

Rex Buchanan: The date is February 10, 2020. I'm Rex Buchanan, the former director of the Kansas Geological Survey. With me is former Representative David Heinemann, who is acting as our videographer. We're at the State Capital, and this interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project series, examining the development of water policy during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In these interviews, we'll learn about policy development through the eyes of legislators, administrators, environmentalists, and others who were involved during those decades.

The Kansas Oral History Project is a non-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of collecting oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy during the last half of the 20th century. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible to researchers and educators through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas.

Today I'll interview Mary Fund who has worked on natural resource issues for the Kansas Rural Center, or KRC, a nonprofit research education and advocacy organization with goals that include the development of sustainable agriculture and a sustainable food system. Mary has worked for KRC for most of its forty-year existence, serving as executive director since January 2015. She directed KRC's early water policy work, writing extensively on Kansas water issues. Among her publications are papers and monographs on water quality, quantity, and management published by the Kansas Rural Center and the *Kansas Law Review*. She is editor of KRC's newsletter, *Rural Papers*, and also edits *Policy Watch*, KRC's legislative weekly update.

From 1995 to 2012, Mary managed KRC's Clean Water Farms Project, working with a network of over 300 farmers and ranchers on whole-farm planning and farming practices that protect water quality. In addition to her work for KRC, Mary has served on numerous task forces and advisory teams for organizations and state entities. She currently serves on the Delaware WRAPS [Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy] Advisory Team, the Kansas Center for Sustainable Ag[agriculture] and Alternative Crops Advisory Team and represents KRC on the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

Mary served on the board of directors of the National Organic Farming Research Foundation from 2010 to 2017. She and her husband, Ed Reznicek, own and operate a 400-acre certified organic crop and livestock farm in northeastern Kansas. Mary, welcome, and thank you for agreeing to contribute to this oral history series.

Mary Fund: Well, thank you.

RB: Let's start—it says, “northeastern Kansas.” I would associate the Rural Center with Whiting [in Jackson County].

MF: Whiting was the birthplace. It was the first office, and it was the office until probably five or six years ago. Then we closed that office, and technology has allowed us to go to virtual offices. We don't have a central office. We have a central mailing address. [laughs]

RB: So, Whiting, why was that?

MF: Because the first executive director lived there. He set up the office next door to him. He was an attorney. He had a home office. He could just start from there. We were really a very shoestring organization initially, about \$700, I think, and a steering committee, and a board of directors that was interested in monitoring state legislation. It was 1979. So, setting it within the context of the time, I think there was an oil embargo going on. So, energy issues were a very big topic on farms and everywhere. There was interest in energy issues because of that. What was the other thing? There were two things. Oh, there was a wheat embargo in the late seventies that had farmers kind of upset about trade issues and so forth.

We actually grew out of Kansas Organic Producers, which was a sort of supporting organization for organic farmers. There were no certification standards. There was no big organized organic organization anywhere in the country or maybe just little farmer groups around the country, and it was farmers who didn't want to use mostly pesticides and herbicides. They were really concerned about that.

The steering committee, board members of that, said, "That's too narrow." We'd like to have an organization in the pattern of the Center for Rural Affairs out of Nebraska, which preceded us by a few years, that looked at state policy, started looking at federal foreign policy, and really started looking at what was going on with the decline of rural America and rural Kansas. Small towns were losing businesses. Schools were consolidating still. Small farms were disappearing. So, they wanted to have an organization that focused on those things and also on different ways of farming.

RB: So that was the beginning. How did you get drawn into this process then?

MF: I had gone back to my parents' farm.

RB: And this is where?

MF: Nemaha County, near Goff. I had moved back there right after my father died. I went to work for the Northeast Kansas Community Action Program [CAP]. I got my lesson sort of on the job with the demographics of my home turf in Northeast Kansas.

RB: So, this is where you grew up.

MF: This is where I grew up.

RB: You were just coming back then.

MF: I came back and got a job with the CAP Agency, which dealt with low-income people and low-income problems. Eventually I was writing grants there. The board of directors at the Rural Center tapped me to come to work for them.

RB: What year is this?

MF: 1979 or '80.

RB: At that time, basically the Rural Center had just started. What did they want you to do?

MF: Well, my first task, I was actually an intern. We were looking at land and water rights ownership in Kansas.

