Oral History
of
Steve Thompson

Interviewed by:
George Mendel Stewart

Steve Thompson (L) and George Mendel Stewart (R)

Oral History Program
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

Oral History
of
Steve Thompson

Interviewed by:
George Mendel Stewart

Name: Steve Thompson

Date of Interview: June 11, 2018

Location of Interview: Granite Bay, California

Interviewer: George Mendel Stewart

Years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1978 to August 2, 2008; (1976-1978 with BLM for 32 years of Federal service)

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: wildlife biologist at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon; wildlife biologist at Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, Washington; wildlife biologist at Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge, Nevada; manager at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas; part of former GARD program for Florida and Caribbean; Acting CNO Manager, California; CNO Manager/Regional Director, California (Region 8).

Most Important Projects: Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, land acquisition to form San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Colleagues and Mentors: Carroll Littlefield, Joe Mazzoni, John Doebel, Willard Hesselbart, Ken McDermott, Mike Spear, Mollie Beattie, Jim Kurth, Rob Shallenberger, Dan Ashe, Jamie Clark, Ken Edwards, Sam Hamilton, Dale Hall, Cindy Dohner, Mitch King, Larry Mallard, Toni Deery, Gale Norton, John Cornely. Non-FWS include Jerry Lewis, Barbara Ransom, Dirk Kempthorne, Cargill, Dianne Feinstein, Bill Britt, Peregrine Fund, King Ranch, Bass Family, Harry Cullen.

Most Important Issues: Water controversies, contaminant problems, conflict between farmers, tribes, and endangered species at Stillwater NWR; endangered species, particular aplomado falcons and ocelots on Laguna Atascosa NWR; working on relations with farmers, cattlemen, tribes, and environmental groups.

ABSTRACT: Mr. Thompson began his government career with the BLM before applying for Fish and Wildlife Service job. He began his career as a wildlife biologist, eventually becoming Regional Director for Region 8. He worked on important projects such as the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, and worked with Cargill and Senator Feinstein to acquire the land to establish San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. He would receive the Manager of the Year award while he was stationed at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. He talks about being part of the community and working with them and asking for their help instead of telling them what was going to be done. Mr. Thompson loved his time with the Fish and Wildlife Service and feels it is a great organization with wonderful employees.

Oral History Program
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

Oral History
of
Steve Thompson

Interviewed by:
George Mendel Stewart

Mendel: I'm interviewing Steve Thompson, who used to be the Regional Director, he retired as a Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from Region 8; first Regional Director in Region 8. The date is June 11, 2018. And I'd start out by saying, where were you born?

Steve: Born in Hawthorne, Nevada. My dad was in the Navy in Fallon, Nevada and so he married into some farming families there with my mom and aunt and other people like that, so the Gettos are a famous family out of Fallon, Nevada.

Mendel: The Getto family?

Steve: Born in Nevada. Yeah.

Mendel: So you were born in Nevada, where were you raised though?

Steve: We lived in Nevada and Lake Tahoe and then moved to Campbell, California and then when up through there—

Mendel: How old were you?

Steve: Through grade school and things like that, and then to my freshmen year in high school then we moved to Sacramento, California. So ended up going to high school here and then eventually up to Humboldt State after that.

Mendel: To Humboldt. And you graduate from there. Why go to school there?

Steve: You know it's funny when you spend a lot of time on farms as a kid, which I did in the summertime; we used to always hay and helped my dairy farm uncle out. I got to where I enjoyed nature and outside. And so I looked at my dad, had a whole sale glass company and doing kind of in the city work and I decided I wanted to work in the country and work with wildlife. So Humboldt had a great wildlife program, and took biology classes at American River Junior College here for a couple years. And got through that part and got the basics done, and then I really wanted to be in wildlife and I wanted to be out in the middle of nowhere. So I went to Humboldt to see if I could find that.

Mendel: But that was from the farming influence?

Steve: Yeah, it's from, as a young boy my uncle getting up really early and going out and cutting hay, feeding the cows every day, the calves, it's sunrise; he a had a 160 acres in the middle of nowhere and I just loved being out on that farm. I just, I fell in love with it, but I didn't think I could farm; I didn't think there was any way to do that. So I thought well the next best thing would be some sort of wildlife degree that would put you out in the country someplace and enjoy it. I wanted to learn a lot more about all of the wildlife too, so the farm started me out on that.

Mendel: So what year did you graduate from Humboldt?

