went to our community partners and said—can we do this together? And actually sat down at the Highlander Center, which is of historic value, and we did that on purpose, and brought that diverse community together to say—can we as a region work together on changing ag policy, on changing farm practice, on helping farmers not have to reinvent the wheel, but to learn from each other and escalate change. So that was very important for our region, because we had nothing like that. And we were jealous of Chuck in the Midwest, and they had something.

RK: Chuck Hassebrook...

MS: Yes, we wanted to have something in the South that had our brand on it—the Southern approach.

RK: Right, like Jim Lukens was part of that, I know, and I know quite well, and that really became, then, the Southern Sustainable Ag Working Group, and then there were working groups being organized out West. We had the Midwestern one, and then we all figured well now we have to come together into something that brings all of our respective working groups together for more potency in Washington, and that's where Ferd Hoefner comes into the picture, and other people.

MS: That's right, that's right—it's kind of an evolution.

RK: Yes, yes, and I think you're still involved with NSAC, too. RAFI is a member and very active.

MS: Absolutely, and I think it's quite important that this has matured to the point that we have several national coalitions that work together to try to pick up the vast number of pieces that it takes to pay attention to a farm bill with so many titles and so many important programs that need reform and protection and advancement. So having sustainable ag as an agenda item for a broad coalition and having the National Organic Coalition just focusing on the organic piece—they really work hand in glove to protect that whole piece of landscape.

RK: I know that one of the things that NSAC's been working on, struggling with over the years, is that diversity issue. A lot of the impulse [for forming NSAC] came from the Midwest, and that's one of the things I think RAFI and some of the other groups from the southern part of the country are bringing in this issue of diversity, kind of front and center into the agenda for NSAC going forward.

MS: Absolutely. Because, I think, we have to fully understand that diversity is not some political thing—diversity is essential to finding the solutions to the future. We cannot find them unless we listen to all the voices and all the wisdom, and this is what it will take to bring about the kind of change that we all desperately need.

RK: Yeah, I think that's a really, really good point. It's easy to sort of think well we're just being politically correct, but, no, it's a formula, absolute necessity to ultimately be successful.

MS: And it is also the formula for resilience at the farm level, that we have got to re-diversify our agriculture systems. We have to have longer crop rotations, we need to have different farm seed choices. We need to fully diversify our farms in order to protect against the chaos we're entering into in terms of climate change, the demand for new crops, and the demand for locally adapted seeds. I mean, this is all our future, so it's quite important.

RK: You're involved even with an international seed type organization. Will you talk a little bit about that? We're jumping around a little, but that's really important, going the way back to, as you say, your third-grade garden, you started figuring this stuff out.

MS: Right. And that was part of the motivation that drew me to RAFI as well, because RAFI was probably one of the first non-profits at the international level calling for a treaty on biodiversity, and was really in the leadership of raising these questions about farmers' rights to save seeds and the right to share germplasm across countries and across breeding communities that we need this access, we need to protect this global heritage that is the basis for our future food supply. So that combination of values—I mean RAFI traces its roots back to the 1930s, and in the farm crisis and the Great Depression. And many of those programs put in place then were critical to stabilizing agriculture up until about the time of Reagan and Butz and the dismantling of many of these kind of parity programs that had protected diversity and a wide number of farmers able to make a living on the land.

RK: The active effort pretty much destroyed the New Deal programs that brought ... I just had a good discussion with Wendell Berry about that. That's certainly one of the topics he's written a good deal about.

MS: Indeed.

RK: I would like to even go into a little more depth about this. I was involved with the development of the Land Stewardship Project in the Midwest, and our thinking there was that ... well, I should say my thinking and a few others', I believe, was the whole concept of parity and supply management and price controls, etc., had kind of gone out the window politically by the mid-'80s. It was still in people's consciousness and awareness of folks like you and many others, but it had been pretty much destroyed by the policies going back to Ezra Taft Benson and Eisenhower up through there. And so, our approach was, OK, if we can't award people through that sort of a program, maybe our priorities for our subsidies and keeping agriculture healthy and keeping small farmers on the land should be around rewarding stewardship as a priority. Then, if you took good care of the land, you were good conservationists, there would be conservation compliance, and you'd get support that way.