RB: Why?

MF: Well, the concentration of farmland ownership at that time we thought was disturbing then. It's even more disturbing now.

RB: You mean, in terms of concentration of land in relatively few hands?

MF: Yes.

RB: How did water rights enter into that?

MF: Well, agriculture depends very much on water. So how we share those water rights or how we farm and what the impacts are on water quality, those are all sort of blended together. We thought that it was—we knew the Ogallala Aquifer is finite. We were asking questions about “Who owns it? Who owns the water? How are they using it? Who's actually making the policies that direct this? Is there some way that the state or somebody should get involved?” We were naive. We didn't know much about water policy. That's why we started looking into it.

There was also a lot of interest in other places and from sociologists about corporate agriculture and what was happening, sort of assuming that's driving family farms out. One of the things that we looked at, the *As You Sow* study by Walter Goldschmidt, [describing two communities,] Arvin and Dinuba—one was the corporate farm town, and the other was the sort of family farm town. We want to look at what are the numbers, what's going on in Kansas? So, we looked at Southwest Kansas, primarily.

RB: I have a few more questions about the Rural Center, and then we'll shift to what we're actually doing here, but I do think that background on the Rural Center is helpful for this conversation.

MF: Sure.

RB: In those early days, and mostly it's because I read that newsletter off and on over the years. I always sort of associate the organization with Northeastern Kansas. That may not be fair. So, has your membership spread pretty much across the state? What's the focus?

MF: Technically we're not a membership organization. We have "friends of."

RB: Is that what I was?

MF: Yes. Still are, I would hope.

RB: I probably am. So, it's not a membership organization. It's just operated by a board.

MF: Yes.

RB: But you can subscribe to the newsletter.

MF: Yes.

RB: Are you spread across the state? How does that work?

MF: There are definitely more people in the eastern half of the state that are longtime friends of the Rural Center. We've never had a huge presence in the western part of the state, but it's increased. There's more going on out there in terms of—there's kind of a local and regional food movement because they rightly think that's connected to sort of a rural revitalization or could be. I would say half of the state.

RB: Mostly I think from my perspective I associate out west, it's big farms. There may be some of the elements of agriculture that you all focus on but not nearly as much as there is in eastern Kansas, especially in that part of the neck of the woods where I am.

So, you come to work there. Do you get involved with the policy end fairly quickly? How does that come about?

MF: I didn't get involved with policy immediately. We did the land and water rights ownership study, which was tedious. We didn't have a lot of computers at that time. I had a KU student who had access then. It was a project for her. So, she had access to the big mainframe computer at KU. At one point, we were actually entering the cards, the old punch cards, into that computer, which had the ownership records. We had been given access to that from I think it was ASCS, USDA agency at that time.

The policy stuff came probably a year or so after that. We decided that we wanted to help the public have a better understanding of water issues across the state. I started going to all of the

Water Authority meetings. It wasn't a Water Authority then [the Kansas Water Resources Board was the predecessor to the Kansas Water Authority] but all the meetings I could.

RB: Right, that eventually morphs into the Water Authority.

MF: Yes, and I started looking, and just did a lot of research. I found all of the old Water Resources Board information, all those reports, and I put together something called *Water in Kansas, A Primer*.

RB: I remember that. So, in doing that work, what were the water issues that you and KRC focused on?

MF: Well, quality. In those early years, there was not much attention paid to quality. There were state regulations and so forth and monitoring schedules and patterns, but in terms of agriculture's impact on water quality, there wasn't a lot that was known or certainly not regulated. I have an English and literature background and journalism. I'm not a scientist. I always took the tack of "How can you make this understandable and easy for the average reader or anybody out there?" I felt like I was often asking really dumb questions, and I found out there are no dumb questions.

RB: More basic questions that a lot of people are not aware of.

MF: I remember talking to the then head of the Water Resources Institute, which was the joint between K State [Kansas State University] and KU [the University of Kansas], and asking, "What happens to agricultural chemicals when they run off or are in the water?" He said, "Well, Mary, I'm just as shocked as you are that we don't know more about that." So, a lot of research came after the '70s and '80s.