Steve: I graduated in the spring of 1976.

Mendel: What'd you do from there? What happened, how'd you get your job?

Steve: I was coming back to get my master's degree on a creek that was off the Redding River up there and look at, well the difference between a grazed creek and one that didn't have cows on it. So I had all signed up and ready to do that and I was going go to Boise, Idaho for BLM and work there and it turned out that I ended up getting a permanent job in Burns, Oregon, went from a GS 5 to a GS 4; I took a demotion in pay.

Mendel: But that was with BLM?

Steve: With BLM, yeah, I started with BLM. But I didn't go back to get my master's because I really wanted to work, I wanted to work outside. And then mostly these BLM jobs I had were both in Boise and in Burns were all helicopter riding to look at the condition of the range land on millions of acres and try to figure out if there was overgrazed or under graze and how many cows you could have. I learned a lot about wildlife there too, about elk and deer and all kinds of raptors; the birds of prey we found with helicopters were just fascinating. I loved those, even though I was paid nothing. We qualified for our first house in Burns, Oregon with a poverty loan because we were under 8,000 a year for a total salary; $180 a month for a house payment and working for the government full time.

Mendel: So you were already married to Renee?

Steve: Yeah, Renee and I met in high school and got married right before I went to Humboldt; we were 20.

Mendel: Wow!

Steve: We've been married a long time, been a great; she's been great. She'd straightened me out every time I get goofed up; she's the one straightening me out.

Mendel: That's what she's supposed to do.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: So you, Humboldt then BLM and more than one job at BLM, two?

Steve: The first job was actually in Boise, Idaho as a GS 5 temporary job while I was going to get my master's for six months, and then a permanent job came up, it was a GS 4; it was only, I think it's like 52 weeks out of the year or something it was a temporary/permanent and then they converted that. I finally got a GS 7, I got moved up.

Mendel: Yeah, I saw, so you had that 5 as a temporary job but you took the 4 for the permanent.

Steve: Right. That was kind of weird, going downhill.

Mendel: You're not the only one who had done that.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: And then, then how did you get into Fish and Wildlife?

Steve: I was in Burns, Oregon and we did a lot of; had two million acres in my allotment that I had to take care of and it surrounded Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. And they had a GS 5/7/9 biologist job that came open, I applied for it and got it, which is really lucky because they had candidates from all over the country. But I knew the manager just briefly from playing basketball with him in a league, a summer league so got to talk to him a little bit and he wanted somebody local.

Mendel: And that was a biologist job?

Steve: Yes.

Mendel: But there was like a decision point in there, I think, where you had to, you could either go with learning from the manager or learning from the wildlife biologist; you were a lower level wildlife biologist, there was another wildlife biologist there. So you had kind of a choice, a decision point there.

Steve: It, you know starts out, there were several biologist on the station and a long, long history of biology from 1908. So to me it was real exciting to learn more about biology. And then if you run a large refuge like that, 180,000 acres at the time, you need the managers and people and pretty quick you've got to go hire three or four biologists, so you have to decide if you want to go into just strictly biology and stay there or just doing some management. My father-in-law told me that, "you're just going to be a wimpy biologist and you're never going to turn to anything until you get into management." He owned a couple drug stores here in Sacramento, but he was really discouraging me from just taking biology, that was a minor thing to him. Kind of a side bar issue, [unintelligible@00:07:05] that wasn't going to help me raise my children or my wife or make enough money to live off of, I'd be over here stuck in a corner.

Mendel: Didn't you tell me about that, that kind of upset you?

Steve: Oh I was really upset. I told him that I want to be the best biologist on the planet, I want to learn; I learned stuff in school but as soon as you get to Malheur and you put on a pair of waders and you go find some crane nests and some golden eagle nests and Ferruginous hawk nests and Swainson's and duck nests and shore birds, and I was just learning that first couple years so much and he tells me, "That's kind of a waste of time. What you need to learn about is management, how to make money, and how to move money and how to deal with people." So I got really upset and was upset for a couple of years, and would never even consider doing management because I was still trying to be a better biologist and prove myself.

Mendel: There was a, I guess he was an ornithologist, there named Littlefield.