MS: Right.

RK: And it still seems to me like a pretty sound idea, but more and more you can also see that hasn't taken hold in the depth and the policies that it needs to. And what do you think about that, and what about does parity need to come back in some way? Can it come back in today's agriculture scene?

MS: Well, I think many of us also understood that. I mean that was the focus of the Save the Family Farm Act. I think you're right, that the powers that be, particularly special interests and the growing influence of corporate power over our federal policy...

RK: Commodity groups...

MS: Yes, has really kind of driven that out of favor. Unfortunately, in my opinion, I don't believe we can get to the shores of sustainability with environmental stewardship alone. We must marry justice into this conversation. And until we do, we really won't get where we all believe we desperately need to get to. And so I think yes, parity is, of course, important. But it's broader than that. We need to restore competition. I mean, we've seen so many cases where if farmers only have one place to sell, their chances of getting a fair deal or a fair contract are extremely low. And we see that all over the landscape, all over the world, where concentration has driven competition and choice out of the marketplace. Everything from your choice of what seed you will buy to what market you will sell to, to what contract you can get, to where you get your credit from. Just the whole list of the components of agriculture have become extraordinarily concentrated. I mean, most people don't realize that we're on the verge of three multi-national corporations owning 80 percent of the commercial seed supply. That's an extraordinary unveiling of corporate power that people must pay attention to. I mean, this is ... you don't have farmers if you don't have seeds.

RK: Right. Well, and it's just on my mind. I was just reading more about it yesterday in the newspaper—the problem with the new Monsanto seed that can withstand Dicamba, and the big controversy that the vaporizing of it and the Dicamba can spread for miles, apparently. It's not just drift next door in the field like from a sprayer; it's deeper than that, apparently. And the solution for Monsanto is—well, buy our seed and you won't have a problem with it.

MS: Well, it's fairly extraordinary that the state of Arkansas would ban the use of Dicamba because of the millions and millions of dollars of off-site drift that is caused by it. And most farmers were very delighted when Dicamba went out of favor, because it does volatilize and can travel for miles on the wind and is very, very unpredictable. And to see it come back as the solution to resistance to Roundup is phenomenal, from an ecological point of view, from a sociological, anthropological view, it's extraordinary that that would be put forward as the solution, and that people would just say—oh, yeah, that seems like a great idea. Now, Monsanto is now offering an incentive for farmers to keep using Dicamba. They're actually going to subsidize and reduce the price if they'll keep using it, even though it's already been banned in states like Arkansas.

RK: Hah.

MS: It is an amazing moment here where, I think, people, particularly the customers, need to understand this is what's happening to agriculture, and we still have no concept of the implications for multiple exposures to a cocktail of pesticides. We have no idea. There's never been a good study, independent study, looking at the cocktail. They may look at individual pesticides, but they never look at the combination. I assume, because it might just be quite terrifying—who knows? These are the part of the motivation on why the growth of organic has become so big so fast that it remains the fastest growing part of agriculture, just because of that common sense reality that there is another way to farm that does not put so much exposure to potentially dangerous toxics.

RK: Yeah, and it's another reason to be involved in the whole organic effort is because of the fact that it's very difficult for organic food, even, to be pure from that standpoint, in this environment. I mean, Wendell Berry has written about that, too. I'm paraphrasing at best, but—how are you going to have a sustainable food system in an unsustainable environment over-all?

