

Rex Buchanan: I'm Rex Buchanan, the former director of the Kansas Geological Survey. Today is November 23, 2021. We're at the Geological Survey in Lawrence, interviewing former Governor Mike Hayden. Governor Hayden has a broad range of career and public service. In addition to serving as Governor [1987-1991], his career includes service in the US Army and the Kansas House where he served two terms as Speaker. He was also Assistant Secretary of the US Department of Interior during the G. H. W. Bush administration and served nine years as Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks for Governors Graves, Sebelius, and Parkinson.

Governor Hayden graduated from Kansas State University in 1966 with a degree in wildlife conservation and completed a master's degree in biology in 1974 at Fort Hays State University. He was first elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 1972 and re-elected to six additional terms, serving from 1973 to '87. He served as Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee in the 1979 to '82 legislative sessions and was Speaker of the House in the 1983 to '86 sessions.

Governor Hayden's interview today is part of the Kansas Oral History Project series examining the development of water policy during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In these interviews, we explore water policy through the eyes of water experts, administrators, legislators, farmers, environmentalists, and others who are involved in development and implementation of that policy. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation created to collect and preserve oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible to researchers and educators online at KSoralhistory.org and through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas.

The Kansas Oral History Project is supported by donations from individuals and grants from Every and Humanities Kansas. Thank you, Governor Hayden, for agreeing to contribute and being here today.

Mike Hayden: Thank you, Rex.

RB: Let's start off a little bit with—I don't know if we need to cover your entry into politics in and of itself because I think that's been covered in a lot of other places. What I really would like to focus on today is the natural resources side of your career and how you got started there. So you campaigned for the House in 1972. Was natural resources a part of what drove you to that? Did you campaign on that in any sense?

MH: Well, it was part of the motivation, Rex. I remember very clearly the incumbent legislator from our area.

RB: And we should add you're from Atwood, Rawlins County in northwestern Kansas.

MH: That's correct. It was a three-and-a-half county district at that time. Atwood was kind of in the center of it. The incumbent was from Oberlin. He was a fellow Republican, but he always voted against fish and game. I got so upset about that that that's really what motivated me to run against him. I was in graduate school. In fact, I used to teach embryology lab in the morning and then drive out to Atwood and Saint Francis and campaign in the afternoon and evenings. But so it was a concern about natural resources that motivated me. It really wasn't an issue in that sense. It's what motivated me to run in the first place.

RB: So when you say "fish and game issues," there was no single overarching fish and game issue? Was it funding for fish and game? Was it just in general?

MH: It was the whole concept of public lands. It was the whole concept of wildlife management. It was the whole concept of funding, of budgeting. Every time something would come up that would contribute to wise natural resource management, he always took a contrary position. So finally I got tired of that, and I ran against him.

RB: Do you think the voters cared?

MH: No, they probably didn't. They probably didn't. When it came down to the issues, the real truth is that geography plays a huge role. My dad always said, "When in doubt, vote for the person closest to home." In the rural areas, that's a huge thing. So I had geography on my side.

But I remember in that first campaign, I went to the Republican Chairman's house in Rawlins County, and I said, "I'm going to run for the legislature. I'd like your support." He said, "You've got my support," but he said, "We've never elected anybody under fifty before." I was twenty-eight and still in graduate school. So it was a pretty high bar, but we were able to overcome it for a total of seven terms.

RB: So this was 1972. The environmental movement at this point is a big deal. Earth Day has occurred. There's a lot of interest, particularly on college campuses, and with young people on environmental issues. Were you influenced by that part of it? Or was it just more of the classes you were taking at Fort Hays or your background before Fort Hays?

MH: One thing, Rex, is that that summer in '72, I was in graduate school, and I'd gotten a grant from the National Science Foundation. I took actually fourteen students from Fort Hays out to study a plan to rehabilitate Lake Atwood and to study the Beaver Creek watershed, which is what fed Lake Atwood. So that all was happening at the same time. There was Earth Day. Earth Day had occurred, and there was a lot of student involvement at Fort Hays, especially in the biology department concerning natural resources and awareness of natural resources. So it all kind of dovetailed.

RB: It was a little bit sort of in the air for everybody at that point that there were movements like protests against the Vietnam War and civil rights, and then the environmental movement

was one that was there maybe a little bit later that was part of that same sort of feeling that was going around.

MH: That's right.

RB: Was there anybody you read in that period, any national-level people that were influential on you? Or was it mostly those folks that you were working with at Hays?