Steve: Yeah, Carroll Littlefield was a PhD student who missed four hours of being a PhD and was the smartest field naturalist I've ever seen; he could memorize everything. And he would go find 50 crane

nests at the beginning of the year, in March we'd go off and find those. So I'd find Canada goose nests, crane nests, we did golden eagles, but he had about ten years of experience and he knew everything biological. I've never seen a guy that bright before, he's just still an amazing biologist. And he could talk about it and he could write it up so, actually I got to publish a couple papers with him that were just data that we collected out in the field, and it got published and that improved my scientific reputation, but it was really based on him; without him I would have never got that written up or published, so we combined our work together.

Mendel: You published several papers, was that all after school or while you're in school?

Steve: It was pretty much, you had to do it after hours, they didn't like you; you'd get two or three weeks off a year so they'd expect you to spend your time, in the old days, of writing your paper then, not at work. And your work was already really busy because we had a short staff and we did 12 different surveys, for instance on our, every year survey and they took all the time you could ever put together and a lot of hours and worth a lot of long days. Malheur's a long ways from town and you drive from one end to the other, it took you all day to get back and forth, so a lot of extra hours; it hurts your family and not very good for the family part, but really good as a biologist, we learned a lot that way.

Mendel: But you didn't have kids then.

Steve: No, we didn't have any kids to start with there, and Renee was working her job so I just would leave at 5 o'clock in the morning and get back 6, 7, 8, 9 o'clock at night and I loved it. I loved, we'd go find a golden eagle nest and repel in and band them or look at young and for me that was just, it was unbelievable. I just was learning things everyday about something new. And Carroll used to belay me down on a rope cause he get scared to go over the cliff and we didn't have anybody to train us, so I had to take a little handbook and read the book and tie the knots, and then he'd about dropped me half the time. You would never do that now-a-days, it'd just be illegal as hell and wrong and unsafe.

Mendel: That is so true.

Steve: I had the books, I was reading a book as I'm going over the cliff and then looking at my knot to make sure my knot's good.

Mendel: It's not like that today.

Steve: No.

Mendel: You have to have training to start a truck.

Steve: You do it a lot better, I mean that was unsafe but we never had an accident but we were lucky. Going to 15 nests a year and we had all kinds of tree nests too and it was just a lot of really scary, interesting stuff.

Mendel: [Unintelligible@00:10:58] golden eagles.

Steve: Yeah, if you were a young person it was so exciting to just get a chance to learn that stuff.

Mendel: How big is Malheur, has it changed over time?

Steve: It was 180,000 acres, I think they're a little bigger now, probably about 200 or 210 and of course they had their real interesting last event where all the bad guys took it over. We actually had, would go with all of the cattlemen and a bus ride at least twice a year and I'd drive the bus. And we'd stop on stops and we'd talk about how they would see the world and what they were worried about and losing cows; went from 120,000 animal unit months AUM's[unintelligible@00:11:36] down to 48,000 while I was there. So a lot of people got kicked off the refuge, and they were all families and they'd been at it for two, or three, or four generations. And it was actually interesting working; and some of the same guys just got arrested and sent to jail were people on our bus. And we'd sit down next to them, we'd have lunch, we'd stop, we'd talk and try to really listen to them about what the problems were. A guy named Joe Mazzoni was the refuge manager and he was good about doing hard, controversial stuff, but really listening to the other side. "I've got to kick you off. I've got to reduce the number of cows on this refuge, but let me learn more about how we're doing it, what we're doing right, what we're doing wrong." So those were good sessions.

Mendel: Did that lead to, do you think those kinds of things led to where we are today with relationships there?

Steve: I think the lack of, as each generation changes, the refuge managers, I think, and the biologists came in smarter as far as their PhD's and master's and laptops and computers, but lot less experience with somebody that's got 40 years running their cows out there, everyday their out in the field. We lost a lot, in my opinion, the Fish and Wildlife Service, lost a lot of sort of hands on, getting muddy, dirty, field experience; they point to their laptop and point that out to you and tell you the answer. But you find a crane's nest and the next day you get wind or thunderstorm or rain, or there's a whole bunch of natural, nature things that go on in life that were, I think we lost track of. And so then we became less honorable spokespeople to the ranchers, they don't believe what you're talking about because they don't think you know what you're talking about. And our biologists were so smart that they didn't believe somebody had been there 40 years but never published a paper, never wrote it up, but just talking about it with a cup of coffee in their hand and probably seen a 100 nests in their life and knew what they did pretty well but it wasn't written up, it wasn't published. And a lot of things were different about predators too, before I got in there, before the '70's, they had a lot of coyote control and raven control and then it came in as sort of an anti-control part. And the only thing we could really do with the ravens was do studies on them, PhD's studies and control them. When you could see a huge difference in like crane nests if you took the ravens out of the picture and cranes always did better on eggs; did a lot better.