MS: And that's been one of our big ongoing struggles, both at the national level as well as the international level is trying to have this conversation about drift and liability and responsibility. And our big fear was that we did not want to pit farmer against farmer and having them sue each other over this issue, when in fact it's, in many cases, because of the rise of genetic engineering and the rise of seed patenting. These farmers literally are renters, annual renters of patented seed from the manufacturer. So they are actually, in our opinion, the one who are responsible for any drift or any contamination, or any problems in the country landscape. So we've been advocating that in a rational world good policy would indicate that you are responsible, and you would take liability if your product ends up somewhere where it's not supposed to be and harms someone who gets no benefit from the use of that technology. That would be a rational marketplace. So we continue to advocate that that would be the way to solution this problem. Because if you're drifted on, either by pesticides or by genetically engineered crops, you have a very difficult task of attempting to be made whole. You're going to lose your market, you're going to lose your reputation, and you did nothing wrong to achieve that problem.

RK: And it even went one step farther, in fact—that you could get sued by the Monsantos for being unlucky about having their drift, and they find some of their patented seed genetics in your crop that you didn't even want to have.

MS: Absolutely, and that has been debated at the highest level in USDA, multiple administrations, as well as the international level, and even within the context of the conventional biodiversity. There is even a protocol to look at liability and the unintended consequences. I think they called it “adventitious presence.” I was calling it something like ... I lost the phrase ... “adventurous presence,” I think is what I called it. [Chuckles] They didn't like that phrase.

RK: This is really very interesting. So calling [Unclear] out and drawing public attention to it is certainly important. Is RAFI or some groups actually—what are they doing? Is there policy recommendations before USDA, before Congress? What is being done about it?

MS: We have put together multiple scenarios to multiple administrations to say here's how the mechanism would work. Here's how you could fix this problem, and the difficulty is the ability to have the political will to do the right thing, which I think is a bigger challenge that goes far beyond agriculture that, as a society, we must wrestle the big money out of Congress if we are to have policies that reflect the needs of the people. That, I think, is the big challenge of our day in that regard.

RK: Yeah, I do, too. I wanted to pursue this issue of where we go now before we conclude this interview, but I want to go back into the past a little bit again, because I think it's so interesting. You ended up after the Organic Food Production Act finally passed, and then it took about 10 years before it finally became implemented. But then you were part of the National Organic Standards Board. I think you even chaired it, didn't you? I'd like to have you to talk a little bit about that.

MS: Sure. So the act passed in '90, after a great deal of very interesting collaboration between consumers and farmers and environmentalists and humane community across the whole country. That was a window of opportunity that we had where we were successful in establishing one of the most creative pieces of federal legislation, because it laid out very carefully this balance of power. Because we were very worried that as a community that we were taking a word that we had helped create in the countryside, and we were essentially giving it to the government to help us oversee this. And there were many good reasons why we made that decision, but I think we wanted to make sure in statute that we were creating a citizen advisory board that represented the broad stakeholders of this community and empowered them with some key statutory authority that would help balance that dynamic and ensure that what may happen would not be what we had seen with things like Farmers Home or other kinds of agencies where that loss of connection between stakeholder empowerment in federal bureaucracy goes awry. So, yes, though that did pass, there was a call for people to volunteer to be on this new board. I got a couple of calls from people urging me, as someone in the South, to consider volunteering for this thing. And, you know, whatever, thought yeah, that might be interesting. We want to make sure this thing gets off to the right start, because our job was to essentially develop the standards to turn over USDA to put into regulatory language that would create the program. I actually got nominated, and I was out at EcoFarm when they announced who the board was. I got a call from my wife, who was just laughing on the phone, and I said—what are you laughing about? She's ... because we lived in South Carolina at the time, and there was this local DJ who imitated Strom Thurmond, and he had a really good Strom Thurmond down, and she thought he had called her with some kind of gag, and she had hung up on him. It turned out it was actually Strom Thurmond, and he was calling to congratulate me on being nominated to the National Organic Standards Board. [Chuckles] So it was a kind of a funny moment in history, and so we ... this is two years later, this is 1992, before this board was convened. We had our first meeting in Washington, DC, and I guess I drew the short straw, and was nominated the chair of the board at the beginning. So I took that job on, and we ... they said—well, gee, there is no money here. I don't know if you can even meet. And we were quite a collection of people across the country, a very diverse group of people. Some came out of organics, some did not. Some did not know what it was at all. We had to organize that committee, and our thinking was the best way to do that would take the show on the road. Let's go out and see organic farms, let's go see organic processing. Let's educate this