MH: I actually started my concern about wildlife and natural resources at a very early age. I remember in high school reading [Henry David] Thoreau. I remember as a freshman in college reading Aldo Leopold and those writers and those naturalists. Since I majored in wildlife at K-State [Kansas State University], it was just a natural progression.

RB: And because this series of interviews focuses really on water, water as a natural resource issue, is it part of your consciousness at that time? It must have been if Lake Atwood was an issue for you.

MH: It absolutely was. It absolutely was because, of course, Lake Atwood and its watershed and at that time there was a beginning, the beginning of the recognition that the streams were drying up. There was a beginning of the recognition that the aquifer was declining which related to the stream flow. So it was a general awareness, and, of course, water is instrumental to all life. So it's intertwined with all of these issues.

RB: At that time in the early seventies, these tributaries, there's less stream flow, and Lake Atwood is a shallow lake. There are probably problems related to just water quantity there. Was there recognition, do you remember recognition of the Ogallala as a separate issue in terms of depletion of the Ogallala? Does that come later, do you think?

MH: Well, let me say that there was recognition and the sense that people were starting to talk about recharge even then. I remember very clearly, I said to my major professor, "Why don't we go out here and dig a hole and fill it full of sand and pour water in it and see if it replenishes stream flow?" And he said, "Oh, that's a crazy idea." But the real truth is, if you look at what we're doing on the Little Ark [Little Arkansas River], that's exactly what we're doing.

RB: Right.

MH: In a grander sense. So there was even back then the recognition that this relationship existed and that was the aquifer was declining, then the streams were declining as well.

RB: That connection between alluvial aquifers and stream flow, which is one of those things that people recognize is absolutely critical today. That's sort of in its early stages in some respects out there.

MH: It was in its infancy then. People were just starting to realize it.

RB: I don't mean to go too far down this road, but northwestern Kansas, you don't see, particularly in your part of the world, there is some irrigation, but it's nothing like that really big-scale irrigation that comes later down in southwestern Kansas. Is that sort of recognition, how much do people recognize it at that point, I guess, compared to other parts of western Kansas, do you think?

MH: Well, they were starting to understand that something was happening because the streams didn't flow anymore, or they only flowed a few months of the year. There were people who kept records about Lake Atwood. That was one of the things that we did was look at the history, and there were people who kept records. Actually these were laypeople, but they kept records about the stream flow in a crude way. They dated and talked about, they saw the dynamics of it, and they recorded that. And then we recorded what we saw, and there were dramatic differences.

RB: Some of that relates—I know we've talked about this before—particularly fish species that used to occur out there that don't anymore or were going away because of lack of stream flow, right?

MH: That's absolutely right. As I've told you before, if you go to the museum at Fort Hays [Sternberg Museum of Natural History], you'll find that there's an eel, and that eel was caught in the Beaver Creek near Atwood. Now the only place in the world where eels, freshwater eels reproduce is in the Sargasso Sea. That eel had to come all the way, all the way from the Sargasso Sea up the Mississippi, up the Missouri, up the tributaries, and finally end up in Rawlins County, Kansas. Well, today, of course, not only is that impossible, but the streams don't flow most of the time.

A number of the other species, my dad used to talk about catching redhorses when he was a kid in Rawlins County. Well, there hasn't been a redhorse in Rawlins County in my lifetime.

RB: Is that a minnow?

MH: It's a minnow-like species. I've caught them. They still exist in southeastern Kansas in the Verdigris. I've caught them up to, say, fourteen inches, but they are a minnow-like species. They were very common, and they're just—what do I want to say? They're just the canary in the coalmine, so to speak. They're just a species that indicates what's happening to the ecosystem.

RB: Right, an indicator. Let's go back then to politics. When you go into the legislature in the early seventies, do you wind up on any of those natural resource type committees in that process?

MH: I've told this story before. Two things happened. One is that I was sitting there one day at my desk, and I noticed the Governor's Advisory Council on Ecology. I noticed that there was no one on there from the House of Representatives, even though they were entitled to have a

seat. So I went down to the Speaker's Office, Pete McGill, Speaker McGill, and I said, "Mr. Speaker, if no one wants this from the House, I'd love to serve if you'd be willing to appoint me." Well, he did appoint me, and that's where I met people like John Strickler. That's where I met other people. So that was kind of the beginning.

Then later on, a year or so later, the Speaker called me and he said, "I'm working on committee assignments for the new term. I'm thinking about putting you on the Ways and Means Committee." Being so naive, I said, "Well, Mr. Speaker, I really want to be on the Natural Resources Committee." He talked me into being on the Ways and Means. So I never did get to serve on the Natural Resources Committee, but I had those inclinations from the very beginning.