So that kind of stuff was hard to learn and I think a lot of the newer people are against predator

control and just afraid of it, they don't really have any experience with it.

Mendel: What about communication? Seems like I'm hearing you say the communication lately; they may know the biology but they didn't have the ability or didn't take the time to communicate well with the locals.

Steve: Yeah, I think biologists, I'm independent too, I think you tend to be to yourself and learning all about the biology and that's already a lot of hours. But I actually think the best communication I had was four times a year I had to go speak to the Lion's Club for instance, and I had to talk about Malheur and what was going on. I was on a softball team in town that was mostly timber people and ranchers and farmers, and so just playing softball and doing that. But actually talking to somebody about something totally different and getting to know their kids at school, and their families, and just socially not just being strictly a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist but a person that's in the community that they can respect and get to know. And that's another big problem I think in government agencies, if you don't get to know the community and listen very carefully, and it has to be kind of away from work, so we were more productive at that I think. And that was something I really enjoyed and I loved playing softball and got to know a bunch of guys and they were big important people, young people of the town about my age but they were coming up, and so yeah I think communication in the right way, not giving them a lecture or telling them what to do but listening and asking for help is a totally different type of communication that we do a lot now-a-days.

Mendel: How many years total were you at Malheur?

Steve: I think I was there about five and half years. And went from Malheur to Nisqually Refuge and did seabirds up there. And so I had the islands up there and a lot of, we had waterfowl counts; I'd done waterfowl counts all my life at Malheur for about 150 hours a year. So when I got up to Puget Sound, they had me fly from the Canadian border all the way down to Olympia and then all the way back up to the mouth of the Puget Sound, all the way up there. So there's like fifteen hours of flying for two or three days, count all the birds in the whole Puget Sound. So that was amazing for me too, to learn where the brant were, what about ducks, what about geese, where were people, boats, flying through Seattle and looking at the big city there and had oil spills and all kinds of interesting; a lot of helicopter time and a lot of plane time. So you'd put 100, 150 hours in on an airplane, it really opens up a big broad, bigger picture that you couldn't see from your desk are a little small Zodiac. So up there too we had Zodiacs dong all the San Juan Islands and counting birds up there. I got in with communicating with a couple old guys. One guy who'd been there was a logger and he had a 36 foot boat and all he wanted to do was drive through the island, so would take volunteer, a researcher guy and myself and he'd take us for a whole week in that boat and just go to all these islands.

Mendel: Just as a volunteer?

Steve: He just wanted to volunteer, but he was a really rich, very influential logger and so learning more about wildlife for him, sitting there at the table, the boat rocking back and forth, was something he didn't pass on to tell the loggers; if you care about spotted owls, here's what these guys are talking about it. If you care about cormorants or tufted puffins, here's the things we've got to try figure out, understand, and do something about it. So there's another communication thing about using volunteers and other people that are influential.

Mendel: I'm curious about the aircraft, was that through contracts or was that with Migratory Bird pilots?

Steve: Back in those days it was all contract, it was all; they had, in Burns, Oregon it was the guy that owned the Burns Car station, he could barely fly. We had all kinds of, almost serious accidents with him because he only had the bare minimum hours in. And Olympia was much bigger, they have float planes only so you had to fly on a float plane with all the water proof gear on in case you went the water so it's hotter than heck in the plane, but the water craft thing was nice because you could fly for two to three hours and land and go look at some seals or go get us something to eat, so that was pretty cool, but all contract stuff. And they were big contracts, they usually had a lot of government planes, like two or three or five or ten. So that made a big difference too because you'd pick out the plane and then bigger one, Olympia, you got a chance to pick out a better pilot too, that was more critical for me it seemed like, getting somebody who actually knew how to fly; like to go to Tacoma, do you go under that bridge or over the bridge. I always wanted to go over it and the guy would go, "No, no we can go under it." And we'd go (makes a noise).

Mendel: Underneath the bridge?

Steve: Yeah. It was exciting and fun and scary but once you got kind of used to it. And then when I got to Nevada, flying down there so much I actually took the pilot's licensing program where you could learn to; took 40 hours of flying, I didn't get my license but I was comfortable then where I could land a plane and take off and fly myself.