RB: A real focus from your organization's perspective on the water quality side as opposed to the quantity side—

MF: Well, you can never totally dismiss the quantity side. I think also what we wanted to do was to see that water policy would be connected with overall farm policy. So often it seemed that talking with legislators or policy makers, they'd say, "Well, that's farm policy. The feds take care of that. We don't really mess with that." But yet farm policy had a lot to do with how we farmed, the size of the farms, who was getting the subsidies or the benefits from those programs. We always thought that there needed to be that marriage—and still today, water policy in the states shouldn't be affected by farm policy, and farm policy tended to make more production. We were always going for more production. Quite often, the price would be quite low because we had a lot of production. But that was all because of the policy and they were using water to do it.

RB: Your point is a good one though. Some of the policy decisions that the USDA would make or the Soil Conservation Service back in those days, when they do things that affect the land, they're immediately going to affect the water. Those water decisions felt like they sometimes made a little bit of a vacuum compared to ag [agriculture] decisions in general, right?

MF: They were using water, and we were using chemicals to make more production, and that affected water—how much, what was running off into it. There were hardly any programs or policies at that time that promoted organic agriculture or any alternatives. We weren't promoting cover crops at that time. We weren't talking about using less fertilizer or long-term rotations. Pretty much it was geared towards a corn/wheat or a corn/soybeans rotation towards all-out production for export.

RB: I understand you looked at quantity and quality both, and you can't really look at one and avoid the other. I will say, in terms of what environmental organizations tended to look at, it wasn't very often that they focused on water quality. Were you-all it? Were there other organizations that you were working with at the time?

MF: In the eighties, we also did a booklet called "Is Your Water Safe to Drink?" It was just a little consumer booklet. It talked about what the tests were, what you should look out for.

RB: For private wells.

MF: Yes, and it also talked about what you could ask about your municipal water. So, we did that. We looked at barriers to conservation, which is also related to water quality. We did a lot of stuff during the eighties, reporting on it, and there were no other organizations—

RB: That's what I'm getting at. In my memory, I couldn't really think of anybody.

MF: We got pretty good at asking the dumb questions, I guess.

RB: Did you do that in a legislative session yourself? Talk about that a little bit.

MF: We were active in promoting the development of the state [*Kansas*] *Water Plan*. We didn't do so much—we provided those materials that we researched and came up with. We provided those to policy makers. We didn't lobby so much. Our tactic has always been that it should be grassroots. So, we'd take information to people, and then they could go talk to their legislators. We monitored the legislature. We were there a lot during the development of the state Water Plan and followed that around the state.

RB: Did you carry that water quality message in that development of the Water Plan?

MF: I think so. I mean, we probably did. I can't remember anything specific.

RB: Did you feel like you got listened to? How effective do you think you were in that process?

MF: I think that what we were always most effective at was asking the question, putting the issue on the table, and being persistent enough that then somebody else with more cred—

RB: Technical expertise.

MF: And larger membership. Then they would take it up, and then it would become an issue.

RB: Can you think of an example of something like that?

MF: I think the water quality issues in general in relation to agriculture. I do remember testifying before—I think this was when there was a Water Authority just starting out—asking those questions about agricultural chemicals. It did end up being a section of the Water Plan and their research—this was a research conference, asking people to come in and say, “What's the issues you want?” It did end up being something called “The Fate of Ag Chemicals in the Environment.” So, they did add that. I think they were listening. They maybe didn't want to give us a lot of credit for bringing those issues up.

RB: Did you interact with the [Kansas] Department of Health and Environment that much in that process? That tends to be where the water quality side tends to show up.

MF: I think only to get information.

RB: But on pushing the regulatory side or asking those kinds of questions, you mostly worked through Water Authority and the Water Office.

MF: Yes.

RB: Did you get to at all the energy issues in that process then?

MF: Very early on, we were involved in energy issues, very early, like the initial five years of the organization. That was probably because of the leadership in the organization at that time. Like I said, there was an energy, an oil embargo, and so it was on everybody's minds, energy use. So, we tried to do some very rudimentary solar workshops, things for the farm that could be implemented.

RB: Let me ask you about a couple of things that go on in this process. You guys may not have had any involvement with them. This is what I was thinking about in terms of the energy side, and it will become clear where I'm going with this in a second, but one of them was low-level radioactive waste. Were you all involved with that?

MF: Oh, yes. There was the Central [Interstate Low Level Radioactive] Waste Compact.