RB: That period then in the mid-seventies is when the Groundwater Management District Act gets passed. A lot of the legislation that really is formative to water policy in the state comes out of that mid-seventies period. How involved were you in that process?

MH: Well, again, I was just beginning my career. I was following it very closely. I was concerned about it. I still am concerned about it today. When those policies were adopted, they were adopted principally to protect irrigation. They were adopted to give the irrigators a huge voice, and the rest of the public in many respects was left out. In places like Atwood, for example, our entire town got one vote, and one irrigator gets one vote.

RB: This is in the Northwest Kansas Groundwater Management District (GMD).

MH: Exactly. So I spoke out about those policies way back, way back in the seventies, that this is not a democratic way. This is not the way to make sure, especially public water supplies are protected. I was kind of a voice in the wilderness, to be honest with you, in those days.

RB: Yes, they're anti-democratic in the sense that landowners, bigger landowners have a bigger voice in the direction of the GMD than the average citizen would.

MH: And people in the city. See, they drew the line so that essentially, we have no vote, even though our water supply now in Atwood comes from the Ogallala. We have a pipeline. We used to be from alluvium, our whole water supply. Well, it got too high in arsenic. So we had to find a new water supply. So, we bought, rightfully so, bought water from irrigators in the Ogallala. So now we are actually using Ogallala water for the whole town. Yet the whole town has no vote at all in the dealings of the Groundwater Management District.

RB: The creation of those districts is real interesting to me. In effect, the philosophy is one of local control. It's in effect saying the locals know better how to handle this issue than, say, the state does. So let's give them—they don't have control in the sense of passing out water rights or enforcing water rights, but certainly they're looked to for direction about water policy from their area, but it's an interesting form of local control is what you're saying, right?

MH: It's a very special-interest thing. Nobody's looking out for the streams that dried up. Nobody's looking out for all of the natural resources that are dependent upon water. It's essentially controlled by the irrigators, and a very few of them in reality control the policy.

RB: There are a lot of people over the years, including some folks from northwestern Kansas that have used that fox guarding the henhouse analogy for how that's all constructed.

MH: Well, it's true. As the aquifer declines and as the streams continue to dry up, it becomes more and more critical. It's controlled by really fewer and fewer people. It's not headed in a sustainable direction, let's say it that way.

RB: So then you become Speaker, and I know I just read it, was that 1978 or 1980?

MH: It was in '82, I was elected. Actually my first session was in '83 as Speaker.

RB: As Speaker, talk a little bit about natural resources and what your approach was. You're in effect appointing people to committees at that point.

MH: Not only that, every committee assignment. In those days, the Speaker, of course you took input from everywhere, but the Speaker made the final determination on who was not only committee chairs but who served on each committee. And you did that in consultation with the Chairs, of course, and with the Minority Leader and so on. The rules have changed now somewhat, but in those days, the Speaker made the final decisions.

RB: What natural resource water issues were you facing at that time? Do you remember?

MH: Well, one of the biggest ones was actually the permitting of Wolf Creek Nuclear Power Plant. It came down to we put it up on the board for a vote. In those days, it had to be approved by the House and the Senate. The Senate had approved it.

RB: And this is the actual operational permit or water-related permit?

MH: That's correct. That's right. It was the water permit.

RB: So the water right for the cooling had to come through the legislature?

MH: That's right. Under the law, it had to be approved by the House and the Senate.

RB: Okay.

MH: Of course, in general, there was a lot of opposition to nuclear power at that time. In fact, when they brought in the boiler, so to speak, I can't think of the proper term.

RB: The big containment vessel.

MH: Right. When they brought that in on the railroad, in fact, there were people who laid down on the tracks.

RB: I remember.

MH: In protest. That's how controversial it was. When we put it up on the board to vote, we were one vote shy in the House. It had already passed in the Senate. So I called a recess, and we caucused. We got that one vote, and it passed. It was permitted then, and Wolf Creek was built.

RB: I remember that construction process pretty well. By the time that vote took place, some of that construction would have already been underway.

MH: That's right.

RB: So to turn down the water right permit, the water right at that point would have been pretty tough to do.

MH: And it would have been very expensive. It would have been the wrong decision, but it would have also been very, very expensive and caused all kinds of litigation and things like that. In the end, we did what we should have done.

RB: I don't mean to get sidetracked here, but in effect, in some respects, we're still dealing with the legacy of that water-right decision in terms of sedimentation of John Redmond Reservoir and the make-up water that goes to help cool Wolf Creek. It's still driving water decisions in the state yet today.