Mendel: Pinch hitter course.

Steve: Pinch hitter, took 40 hours of that. And was a really good, but that was paid for by Fish and Wildlife Service and I think back to the early rope/rock experience I told you and then longer in the career, ten, fifteen, twenty years into it people started getting more conscious of safety. So teaching you how to fly was really good in a 180 airplane with just a single engine, a single pilot; if something goes wrong you're in trouble. That was really good. I loved flying. I get a little airsick every once in a while, but it was worth it. You learn so much, to me it's giving you the bigger picture, which is hard to get in your office or in a truck or in a boat. And when you fly, you get to see so many more things, and understand the water management so much better for me. It was easier to see where the water was coming from and where it got hung up and where farming was and where we were as marshes at the end of all that. Planes are, that's a

big asset to building you knowledge I think. Very good.

Mendel: How long were you at Nisqually?

Steve: Nisqually, was there about three years. And that was an interesting, a lot of politics and a lot of Seattle, a lot of seabirds and it was more wintering birds I learned about there. The Peregrines are really common and I've never really studied Peregrines before, but I'd go out to Protection Island and have to monitor four or five of the bald eagles nesting there too, and we had all kinds of seabirds there. And lots of problems with people, the seabird nesting islands there's too many boaters and too many people want to go out and land on the island and go do something. So you had to figure out how to talk to coast guard, the public, the boating yachting clubs, and try to explain why wildlife was there and why it was important and when you go and just take your kids there for a wonderment you're going to scare things or make them nervous or things like that.

Mendel: But your job was wildlife biologist?.

Steve: Yeah, I was a GS 11 wildlife biologist. I was going from Malheur, I got up to a 9 and then they had a 11 biologist up there. And a guy named John Doebel was really, I had met him before, and he was a refuge supervisor for all the refuges and he was telling me what a great biology job it was and how much you learn and how great, and so he talked me into it. So we left Burns, and went to Olympia. And I had two girls too at that time, so it seemed like maybe a little bigger city might a little better place to raise your daughters and do that.

Mendel: So they were young, they were young when you went from Burns to Nisqually.

Steve: Yeah, they were just barely in kindergarten.

Mendel: You had your girls in Burns?

Steve: Yeah, they were born actually Burns and Hines were right there, we lived in Hines, but yeah they were born in Burns at the hospital there. A little tiny hospital, you walk in, knock on the door and there's maybe a doctor there, and if they have to go get the doctor, so it was maybe one birth a week in Burns and Hines, it was pretty tiny.

Mendel: Who did you work with at Nisqually, John Doebel was the manager?.

Steve: Hesselbart was the refuge manager and he was an interesting guy, and really fascinating with things, but Doebel lived, he lived in Portland to work in Portland but he lived right down the street from the refuge.

Mendel: He was a refuge supervisor but he lived close by?

Steve: And he was one of the most exceptional leaders on tough issues but also with personnel. And so the refuge managers were a little nervous with him, they would be very cautious and try to ask him first what to do. And he used to call me on the phone and

all the time and tell me, "Now I want you to do this, this, this, this," try to get me all straightened out. "You go tell Bill, I've got to go do all this." I said, "But Bill's my boss and why am I, you're the refuge supervisor, you want me to go tell him certain things and how to do them, and everything else." And he goes. "Yeah, get in there right now." So it worked out fine. We actually, all three of us ended up getting along and respected that. But he was, Doebel was amazing; he was one of the brightest, smartest, good at politics, good at people, really good at biology too, so he was a great, great refuge supervisor; one of the best I've ever seen.

Mendel: That's really cool. Who else was at Nisqually?

Steve: I don't remember much of the other people there. We had a whole bunch, we had just a small staff like five or six people and been a long time ago so I can't remember the names for it. But good people there, we had a good outdoor recreation planner, and we had some other people, mostly maintenance people because the islands and everything were so separated and so far apart. And Nisqually had a lot of public use but not a very big staff, we only had like probably six or seven people at the whole refuge there.

Mendel: When did you meet Ken McDermott?