board by going out there in the countryside and seeing the people who are doing this and listen to what they think needs to happen. So we spent four or five years doing that. We would go down the halls of USDA raising money and finding little pots of money that hadn't been spent in this part of the place, and just kind of a, you know, patch it together. The good news was we came up with a very solid set of recommendations that covered pretty much the whole gamut of what it would take to have a regulation. Unfortunately, when we gave that regulation to USDA and they put that proposed regulation out, they completely failed to follow our recommendations. So we had a major crisis on our hands, and there was a major organizing attempt by the National Campaign for Sustainable Ag at the time, by the organic businesses, by the farmers, by the consumers, and we think at that time we hit the highest number of public comments to the agency in the history of the agency at the time. And it was right at the beginning of the internet, so this was a moment. But a lot of it was postcards, and I'll never forget getting called into USDA by an old friend of mine who had worked for Jim Hightower, Keith Jones, and he was at USDA at the time, and he called me and he said—you got to turn this thing off; we get it. We're just like laughing—what do you mean turn it off? We can't turn—this thing now has a life of its own.

RK: Viral...

MS: It's gone viral, and we can't turn it off. I think we were up to like, you know, 273,000 comments, which was a lot at that time.

RK: Yeah, Jim Riddle told me about this, too...

MS: So I said—I have to see where all these comments are going. Can you show me? So he took me down into like the sub-basement of USDA with, like, the boiler pipes on the ceiling and everything, and there were like these kids, after-school, at-risk kids, taking these postcards and putting them in the proper pile based on what they were saying. I mean, this was extraordinary to see that they were kind of hand evaluating these things. Of course, much of the news was about what we called the Big Three. We had decided that genetic engineering and sewage sludge and irradiation were not compatible with a system of organic and sustainable agriculture. Well, that completely was at odds with US farm policy, US domestic policy, and was very much at odds with the political elite that had gotten elected by money from these very powerful interests. So that's the one that I think helped meld the withdrawal of that regulation and the subsequent new regulation that reflected that reality. But there were many other problems embedded in there. We called it the "66 points of darkness." We identified a number of problems, some of which we resolved, and some of which we have not, that have affected that rule even to this day.

RK: Right, I've been hearing about that. One of the struggles is who gets to be on the materials board, make the decisions on what's allowed. If you're an organic company but you also have a large non-organic component—those sorts of things are still very much...

MS: That's right.

RK: Then there are efforts to kind of keep it loosening up to more synthetics and things like that, as I understand.

MS: That's right, and particularly in this climate today we have many needs to advance the organic regulation. In fact, on purpose it was designed in our mind as something that would continuously improve over time. We have found that it's quite difficult, almost, I would consider, like chipping concrete to try to improve these regulations. It takes a great deal of community effort to improve it. It's one of the challenges to the governmental approach. In the private sector you can change it much quicker. But we got many benefits from this partnership. I've always called it like a shotgun marriage, a little bit. USDA was opposed to this regulation, testified against it, said please don't give us this job. So it was a shotgun marriage, and I tend to say we're still in marriage counseling. But it has managed to grow this industry and provide a better income and a better-quality product around the world.

RK: I know of another place where you were founding member is the Agriculture Justice Project. Is there effort to bring some of those justice components into the organic label and things to like that? Do they meet?