MH: Yes, it is and will far into the future.

RB: As far as we can see, absolutely, yes. Any other water-related natural resource issues? I want to come back to that Wolf Creek thing. Let's go there real quickly. This is not a water issue, but nuclear waste becomes a big issue, particularly low level waste sites. This is quite a while after that.

MH: Yes, it is.

RB: But that issue of siting a low level waste repository in the state still shows up at the time that you're involved—

MH: It showed up when I was Speaker and when I was Governor. We were a member of the compact with Louisiana and Arkansas and Nebraska, and there really isn't any place in Louisiana where you can bury low level because of the water tables and everything. There's very few places because of the geology and everything in Arkansas. So it really came down to Kansas and

Nebraska as having any kind of reasonably safe site. It ultimately came down to Boyd County, Nebraska, which is where ultimately the choice was made that it should be sited there.

RB: But folks were looking at northwestern Kansas. They were looking at not quite the part of the world that you come from, but not far from it because some of the political careers got made based on grassroots opposition to that low level waste site.

MH: That's correct.

RB: I remember particularly Laura McClure up in Osborne County.

MH: Right.

RB: And big public meetings in opposition to that low level site.

MH: And the tragedy of it is is that it's never really been dealt with.

RB: No.

MH: To this day, it's never been dealt with adequately, and it still represents a significant public danger even yet today.

RB: It has not been dealt with either in low or high level ways. That low level waste compact had a real checkered history.

MH: Yes, it did.

RB: But that's a whole another story that really doesn't have much to do with water, but it does drive an awful lot of the environmental movement and water-related movement in Kansas that rose out of that opposition to low level waste.

MH: That's true.

RB: So you go from Speaker to running for Governor. Does water enter into the campaign in any fashion when you do that?

MH: I'd say very little, very little. My opponents either in the primary or the general election didn't make much of an issue of it. I didn't make much of an issue of it either. So I would say that it was a secondary, there wasn't a lot of disagreement among the candidates for that matter on the issues. So water was not a determining factor in any of those campaigns.

RB: It's hard for it to be in the sense that unless there is a really severe drought or some real immediate water-related issue like say water right for Holcomb Power Plant or Wolf Creek—

MH: Right.

RB: Water is always sort of a secondary issue, isn't it?

MH: Well, unfortunately it is or has been.

RB: There's not a lot to be gained by going out and making a big deal out of it in an election because for the most part, the voters are more concerned about shorter term issues.

MH: That's exactly right.

RB: And yet when you become Governor, water does become a big part of where you spend time, a big priority for you.

MH: Right. That's exactly right.

RB: Did you know that going in? When you were campaigning, were you cognizant that was going to be a major effort of yours even if that wasn't getting a lot of conversation on the campaign trail?

MH: I'd say yes. I'd say yes. I knew that it had to be addressed. I knew that. But I knew also that there's no political sense in raising the issue unless somebody raised it, and then you could respond. Sometimes silence is the best approach.

RB: When you say "had to be addressed," what does that translate into once you get into office?

MH: Of course, we had always had laggard water policy. We have always been—we're kind of a stepchild. We don't have eastern water law. We don't have western water law. We've got a hybrid here. We're right in the middle.

RB: We're a transitional state in some senses.

MH: Exactly. So we didn't really know our own identity when it comes to water. These other states, a lot of them were far, far ahead of us because they had identified one form or another of governance, so to speak. We were the stepchild among other states.

I knew that the Water Office—Governor Carlin had established a Water Office, but it was neutered. I mean, it had no money, and it had a very little staff, and that staff probably wasn't the most professional at the time. It was the best we could do. So I knew that if we were going to deal with it, we had to get a Water Office that was professionally staffed and adequately funded.

RB: How did you choose to do that for the Water Office?

MH: Governor Carlin had moved Joe Harkins into the Water Office, but he essentially had just a skeletal crew and no real long-term funding. So I began with a number of others who were concerned about natural resources, including some of the irrigators in southwest Kansas that you speak of and other people beginning to recognize that in fact we've got to fund this, and we've got to bring long-term, adequate resources to this issue so that we could get a professional department, a professional staff, and we can actually begin to advise the governor, the legislature, and even local water management officials, we can advise them on what's the best statewide policy.

In reality, we really never had a statewide policy. So we begin the effort to figure out how we're going to get the money, how we're going to get the resources together to provide for that.