Steve: Oh, Ken McDermott I hired there and he was at Evergreen College and a bartender. And so I had to interview him at the bar, which I thought was one of the most interesting things I've did in my life. But I found a guy that was a, Evergreen is an interesting college, it's not grades, it's more evaluations in a different way of just talking to people and walking through it. And Ken McDermott was fantastic and picked him up to out and study Protection Island, we had to do all these nesting surveys, so he was out there all by himself camped in a little tent for six months. Came back with a great report, so he could write it up, he was a great writer, a good student studying stuff and learned all kinds of stuff, and he was just a really super, outstanding guy. They end up hiring him for Deputy Regional Director and a couple other things we ran into each other in Washington D.C. and other places like that. But he was an exceptional; you meet those people, that's what amazing, I think, is a good leader recognizes fantastic people. And then you give them a lot of responsibilities and roles and let them work really hard, but you have to trust them and you have learn a little bit too as they're coming along, boy the best hire, one of the best hires I ever did.

Mendel: So while you were at Nisqually, you were a supervisor, was it a GS 11 supervisor wildlife biologist?

Steve: Yeah, except I had nobody underneath me except when we'd hire students or we'd hire things like that. So it's just a GS 11 but I didn't supervise anybody else. And then I hired—

Mendel: And Ken was one of those people though?

Steve: Ken was one of the people we hired for projects; I supervised him for six months. And then he went to Hawaii from there and turned out great. So he's, but he was a smart student that also was a

bartender which I found interesting because he had practical experience with people. He could go do something controversial and come back and go talk to anybody about it and they would listen to him because it's like your bartender's talking I better pay attention, so he was really sharp that way. And he was a great basketball player, he would always take me and whoop me at practicing basketball or something like that and I always thought that was kind of weird because that's when he totally lost his, "You're my boss, I respect you, on his off hours, "I'm going to kick your ass." So he always did, he was really good. He was a great guy.

Mendel: But only three years at Nisqually?

Steve: Yeah, three years there.

Mendel: And where did you go after Nisqually?

Steve: Let's see, after Nisqually we went to Stillwater. I had some family issues in Fallon, Nevada where my grandfather died and my grandmother needed help and that was a small station too. And Fallon, Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge had all kinds of water controversies and contaminants with arsenic and boron and all kinds of stuff, and only had, maybe five people at that station. There was a GS 11 refuge manager and myself and another person and then maintenance people. But we had the most controversial right from the Secretary of Interior and the Deputy Secretary of Interior was from Nevada, Our Deputy Director of Fish and Wildlife Service was from Nevada. And so they had a big problem with contaminants and the conflict between farmers, the tribes, and endangered species. So our little refuge was sitting at the end of the dump with all the water in a big place where controversy was just red hot there. And a lot of ES, endangered species people were trying to dry up the refuge, so that was interesting; even within Fish and Wildlife Service we had fights. And the State Fish and Game Department was really trying to save the refuge and not get so much involved in the endangered species part.

Mendel: Because of concerns with contaminants?

Steve: Yeah, there was a lot of drain water, once the farmers used up all the water, and half the water they got from the Truckee River on a spill that was dug across there, so they had the Lahontan Reservoir for the Carson River, and the Truckee River they took a third to half the water. And then by the time it got all the way down to the bottom of the system, which was the refuge, a lot of contaminants, a lot of problems there. And we had dead birds and birds with funny bills that were growing all rolled up in circles and like the pelicans and stuff like that. Yeah, it was a big problem. And the only way to solve it was to negotiate a solution, so the Secretary had us write up an eighty page report to summarize our needs and then I had to fly back to, I was a GS 11 never been to Washington D.C. and here I'm sitting with the Secretary, and the Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner, and a bunch of other people all yelling at me and I'm trying to figure out—

Mendel: But again as a wildlife biologist?.

Steve: Yeah, I was just GS 11 wildlife biologist, but the manager didn't want to do the management part. He said, "No, you better go back there." So I learned a lot about management, compromise, understanding the rules and laws we that we had. I really didn't know that much about all the rules and regulations and why water was a problem, why endangered species took such a high precedent if that was a problem. And all of our solicitors and attorneys and the Director and Deputy Director; I got to meet a whole bunch of, be back there for a week at a time in Washington D.C. and just get run through circles trying to figure all that stuff out. That was a huge, huge change for me being out, being the best biologist I could be to all a sudden now you're really involved in politics. And you're really involved in big decisions that are going; that refuge is going to be around or not was tied to that water quality and you had to show that maybe it could happen or maybe not.

Mendel: When you went back to D.C. with the Secretary, what was it you; there was a report, was there an outcome?