RB: Right, there was a five-state compact that was looking at low-level [radioactive waste disposal] sites possibly within the state [Kansas].

MF: There was a period of time when that arose, and they published a map that sent everybody crazy.

RB: I remember that very clearly. They were looking at basically a lot of times shale units that they could then place—

MF: They were looking at an area of northeast, north-central Kansas. So when that got out, all of the “Not in my Backyard” folks—I didn't know so many people knew who I was in northeast Kansas because I got lots of phone calls from people saying, “I know you work on environmental stuff. So, what do we do?” So, we did get involved in that.

RB: The person that I really associate with a lot of that reaction was Laura McClure who was a representative from Osborne County [member of the Kansas House of Representatives from 1993-2003]. That was one of the areas. There was a series of big public meetings and car caravans and all of that. So, you were involved in that.

MF: We organized some public information meetings and did the PR [public relations] work to get people to the big public meetings.

RB: So, the connection there is just sort of a rural area and response to what the concerns were that people felt like were going on.

Another issue that shows up at that time that gets a lot of grassroots involvement is Cheyenne Bottoms [wetland area in Barton County]. Were you involved in that?

MF: We didn't get as involved in that. Audubon led the charge on that. We supported them. Actually, somewhere in there was the development of something called the Environmental Lobby Caucus. There were a number of environmental organizations, and the Rural Center was one of those groups that participated. There were six, seven, eight varied organizations that formed the core of that. They would meet on Friday afternoons every week here in Topeka after the legislators left and discuss issues and shared information, and different groups would take the lead on different things.

RB: As I sit here and think about it, just in watching it from my perspective, the others, there was a KNRC [Kansas Natural Resource Council], the Sierra Club to a certain extent, Audubon—

MF: And the Kansas Wildlife Federation was active in that group.

RB: Does that feel like sort of a high-water mark for these environmental groups coming together and working together on issues?

MF: Yes, it was. I'm not quite sure why it all dissipated there for a while. I think some of the organizations had trouble keeping funding. I think basically it's come back again.

RB: It feels like it's trying to.

MF: Yes.

RB: But that period there, I don't even know what era, it may be like '85 or so.

MF: Yes.

RB: Mid-eighties, we'll call it, as I look at it in retrospect, really there were a lot of groups, maybe at least from the outside that looked like they were somewhat coordinated.

MF: Well, they were. I've tried to explain that to some of the younger people involved in some of the environmental groups now. We had a caucus. We had a coalition. It was a working one.

RB: There were basically strength in numbers at that point.

MF: Yes.

RB: That was kind of what was going on.

MF: We worked on everything from recycling to energy legislation to water. Water—the state Water Plan and getting that established was a big thing.

RB: A couple of things related to that, and I'll come back to the Water Plan funding specifically in a second. In previous conversations, one of the people we talked to specifically that was really striking to me was Joyce Wolf. When I talked to her about her legislative activity, and she started to recount some of it, it was real striking that an awful lot of the people involved at that level of the environmental movement were women.

MF: Yes, that's true.

RB: Talk about that and why that was.

MF: That's true to some extent even today. There are a lot of women who—you can argue that it's because we're the homemakers, we're the mothers, and so we're concerned about everything from what water our kids drink to what kind of food, what's in the food, and so forth. It could also be we work cheaper. We're cheaper to hire.

RB: That was Joyce's answer.

MF: Yes, and we worked well together.

RB: As I think about it, it was a fairly cooperative group. It was not even a case of setting differences aside; it was almost like you didn't have any.

MF: There weren't differences at that point. We worked on different things. We didn't have a lot of—there was no infighting, no problems that way.

RB: Let's talk about, and one of the things we focused on here throughout these conversations has been Water Plan funding. It's one thing to develop a Water Plan. The State did that fairly early on, and it has been fairly meticulous about planning process, but a plan doesn't get you anywhere if you don't have priorities and resources to put into it. When the State went through that process of trying to develop Water Plan funding, were you all involved in that process?

MF: Somewhat. I don't remember the details. I think I warned you about that earlier. Obviously, you have to have the money. I don't remember exactly what was going on. I know that there was lots of discussion when the Water Plan came to be, that "Well we don't want this to just sit on a shelf somewhere." It was pretty clear that we were not going to have a huge amount of money dedicated at any one time, but little did we know that it was going to be siphoned off at some point in the future and not even the minimum that we asked for.