RB: So while in an awful lot of water-related issues, there might be some disagreement between local irrigators and the regulatory community and the environmental community, in this case, if some of the irrigators were supportive of additional funding, why was it so difficult to get that additional funding passed?

MH: Because it called for an increase in taxes.

RB: The same old story.

MH: That's right. Everybody had their own special interest. They were opposed to paying their share. Some of them still don't pay their share today. But our idea was that everybody ought to kick in a little bit at least. And so we gathered the wagons, so to speak, and figured out where you can tax various entities to provide the adequate funding and the general fund, too. We tapped the General Fund.

There was great resistance especially in legislators from eastern Kansas in tapping the General Fund for water. First off, they had plenty of water, and they don't irrigate to any great extent. So they said, "Why are you going to take money from the schools?" or "Why are you going to take money from these other important functions?" to put it into water when they had very little concern about that. So you had to bring that whole thing together, the General Fund dedication plus the increased taxes on fertilizer and sand and gravel and so on in order to make this whole thing work.

RB: In some senses, it's the "Are we one state or not?"

MH: Yes.

RB: If we're one state, then folks in eastern Kansas ought to be willing to bear some burden because they're benefiting by the increased economic activity that's going on in western Kansas and the tax revenue that results from it as a result of water issues out there. So on the one hand, Kansas is a very different state from one end to the other in terms of its water resources,

but you have to try and treat it as one state politically. I always thought that made it really hard to deal with water, just in and of itself.

MH: One of the benefits is that water in Kansas flows from west to east. What happens in the west has a bearing on what ultimately happens in the east, especially for public water supplies and everything because most of them are long the river bottoms. Most of them come either from the river itself or from the alluvium of the river bottoms, and it's all originating in the west and coming to the east. So the real truth is, there's a great synergy, a great, what do I want to say, dependency on each part of the state when water issues—people don't understand that. They just turn on the tap, and they haven't given any thought to where water came from. But that's one of the reasons why we could ultimately get votes from the east and from the west.

RB: And that whole story about Gus Bogina and bringing everybody in together has been sort of a constant theme in all of these interviews. Everybody has had their own perspective on that. Do you have any specific memories related to those few days that you want to pass along?

MH: Of course, I remember it very, very well. I called Gus in his hospital room, and I sent the Highway Patrol after him. I called him, and he said yes, that he would come on a gurney. I remember very clearly what he said after he voted. He said, "Hell, I was a lot more scared driving over here at 110 miles an hour with the Highway Patrol than I ever was in the hospital with my heart bypass."

So sure, of course, I remember it very clearly and all the other steps that led up to it. Remember, we had to get it passed in the House first, and then we had to get—remember, Gus is from the east. He's from Johnson County. So that shows you how we were able to bring people together. We had almost unanimous consent in the west and in the southeast, too, for that matter. So that shows you. Here is a guy who cast the final deciding vote, and he's from Johnson County. It shows you how it's all interwoven.

RB: I want to go back to, you made that comment about rivers flowing from west to east. Some of the governance of the Water Office is based on basins.

MH: Yes.

RB: They have a series of what used to be called Basin Advisory Committees. They have a different name today. But in effect, they were approaching their input on water management, not by political boundary, but by natural resource boundary.

MH: That's correct.

RB: As far as I know, there might be a few exceptions, but that's really one of the first big times when boundaries are determined by a natural resource feature and not a political feature.

MH: They're very unique, and that's the way it should be. It should be based on the watersheds. It took a long time to understand that, of course, because the other things were always determined by political boundaries, so to speak. But water knows no bounds, and it is the watershed that is the basis for the whole thing. So it actually was very farsighted and very wise to begin to understand that we've got to deal with this on a watershed basis. That's the only practical way to be successful.

RB: It's an enlightened approach. John Wesley Powell at the USGS in the late 1800s was trying to use that same philosophy for the entire country. He wasn't successful. But it's real striking to me that that took place in Kansas really pretty early and is still in effect. Now the Groundwater Management Districts are kind of a combination of natural and political boundaries. But those boundaries that the Water Office uses for the most part are basin derived.

MH: Yes, they are, and that's the way it should be. Let's hope it continues in perpetuity.

RB: To me, it's a real strikingly enlightened approach to this process. So any other issues water related, natural resource issues? That water plan funding is a big deal. It becomes really the lifeblood of water funding in the state in a higher level and a sustainable revenue stream for water. Did it turn out the way you thought it was going to?