Steve: Actually they were going to court and our report, we won the day with because we said that here's all the migratory birds, here's all the values, that they all tried to run down and said was nothing, But luckily that refuge has been around for a long time so I took all the data; we actually hired ten people from all the research people and everything came in to Fallon for a week as we wrote the report up. So we actually won the day, we actually got to convince people in the Secretary's office that if the Bureau of Reclamation was right and they cut all the water off to us, the impacts to migratory birds were a big deal and a problem, and they really couldn't fix that. So we needed to find a way to deal with the contaminants, which was actually reducing the grazing and the farming a little bit, and trying to keep their water fresher and not so much contaminant water.

Mendel: Is that something that you had a big role in or you did?

Steve: No, we had a huge role in that because the wildlife part of it was the driver for a decision, so if you could take; one thing we found out is sometimes the scientists will say, zero, and if you went out there and studied the birds and we did all kinds of nesting surveys and studies with the research people that maybe we could take half of that and maybe we could still get enough water out there do the farming, but we added a little more fresh water and maybe it had to be during the nesting season. So we were able to tweak the Bureau of Reclamation/negative stuff from the researchers and come back with solutions that actually worked. And it helped wildlife, and they allowed farmers to still stay in business, and the tribes were a little bit upset because they didn't know either, but they wanted all the water. But we had a compromise there too, so we had to spend a lot of time with the tribes there, went farming, went camping excuse me, over at Pyramid Lake and would meet the tribal chairman over there and camp with him for a day or two. And it's really hard trying to understand, they have such a turnover in their politics that he wanted to know the real answers but he was a very religious guy. And so to him nature was more religious than it

was really maybe to some other people, so he thought a lot about all the migratory birds and everything else and he wanted to help them too; it wasn't just his fish. So that was a good, you talk about communication, that was really intense, supposed to meet him like Tuesday at noon on the first day and he shows up Wednesday at noon. And I said, "I thought we were going to be Tuesday." He said, "I don't know, Tuesday, Wednesday." So his schedule, being tribal chairman and in the tribe was just totally different. He was not on a tight schedule like I was. And so he shows up, and I was still there, I had other work to do, but I stop the work I was doing and spent the time with him, which in the old days I might have just been biologist I might have just said, "Well, you're late so I'm a biologist, I've got to get home." But I spent a lot of time with him and that helped us get at good—

Mendel: Sounds like you recognized the importance of being flexible and understanding them from their perspective. I think a lot of people forget that.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: A lot of people forget that.

Steve: I think wildlife people can recognize a problem in the old days, the trick or the challenge was to be able to communicate that problem into solutions that are sustainable, and then who are the different kinds of people and who needs to help you get that solution in place. And it's usually the one that's the most upset, and so you have to be calm and you have to listen and you can't get mad at them because they're really upset and really angry and really fired up, but you have to try to figure out is there a solution there or something that we could all do and help each other. And that took me a long time to learn, that was I think going from strictly biologist to all a sudden a communicator and trying to solve problems; I got lucky and had some good experience with people and I had a good attitude about it. And you've got to keep a good sense of humor, you've got to laugh and have a few jokes and that's probably just as important.

Mendel: To be able to connect with people, for no other reason [unintelligible@00:35:54, talking at same time].

Steve: [Unintelligible@00:35:54 talking at same time]. Everybody's different, and different cultures, like the tribes and farmers, completely different backgrounds, and so you have to understand that and when they talk to you, you have to understand where they're coming from. So that's why I think farming as a kid really helped me understand more where my uncle was as a farmer and what moved him and what motivated him and what was important to him. And that helped me talk to some of these other groups because I had to understand that somebody was different than me growing up in the city in Sacramento in Campbell, California, that's a different world; people talk differently there and think differently and worry about different things, and so I think that's part of it too.

Mendel: Sounds like your farming background is where your conservation ethic derives, right?

Steve: Yeah. I think [unintelligible@00:36:51].

Mendel: But sounds like you mixed it with knowing that people were important too.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: And you learned that through Malheur and then you went to Nisqually and you had to deal with people. And then you get to Stillwater and people and all the issues related with contaminates, and people were a big part of that job it sounds like, maybe the biggest part so far.

Steve: Yeah, I think so and I think that, can you learn to talk to; I think biologists in general, which I wanted to be the best, are really good about trying to figure out a problem and get it understood a little bit. And if you get in an airplane, you get more understanding, and the more you can understand about what he conflict is between water and your wildlife or grazing and your wildlife or anything like that. The more that you get that understanding, and then it's how do we communicate that, how do we ask people for help and not tell them what they've got to go do through a rule or regulation because that doesn't get very far, most people just get real negative and go hire their lawyer and going to come fight you. So that's a really growing experience for me; that was something that really helped. I'm lucky as a biologist and I got thrown into some really controversial places, and then I got unlucky again and then somebody said, well I'm not going to go talk to them, you go talk to them.