RB: But in terms of the actual passage of that sort of package of funding sources that went into the Water Plan, you guys weren't hugely involved with that?

MF: We didn't get hugely involved at that point.

RB: Let's talk a little bit about one of the programs, and this is getting towards the tail end of some of the time, but during the Graves administration, there was an emphasis on particularly voluntary efforts to look at the issues that you all focused on in terms of nonpoint source pollution, especially run-off atrazine is my big memory, but there may be some other things as well.

MF: Yes.

RB: Talk about that a little bit.

MF: I served on the Pesticide Management area that focused, specifically on atrazine. Voluntary efforts are great, but I never set much store on whether they would do much good because you have to understand why you'd doing certain things, why you're changing a farming practice,

and I'm not sure that that has actually made—there was enough attention on that. Farmers didn't understand maybe why they should have been altering their behavior some.

I remember standing out—this was one of the water quality tours—we were somewhere along a stream bank and talking about this is how this should look for protecting water quality, and I said, “Well, but how do we get people to stop bulldozing out all of these streams?” We talked about putting buffer strips and so forth in, but we weren't doing anything, and how do you get them to do that? Well, it's probably not going to come through as totally voluntary.

I mean, all of our conservation policies have been predicated on farmers being willing to do the right thing. We did a study that actually just imitated, just followed other studies similar where we looked at what the barriers to conservation are. Why don't farmers do these things? What's standing in their way? We found out that even though they'll say it's economics a lot of times, a very close second was simply the cultural and social and peer pressure to keep doing it the way they've always done it, and that's true today.

RB: I grew up on a farm, and very often it is cultural. There are only certainly things you do, and there's a risk that's run if you're doing something that's so completely different from everybody else.

MF: We see that today. We see that today with the emphasis on soil health, and farmers who are adopting cover crops and a continuous “no till” with cover crops in there. They find each other. Now we have the technology. They can find each other on Facebook and text each other. They're not neighbors. They're clear across the state from each other.

RB: Form their own communities.

MF: They form their own community to educate. We didn't have that.

RB: In that era in the late '80s and early '90s, to suggest really hardcore regulation in order to reduce nonpoint source pollution at the kind of scale that we're talking about—

MF: Right. It wasn't going to work. I'm a farmer, too. The last thing I want is somebody coming in and telling me what I have to do. If you have a little more flexibility of some choices, one of the things that we did and we're lucky—this is when we started working with KDHE was with our Clean Water Farms project, which started in 1995. It went on for like fifteen years. We had multiple years of funding, and we were able to finally put money where our mouth was on some of those things because we could fund small demonstrations. It wasn't a lot of money. We only offered \$5,000 grants, which you would think would not be enough to maybe get big things done, but we kept it low because we wanted to work with more farmers, and the demonstration part of it was that they had to have a tour. They had to have an educational piece to it.

Part of that, too, after the first four or five years, we worked with K-State and with I think even KDA [Kansas Department of Agriculture] was part of the planning group to come up with a whole farm planning tool. The River Friendly Farm Plan was what we called it. The idea behind that was if people understand why they're doing something or being asked to do something, they have a better chance of going ahead—

RB: Other than being told.

MF: Right. That whole thing was, "Let's get some models out there that show people that these things work." So popular were intensive rotational grazing and alternative watering systems. This was sort of at the beginning when USDA NRCS was even starting to look at some of that stuff. Now it's commonplace, but it wasn't at the time. So that was an area where we pulled away from policy stuff and started working on models and working with farmers. We did probably three hundred or so of those whole farm plans.

RB: Were those geographically spread across the state?

MF: They were mostly in the eastern part of the state. There were a few in central and west. The eastern part of the state is where the nonpoint runoff was the greatest problem.

RB: I'm not quite sure the best way to put this, but it's so dry out west that, by and large, runoff is not going to wind up in most of those tributaries anyway. Really where you run into problem is back in eastern Kansas, where you get big rainfall events that flush all sorts of stuff.

So, in effect that was again a voluntary demonstration program. Based on what you know today, in terms of those programs and how they worked, do you feel like they were successful in doing what they were meant to do?

MF: The Clean Water Farms program? Which program?

RB: The voluntary programs, that one, and in a broader sense, I guess. How much better off are we today in dealing with this issue than we were twenty, thirty, forty years ago?