MS: Well, certainly we tried to do that at the time. We advocated to bring that issue into the organic standard. I also was a part of the UN process to create the international guidelines for organic for all the members of the UN, and we tried there to establish that component. It just was not going to happen from a governmental point of view. To be fair to them, we were asking them to create a standard that would apply to all products across the entire world, something they had never done before, and just taking on the environmental and humane component was overwhelming to them as federal agencies that generally were not accustomed to looking at the whole system. They had little cubbyholes, and this was a systematic approach. This was the broad brush. So our frustration there led us to develop, both at the [IFOAM] level, both this idea that fairness is a component of the organic definition. At the global level our community has always believed that fairness was a component of the organic principles, a vital important component and principle. Our inability to get it into legislation has been a huge thorn, and I think in many ways has prevented organic from achieving its full potential. So what we have attempted to do is graft this on in the marketplace. And that has many benefits, because, one, it can demonstrate to the consumers that, indeed, there can be a system that is not only humane, but is also environmentally appropriate and fair at the same time. Because that is kind of the holy grail if we are indeed to change our food system, it must carry all three of those components. So there are many models like that in play across the world now, where they have added that component on, and they are beginning to get additional differentiation in the marketplace. However, it is a little bit like the place we were in organic prior to the federal law, where you had many different definitions of organic all across the countryside. That was probably one of our motivations, because customers wanted to know—is an organic tomato in South Carolina, is that the same as an organic tomato in New Jersey is that the same as one in Europe, is that the same as one in South America? So that need to come up with a consistent set of standards so that trade could happen based on equivalency was a critical part of needing to establish that system. And that's kind of where we are now still with the fairness component. There is not yet consistency. There's a new movement afoot even in the US now to incorporate the idea of regenerative organic. So it would be an add-on, additional choice for organic that would strengthen these three pillars that we believe are still too weak in the federal and international guidelines. It would strengthen the humane component, it would deepen the soil component, getting at soil carbon sequestration,

getting at protecting soil erosion, and also looking at the fairness to farmers and workers. Because workers can't have fairness if farmers don't have fairness. They can't have fairness unless we can pressure the marketplace to offer more transparent and fair negotiations so that, indeed, farmers and workers can have a living wage. That's at the core of our struggle here. It's a predatory marketing system that is rewarded by federal policy.

RK: Right. The regenerative word I associate that with Bob Rodale, going back there, and so it's come back with a kind of a broader definition.

MS: That's right, and I was happy to know Bob when I was a young farmer. I visited there, and he came to my farm, and we had nice chats about many topics, and that was one of his topics for sure. I participated in writing a chapter in international history of organic, and I got to meet another pioneer in organic that does not get much air play—Paul Keene, who was also in Pennsylvania, and he started a company called Walnut Acres. So he was one of the first kind of like mail order who had not just grown the crop, but also processed it and canned it. And he told me fascinating stories about why he became an organic farmer. He had gone to India in the '40s and ended up hanging out with Mahatma Gandhi. At the end of that whole ... he thought that he was going to teach English to the Indians, and it turned out that that's where he learned of organic farming and decided to come back to America and become an organic farmer.

RK: Boy, that's another interesting story.

MS: It is, it is.

RK: I wanted to see if there's anything else related to your international work. I know you were in India not that long ago—what are you doing there? What have you been doing on the international front?

MS: Right. I mean, our approach at RAFI has always been that we try to work at the local level, we try to work at the national level and the international level, because sometimes you might not be able to get traction at one level, but you can get traction at another. And sometimes, you know, if you work on the problem only at the local level, it may not work out so well. But if you can get a global agreement on something, it can help put pressure back at the national and the local. So we tend to kind of move back and forth between these arenas, and we've worked on a wide range of issues. Primarily what I've been trying to do of late is a combination of addressing this challenge of GMO contamination and building deeper understanding in those places where biotech has not taken root, and thinking about how they can avoid the kind of problems that we now have in America, where there is no regulation and there is no liability and there's no regulatory oversight. It's a big problem, but ... Secondly, we're trying to strengthen an international seed platform where we're linking all of the groups and farm groups and NGOs that are all working on adapting local seeds to meet climate change and to come up with seeds that are more adapted to organic and sustainable agriculture. There's a wide array of very exciting activities happening in the grassroots all around the world that is highly participatory, where farmers and plant breeders are doing this work on farm. We do this in North Carolina now. We have actually just helped create a farmers' seed cooperative in North Carolina and helped these farmers learn how to make their own double-cross hybrid corn that came in number two in the