MH: Well, let me say that it did allow for the first time to really have a professionally trained staff. It really did for the first time allow the expertise to be assembled, which is what we sorely needed. We sorely needed. Now I would say this, too. You never escape politics in water. So even though we've got real good studies now, and we've got professional people who conducted those, but we still overall, it's the overall political climate that determines really water policy.

What the Water Office has done is on a watershed basis, it's allowed us to understand a hell of a lot more than we ever knew before. But you still have to have the political will to make the decisions governing water. So that's still where we're very weak. We've got a good scientific basis. We've got good professional people. But we oftentimes don't have the will, the political will to do what needs to be done, particularly for the future in water.

RB: Yes, and I'm going to come back to that in a minute. Lack of knowledge is not the problem.

MH: No, it isn't.

RB: Lack of information isn't an issue here anymore.

MH: No, it isn't.

RB: You go from being Governor to eventually Assistant Secretary of the Interior, and you're in that Washington, DC environment for how many years?

MH: Two.

RB: Then eventually you come back and get appointed Secretary of Wildlife and Parks. It has become Wildlife and Parks in that period.

MH: No, it became Wildlife and Parks in 1987. It was Kansas Fish and Game. I signed an executive order creating, which John Strickler was the architect of, he's also the first acting Secretary.

RB: Right.

MH: So Wildlife and Parks became the agency it is. It became a cabinet level agency then in 1987. And then I did come back to become the Secretary then.

RB: Just real quickly, a little bit of inside, you surrounded yourself with people like John and Gary Hulett is another example.

MH: Yes.

RB: That's pretty unusual for folks like that, both of them very strong natural resource backgrounds and philosophies, for folks with those kind of scientific backgrounds to be in such visible important positions is pretty unusual.

MH: It's very unusual, and it's very unfortunate that there aren't many more. It's very unfortunate. Governor Graves relied a lot on John Strickler, but unfortunately after that, many of our governors have not relied on the expertise of our university communities and others in natural resources. I was very proud that we were able to do that, and we made some great advancements because we brought in people who were lifetime trained and professionals in natural resource management.

RB: And willing to go do it.

MH: Yes.

RB: In a lot of cases, people in scientific community got into science because they wanted to go do science.

MH: Right.

RB: And if somebody from the Governor's Office calls them, they run for the hills because that's not the world that they know or ever really wanted to be part of.

MH: No. It was very fortunate that John was willing to do that and take a leave of absence from K-State, and that Gary was willing to do that and take a leave of absence from Fort Hays. I had

hoped maybe that I could set a trend where succeeding governors would understand the value of that, but unfortunately for the most part, it hasn't happened.

RB: It doesn't appear to. Those years you spent as Assistant Secretary, when you come back to Kansas then as Secretary of Wildlife and Parks, how did they inform, how does that time in DC and that exposure to the Department of Interior—

MH: Yes.

RB: How does that inform, influence you when you come back here?

MH: Well, to a great extent, to a great extent. The difference is, of course, when you're in Wildlife and Parks, you're looking at one of the fifty states. When you're Assistant Secretary of the Interior, you're looking at all fifty, and you're looking at these issues whether they be wildlife, whether they be public lands, whether they be water, whether they be Native American issues, you look at this, it's a tremendous education and experience because all fifty states are different, and the water laws are seldom identical. It gave me a great exposure to all the huge water issues that we're seeing in California right now and in the Colorado River Basin. It gave me a firsthand look at all of that. It gave me a firsthand look at the issues in Alaska that we're dealing with again right now, whether it's lumbering in the Tongass or whether it's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It was a tremendous education and broadening of my perspective from a state level, one little state with only 1 percent of the nation's population to all fifty states and territories. It was just an incredible expansion of my exposure to natural resource issues.

RB: So you could see what those issues were and how other states were going about trying to address those issues and see what might be pertinent back here.

MH: That's exactly right. Go ahead.

RB: Was there also some advantage to getting to know the federal bureaucracy so that when you came back to Kansas, you know how exactly the Department of Interior operates? Is there interaction there that that was helpful for?

MH: Oh, absolutely because, remember, in Kansas Wildlife and Parks, there's huge funding resources that come from the sale of firearms and ammunition. There's resources that come from the Federal Duck Stamp. There's funding sources. There's new laws that have been passed just recently even to increase dramatically land and water conservation funds, which comes from offshore drilling fees.

It was a great education because then you knew how the system worked. Not only that, you knew the people.

RB: You knew who to call.

MH: Exactly. So you could get a lot more done, knowing that we're not just one little isolated state here. By knowing those people and how those funds flow, you could take advantage of that for Kansas.