MF: We're probably better off, but I think there's still a long way to go. We'd like to think that with no till and with the advances there that we stopped a lot of the nonpoint runoff, and we haven't. We still have a lot of water quality impairments and problems in streams and so forth. I think it's just the sheer, the scope of the problem, the scope of the ground, the landscape that has to be covered that it makes it really difficult to say that we've made a lot of progress. I want to be optimistic and say that we have, but I'm skeptical.

RB: There's certainly more awareness of the issue than there might have been certainly thirty or forty years ago. Back in those days, it was kind of, if a certain amount of atrazine is good, twice as much must be better. I don't know that anybody thinks in those terms—

MF: Well, just the sheer cost of it. We were also active during the farm crisis. It's probably not the first farm crisis, but the farm crisis of the 1980s. That was actually sort of the beginning of a lot of sustainable agriculture organizations, and a lot of those farming practices being pushed from various people because they were to lower the cost. If you relied on old-fashioned crop rotations and if you couldn't afford the atrazine, the chemicals, they had to go back to some other weed-control process.

RB: How do you feel that no till plays into this? Has it been an overall benefit, water quality-wise?

MF: I think that it's considered a bigger benefit than it has actually been because you can go down any country road, and you can see what fields are considered no till by NRCS and by the farmers, and you still see soil in the ditches. I mean, you have heavy rainfalls. You still see it, and it's improving because we're seeing cover crops mixed with that. That's helping, but just recently I ask in my WRAPS watershed, "What is the percentage of the ground that's covered with no till here?" and they said 15 percent. That's not much.

RB: Recently in some conversations with folks out west, those percentages, they're higher than that—

MF: They may be higher out there.

RB: But they're going down. They're not going up, which is pretty striking as well.

MF: It's hard to convince farmers to talk about environmental issues when they're going broke or when they're having financial stress. So, they're going to continue to do things as they have. It's like one more straw on the camel's back for them to bring up, "Well, you need to be doing this."

RB: I'm not quite sure how to fashion this question I'm about to ask you. Now you're sitting here in 2020. You had thirty-five years of exposure to the water world, the water bureaucracy, both federal and state. Certainly, you know a lot more about how this world operates.

MF: I used to think I did, but lately I don't know.

RB: Why?

MF: Just politics in general.

RB: You must look back at when you started and think, "Boy, there was a huge world out there that I didn't know anything about that I sort of waded into." Are there things that you wish you would have known then that you can look back on?

MF: Well, you always can do that. I looked at the final chapter of the *Water in Kansas, A Primer*, and some of the conclusions in there. That was written in 1984. It talked about how a lot of our problems were because we had taken a “development and technology can solve all our problems” approach, and that we needed to get beyond that and recognize what was appropriate technology, but we needed to ask some questions along the way as to what would make—how can we build a sustainable resource base, one that renews itself and is around for generations to come as opposed to using it or losing it. So that was where that left off.

If you think about it today, there have been technological advances for efficiency and irrigation, but we're still pumping the Ogallala. We still have nonpoint pollution problems.

RB: Water impairments.

MF: We still have more of a question of “Well, we have to grow. We have to develop this, and technology will solve it.” The changes have to happen in people's heads, and it has to be sort of a paradigm shift from that. I'm all for technology. I like my computer. I like my washing machine, all of these things. But are we going to have drones doing agriculture? Very expensive. What about the people? We have to understand that people are also a resource, and people are part of the natural resources in Kansas, and we have to protect those so that there can be communities in the future. We haven't reached that. We haven't learned those lessons.

RB: Learned the lessons may not be quite the right way to put it but solve those priorities that you identified. So, at your meeting down in Wichita, the lieutenant governor spoke about this rural task force and the listening tour that went on. I was just there for his talk and the questions and answers. I didn't hear a word about water in that conversation.

MF: No.

RB: I heard a lot about broadband and medical health and all sorts of things. As I sat there, I was really struck that there was no conversation about natural resource depletion in a part of the world where natural resource depletion is going on.

MF: Wichita has had more than its share of water issues, quality and—

RB: But those rural areas out west, if you look at the areas that have water shortages out west, they're also the same counties and towns that are already struggling with the demographic issues of basically a reduction of population, an aging population.