state competition against all the biotech corn yields. So we're very excited about this direction of adapted germplasm in seeds to meet the needs of regional agriculture. But we think, again, like the SAWGs, all these groups are out there but they don't know each other, and there's no synergy yet. So we're trying to build an international platform that would both look at the policy arena, which is critically important because of the growth of utility patents in seeds. This is something we never anticipated, early-on, that you could use a utility patent that would strictly prevent anyone from saving that seed, anyone from sharing that seed, and locks up that germplasm for 20 years, which is not good for innovation in a changing world where we need ... we're way behind on adapting to the changes that we're facing now. Farmers, I hear all over the world saying—I'm not sure when the rainy season is. I'm not sure, you know, I have hot, dry, wet, cold all in the same season. So the answer to that is diversity and adaptation. But we have to have access to germplasm if we are to do that in real time.

RK: And is that like a U.N. area, then, where you're working?

MS: Well, in this case we're really working under the umbrella of the international organic community, because they offer us a platform that we have to populate. And certainly there are UN connections to that. We've done a lot of work with FAO on this topic. But it's challenging because what has happened is the resources, at the very time that the privatization of seeds grew, public resources for public plant breeding declined. So now we're at this very delicate moment where the existing plant breeders who know how to do this—because it's part science and it's part art. You can't just go into a lab and learn how to do classical plant breeding. You have to go in the field and be able to see that difference and be able to identify it and work with it. And that knowledge, most of those plant breeders—we're working with a 77-year-old corn breeder, one of the last in the entire country, in North Carolina. And when he retires they may not replace him, because there's not a federal stream of resources that would encourage the university to continue that direction. So that's one of the domestic pushes that we've been working very hard on, is building that kind of coalition to reinvigorate our public plant breeding.

RK: I've heard Wes Jackson talk about that same thing. He's very concerned about that situation.

MS: Absolutely, yup. He's been a part of that same coalition with us.

RK: Are they?

MS: Yeah.

RK: Well, I think this has just been so wonderful. I'd like to talk more about some of these things, but I think for the sake of time I'd like to wrap this up with you talking a little bit more about what do we do now. You've mentioned several things that are obvious, kind of set a path, but I'd like to have you wrap up with talking about that – your advice to younger people, who are thinking maybe like you were 30-40 years ago. What would you tell them today?

MS: Well, I think the issue still remains that we have to build the justice component. The sustainable ag community needs to do a deeper dive if you will, and must embrace the social

component. Must greater link with the diversity of communities out there that are partners that we have not built. We're still far too narrow. We need a lot more, I think, cross-sector, cross all kinds of lines of relationship. If we are to change the direction and the tone and the tenor of our food system, it will take a much more diverse coalition, and that we have to build that. We have to get out of our comfort zone. We have to get out of our little slice of agriculture and build a much broader base of support that includes a much wider community. I think that is our job. I think the other piece is that we must deal with this issue of special interest and its influence over policy, because if we can't get that out ... Churchill said that democracy was the worst form of government in the world, except for all the rest. And I say it can't be that we have the best democracy in the world that money can buy. So we've got to wrestle that question, and that can't just happen by agriculture; that's got to happen by a broader coalition that's looking at why, why good people can go to Washington and not vote for rational programs that help the people. That's at the core of our problem. It is a justice problem, it is a problem of special interest, it is a problem of the power dynamic.

RK: Well, I would express, then, to wrap this up, that I hope you stay in this fray for quite awhile, because we have to figure out how we accomplish that, and that is a massive, massive task.

MS: Well, it was always a massive task. And I would say to any generation just get your shovel out, keep digging.

RK: Good, good. Thank you very much, Michael.

MS: Thank you—my pleasure.

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