RB: When you come back and you're Secretary of Wildlife and Parks, one of the things that you were involved with was the Governor's Subcabinet on Water Related Issues.

MH: Yes.

RB: Talk a little bit about where the source of that idea came from and how that operated.

MH: Yes. The idea came from Governor Sebelius. She was very determined that there must be coordination and communication among state agencies and that it's often described, each state agency is a silo in and of itself with very little relationship of knowledge about what was happening next door. Well, issues like water, for example, they cut across. They cut across everything. So she turned to me and said, "I want to form a subcabinet on water and natural resources, and I want you to chair it, and I want you to bring all these water-related agencies together, and I want you to meet at least once every two weeks, if not more often so that we've got coordination among these agencies." That's the Water Office. In those days, that was the Conservation Commission. That was the Department of Agriculture. It was the veterinary, animal health people. It was Wildlife and Parks. It was a number of agencies, and it was very, very helpful because we could find out who was permitting something over here and how many gallons that permit is going to allow for and what impact that's going to have on endangered species or public water supplies or whatever. It was an ingenious idea, and Governor Sebelius deserves the credit for it.

RB: When it comes to water, there are a whole bunch of those silos, not just the big ones that you've named.

MH: That's exactly right.

RB: There are twenty, twenty-five that are state agencies. We're sitting in one of them right now.

MH: Right.

RB: It isn't that they don't want to work together, but there is a lot of time no mechanism to do that.

MH: That's right.

RB: Even those agencies like Survey that weren't part of the Subcabinet would show up there when there was an issue related to them. That struck me as really a groundbreaking, barrier-breaking kind of thing to do, and yet it goes away.

MH: Yes. It does because the succeeding administrations didn't see the value of it, I guess, or weren't concerned about it. Maybe we haven't had anybody in the Governor's Office who thought that much about natural resources, and two is we might not have had—we just might not have had the right people or the synergy to make that happen. We did make it happen, and for eight years, it was very successful and led to a lot of coordination on the development of public policy. It actually ought to be recognized in statute. It ought to be placed permanently in state government because it is of such value.

But what's happened is, things have gotten further apart. The Ag Department has now moved to Manhattan. They're no longer in Topeka. So you've got the silos even grow greater and further apart, and that's not a good thing when you're trying to develop overall public policy.

RB: In the very first one of these interviews, we talked to Joe Harkins right here, and Joe talked about the arc of interest in water as an issue. Joe traced really, I would say probably its apogee to when you were governor and the Water Plan funding and then talked about what has been sort of a steady, downhill slide. The Water Subcabinet might be some opposition to that slide, but one way that that slide is shown is in funding for the Water Plan, which is today significantly less than what it was meant to have been, right?

MH: That's correct.

RB: Is that lack of funding on the Water Plan side a reflection of that downward arc that Joe identified? Do you think that arc is accurate? Let's start with that and then say is that funding an example of it?

MH: Yes, I do definitely think it's accurate. I think it's a direct reflection of who we elect to public office. If you go to the legislature today, you don't find leaders in natural resources. You don't find leaders in water policy. It's a direct reflection of who we have put into public office. So until that is reversed or until that's corrected, unfortunately I think that decline is going to continue.

RB: That elections have consequences. Is that decline in terms of funding for the Water Plan, is that personally disappointing to you?

MH: Sure it is. Of course. There is no single element more important than water. It binds us all. It's important to all life, not just the people, but the whole state. Everything living is dependent upon water, and if we don't have it in sufficient quantity and quality, the quality of life deteriorates. And I see problems with public water supplies every day. I see declining aquifers. I see drying up of the streams. It's continuing, and there doesn't seem to be the kind of leadership or emphasis on it that is needed for the better future of Kansas.

RB: It's always felt to me like people in the water community have an easy time having meetings and talking about the issue, but in terms of attracting funding to actually deal with water-related issue, that's been much more difficult.

MH: That's correct.

RB: Why is that? Why is it so hard to see the political advantages there? Is it because of the long-term nature of water problems? I mean, the Ogallala is not a tomorrow crisis. It's a longer term issue.

MH: Right.

RB: Is that part of the reason water has so much trouble attracting money?

MH: Well, it's part of the reason. The other reason is that the voters and the general public take water for granted. They don't ever think about it unless it doesn't run out of the tap. They don't ever think about it unless there's a flood in their backyard, and then, oh, my god, why hasn't somebody done something? Well, there's been some of us who have been trying to do something for a lifetime in regard to these issues. The public, there really is a—you have to do this in spite of public support in all honesty. You have to increase taxes on fertilizers in spite of the fact that farmers are going to be opposed to that because their whole livelihood is based on water. They don't understand that sometimes, but it's true.