MF: Sure. I don't know why the Office of Rural Prosperity doesn't talk about resource issues. They don't really talk about agriculture issues. Everybody seems to think that the growth of a community in a rural area, you need to diversify away from agriculture. The problem is that agriculture is part of the problem. When you see the signs that say, “One Farmer Feeds You and

128 People," that's the story. We've become efficient, but that depletes people. We don't need people out there. That's kind of the contradiction and the conundrum. How do you get more people out there? Can you do it without just building a different kind of agricultural economy?

In the past ten, twenty years, we talked more about local and regional food economies. There's no silver bullet that local food, which is a big trending thing across the country, that's not going to solve problems, but for food security, for communities, it offers a lot of opportunity for businesses to develop, to bring people back or to keep people. That's actually just as important is to keep people.

RB: A couple of things. When you look at those water issues, a lot of the places that have plenty of water are the same places where there's already a surplus population today like in Johnson County.

MF: Right.

RB: They don't have a water problem. They're not going to have a water problem. That's where everybody moves to. But I do want to sort of touch on where you were just going in the sense of small-scale organic farming is not going to solve the issues of western Kansas.

MF: No.

RB: But certainly, there has been an increase in that kind of small farm in northeastern Kansas, through a lot of this state, hasn't there, that must make you feel pretty good?

MF: Yes, the growth of interest in how we raise food, who raises it, that's a development that's been a real positive one. But even the smaller scale farmers right now are having trouble making a living at that. I've never been interested in encouraging people to work for a poverty wage. So, it's good on the one hand, but there's still some issues. I think land access, the high cost of land—the cost of land is killing beginning farmers. It's hurting the retiring farmers. It's good to see that development, all that interest, but it's not a silver bullet.

We talk to people about expanding their enterprises and maybe adopting some fruit and vegetable production, but it wouldn't take a huge number of farms to supply Kansas. We would like them to be able to do that.

RB: A fair number of those are relatively young people. You're right. Even with a small amount of land, given the prices in the part of the world where they live, land prices are such that it's probably prohibitive.

MF: There's a real problem. As I said, people are resources, too. We have priced them right out of their future on farms.

RB: The Rural Center and you, however you want to put it, sort of see the connection between natural resources and people and ag [agriculture] in ways that most environmental organizations in this state probably don't. Other environmental organizations, they know the farming is out there. They know ag exists. They know ag plays a big role in land use and water and resources, but they don't really necessarily understand or appreciate that role. That seems to me where you all are different.

MF: I think so, and I hope that we have played the role of trying to explain to some of them why some positions won't work, why they're hard for the farmers to adopt or understand. Farmers certainly don't want people from environmental groups telling them what to do. I'm a farmer, and I'm that way, too. I think that we've always had strong feelings about the environment ourselves as an ag organization.

RB: Are you essentially optimistic about the future of rural Kansas?

MF: I think that it depends on what day you catch me. I'm optimistic because I see all of these people who would like to come back to a rural community, but there's challenges. That's why I was thrilled to see the Office of Rural Prosperity. I thought, "Okay, they're finally going to start to deal with some of this." There's no housing. You can telecommute on a lot of jobs, so you don't even have to have the jobs right there, but, again, they're not good paying jobs.

It's all connected. I think that's what makes me both optimistic but also not optimistic because if you're trying to bring people back to rural communities, they have to have a decent-paying job. The young people have outrageous student debt. So, they feel like they have to stay in an urban area, and they can't afford to move back. Then there's no housing for them to move back to.

What I've been told in my community is that farmers won't let go of two or three acres so that somebody could even build a house. I think there's a whole lot of things that—it's extremely challenging to be optimistic when you realize all the pieces that have to come together.

RB: There's housing. Telecommute, you have to have good broadband service, which doesn't necessarily exist out there. Nobody's going to want to live anywhere where there isn't good medical service or where they've got to drive long distances to get there.

MF: Or where they close the schools.

RB: You put all that together, and it just feels to me like it's a really tough situation. Maybe there is no real good answer at this point. Nobody wants to hear that, but I'm not sure what the real good answer is, and I grew up in one of those towns.

MF: The positive thing is I think that people do want to get out of really big urban areas. They do want to come back and raise their kids where they don't have to worry about them walking down the street.

RB: Maybe related to that a little bit, the folks that we've talked to in this process talk about both the arc of how water issues and environmental issues sort of peaked out in terms of level of interest in the eighties and nineties and then sort of a drop-off on the other side. They also talk about this rise in lack of ability of people politically to come together and talk to each other. That's where we are now in terms of the sort of tribalism that's going on. Is that what it looks like to you?

MF: I think that at no time in my thirty-five, forty years of working has there been such division among people, so much distrust and misinformation. Everybody on all sides says, "I don't know who to trust or who to believe on issues." We try to tell people that we need to keep talking.

We did these town hall meetings. This is like the sixth year in a row. Of course, we get people who agree with the Rural Center, but every year, we get more new people who aren't that familiar with us. Just the opportunity to sit down and talk about a variety of issues, people seem hungry for that. I think last year we tried to talk about climate change. We tried to set our questions within that context, knowing that there are people out there who deny that it's a real thing and disagree. Only at one meeting did we have anybody really bring that up, but he said, "The problems are all still the same." So, it didn't matter in the long run.

RB: It's interesting. Those town halls may have worked that way, but if you walk around here, it feels very different today than when you first started. Wouldn't you say that's true?

MF: Yes. I think that things change more quickly maybe at the grassroots level than they do at the policy level. There are more people out there who are not involved in the legislative process or policy making of any kind who think differently than what maybe the majority of the status quo does under the dome. That would make me a little more optimistic. It just hasn't quite caught up. I don't know. I hope it does. I'd hate to see us just become totally stalemated.

RB: One of the things I was going to mention, you all do a nice job of providing legislative updates during the session. That's sort of a role that you've taken on in the environmental community that I think everybody else in the environmental community relies on you all to do.

MF: I think we've got six organizations that help co-sponsor that, and because they all focus on their specific topic, and then we kind of come in and say, "But this happens within the context of a budget and a revenue system and a tax system." You have to be aware of those things.

RB: All of those things.

MF: To get anything passed. So that's kind of where we come in.

RB: Assuming that you're able to successfully retire, what do you do at that point?

MF: What do I do? Spend some time catching up on all those things that I haven't been able to do because I've been working over forty hours a week for quite a while. I have a farm that I want to do some things. As I told somebody today, I want to plant trees because that's one of the best things you can do for carbon sequestration. I want to continue to write. I'd like to be able to step back. I'm a better writer than I am a talker, which is hopefully obvious here. I want to be able to try to make sense of some things.

RB: Like what? If you had to pick a priority at this point.

MF: I've been reading more history and kind of seeing how that—history is never past. It's always here with us. So how similar situations or times, if there are any, that have happened in the past and what's happening now in terms of all the division and the really big challenges. You said people are moving to Johnson County because there's lots of water. We don't know what's going to come down the pike here in the next twenty, thirty, fifty years.

A long time ago, this was early '80s, and I remember asking a Corps of Engineers guy—I was asking questions about the dams and the reservoirs. They had their life spans, and they're built for a hundred years. I'm taking notes, and I said, "And then what?" He just looked at me with this look of "Well, we're not going to be here by then, so it doesn't matter." I said, "No, there's always somebody after."

RB: Some of what you're saying is timeframe and sort of how far in advance people are thinking.

MF: Yes. We don't really look out far enough ahead. I don't think we're good planners in general. Obviously, we haven't implemented the plans we have, if you look at the water plan, to go back to that.

RB: I just had sort of an odd thought. Do you all have much of a connection with the Land Institute in Wes Jackson?

MF: Some. That's a long-haul kind of issue.

RB: Exactly. A long timeframe. I was just thinking if you looked at folks that think about some of the issues that you all deal with, some of them are Wes's group, some of them are you guys, and the other one is Marci Penner at the Rural Center.

MF: Yes, the Kansas Sampler.

RB: The Kansas Sampler Foundation down in Inman. You're all three pretty different groups and different people and different organizations, but you do—those are three kinds of groups that are talking about these things.

MF: She's a good, optimistic cheerleader.

RB: This conversation would have been very different with Marci.

MF: Yes.

RB: No question about it. I think if there's anything else you can think of that we should have covered, why, I appreciate the chance to talk to you about this stuff.

MF: Thank you.

RB: I appreciate you taking the time. I'm glad we were able to finally get it down.

MF: Yes. Thank you.

[End of File]