So you just have to have the political courage to make some of these decisions. That's what we haven't had lately in spite of either public resistance or lack of concern.

RB: Do you think much about climate change in relation to water?

MH: Absolutely. Climate change is having a huge impact. In Kansas, somewhat we're better off than a lot of people when climate change comes because the coastal areas are going to be impacted first.

RB: And already are.

MH: And then the northern areas, the glacial areas, they're going to be impacted tremendously. Kansas, we're kind of in the middle. So while climate change is happening, and it's kind of a subtle thing, while it's happening, a lot of other people are having great catastrophes before we do, but it's coming here. It's coming here. But we'll be some of the last to be affected just because of our geographical location.

RB: Some of the drought that's been really long term in the West, it kind of creeps into western Kansas.

MH: Yes, it does.

RB: But it doesn't really get, it certainly didn't get very far east in this process.

MH: Right.

RB: I have one last question for you that you're probably not going to see coming, but I just thought of it as we're having this conversation. Do you like politics?

MH: Yes. I do.

RB: Why?

MH: Because that's where the decisions are made. I've always just had a feel, a respect so to speak, for politics because I know that's where the real decisions are made. So that's why I always wanted to be part of it. It's still true to this day. A lot of what we see is disheartening. A lot of it is disheartening. The country right now is divided more than it's ever been divided maybe since the Civil War. But the real decisions are going to be made in politics. So if you want to influence those or if you want to be part of those or even if you want to understand those, you'd better be interested in politics.

RB: Just yesterday somebody was talking with me about climate change and what an individual could do if they were concerned about climate change. You can make incremental changes in your lifestyle. I would assume you'd probably argue that a real important component would be political activity, too.

MH: It absolutely is. These political decisions are the one avenue that we have on a global scale or on a nationwide scale to actually deal with climate change. It's going to have to be dealt with on certainly a nationwide, but even more than that, a global basis, or it will continue, and it will continue to accelerate.

RB: In some respects, your career is sort of an expression of that. Instead of going off and becoming a park ranger in XYZ Park, you decided to go into politics because I assume you felt like you could have—and I've heard you talk about this before, have more influence as a result of that.

MH: That's right. I've told this story many times, Rex. Some people say how did a guy in wildlife conservation get into politics. After I got my degree, I was drafted. I went to Vietnam. I was in the Army and I was in Vietnam, and that whole process took two or three years. When I came back, I went and visited a number of the guys who graduated with me in wildlife management. They were in government jobs by that time for the state or federal or whatever.

I said, "How do you like it?" I was trying to figure out what to do, to go back to graduate school or what I should do. They said, "Well, we love our job, but the real decisions are made by some

damn politician.” And the light came on. To me that said, “Hey, if you want to influence natural resources, you'd better get into politics,” and I did.

RB: And as you look back at the legacy of those various forms of service you'd had, is there any single thing that you would point to and say, “That's the thing I'm proudest or happiest that we got accomplished”? Would that Water Plan funding be it? Would it be something else?

MH: That would be one of the great—it's a mosaic. It's a portfolio that was over forty years of public service. Each of these are a little piece. Each of them are a little piece, but the Water Plan funding was one of the hallmarks. It was one of the great pieces, and the legacy still continues, but it's diminished, and that's a real shame.

RB: Well, the legacy may be no single event like that as much as it is making clear that water and natural resource issues are priority.

MH: Right.

RB: Very few politicians in this state stand up and have said that.

MH: That's right. It needs to change before the things collapse, before more streams dry up, before more impact of climate change, before more catastrophic floods, before more reservoirs are filled with sediment. You can go down the list. Somebody needs to stand up and say, “This needs to be a priority.”

RB: Are you optimistic or pessimistic that that's going to happen?

MH: I think that's unknown. I'm not pessimistic about it. If you looked at the recent track record, you'd be pessimistic. But Kansans have a great sense when these issues arise, a great sense of coming to the fore and solving them. So I haven't given up hope.

RB: They sometimes come up with Kansas-related solutions, too, that involve conversation of sort of coming together and maybe that will be our saving grace in this process.

MH: Let's hope so.

RB: I sure appreciate you doing this today, Mike. I know you've been down some of this territory and plowed some of it before, but I think what you did in water and the legacy we just talked about is really important. I think having your first-person account of it for people to see down the road is really important, too. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this and taking the time today.

MH: Thank you, Rex.

[End of File]