Mendel: That was at Stillwater where you had to go back to D.C.

Steve: Yeah, I'm sitting going, "Why am I going to Washington D.C.?" But then I got sort of excited about, well maybe, what if I could help solve this problem. What if we started to make progress? And then maybe that's, maybe that's more important to me, which went back to my father-in-law's original discussion with me as a young biologist said, "You're going to be nothing as a biologist, it's just a waste of time." Which isn't true, biologists, good biologists are great, but if you want to solve the problem you've got into communication, you've got to get into talking to people, you've got to into offering up solutions. You can't get mad if when they get mad at you.

Mendel: Did you grow to appreciate what he was saying at some point?

Steve: I did after a while, it took me a long time, I wouldn't really admit it, but yes I did.

Mendel: Sounds like it.

Steve: I kind of, I did appreciate it after a while because I, it's not easy to get rewarded because the other thing is even if you solve the problem, some other big shot's going to take credit for it and you have to just smile and know that you helped a lot but it's the really big person that's at the top of the table or the front of the table that's going to say go right or go left. And then they're going to take credit for the whole thing and probably you'll never get your name mentioned again. But that was a little weird for me too figuring that out, that that wasn't a big deal, I was helpful and maybe helped them get there but I wasn't

going to get credit for it. Whereas a biologist you can go publish a paper, you can go talk, you can get credit for being the most knowing about golden eagles or Swainson's hawks or something like that. And solving a water problem, the state might get credit for it, or the federal government back in Washington D.C., but they never could have got there without you but you're not going to get mentioned, so that took me a little time to learn that too.

Mendel: Well that's interesting because that's kind of backwards of what I would think, I'd think the manager making the decision gets the credit, whereas the biologist wouldn't who gives the information or the background or the knowledge for the decision would get less credit, but you're saying the opposite of that.

Steve: I think so. I you take on that management role and you and if the manager doesn't do it, and you end up having to go back and take that; I was a biologist having to act like a manager but the manager took credit a little bit, but more the bigger shots in the department were the ones that really wanted to say, "We fixed this problem. And here's what we're going to go do." They might say, "Thank you Steve," for bringing the biological data in and information, but most likely not. You're just going to be, you were never here. So that was, go back and play softball in Fallon, Nevada, I'm going, huh that was interesting, D.C. was so much different than a local community because people in the local communities tend to give you credit, they tend to like to know you and they're tell their kids about you and you'll have a communication that's different. Once you get up in the higher levels of organizations it's the big shots that are going to the credit.

Mendel: Do you think that was because rural communities are more that way or is it the west for some combination of the two?

Steve: I just think higher level politicians whenever you have to deal with like a Director or a Secretary, they are on such high level politics that you are one of a hundred problems in the door. And they don't really worry about that too much; they just wanted a big plus next to their name, so it's more politics than anything.

Mendel: So how long were you at Stillwater?

Steve: Stillwater, we were there about three years. And I'd had that, I got told by a couple folks "You're in big trouble because of all these solutions and that you're either going to get moved or you're going to lose your job." And they actually had, people protection pardon that the senators would give you, between the republications and democrats all these fights going on, so you could sign up for that and then they couldn't touch me. Or they said, "Maybe it's time, you're a pretty good manager, why don't you go down to Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge." And Joe Mazzoni, who was the refuge chief called me—

Mendel: Who knew you before.

Steve: Yeah, I worked with him at Malheur and everything else so he's got Laguna Atascosa Refuge, a very highly controversial, ocelot, aplomado, all kinds

of problems refuge. We have eight endangered species there and four hundred birds.

Mendel: Right on the border.

Steve: Right on the border of Mexico and all this stuff going on down there, so he tries to talk me into putting in for refuge manager, which I did, for GS 12, so went from an 11 to 12. I was also starting in my life to think about my family and my kids and a GS 9, 7's the lower grades, I've got kids that are going to want to go to college, I've got things to worry about financially. So the 12 was a another thing there; I was in big trouble, everybody yelling at me, three years at Stillwater, so I thought Laguna would be a good, kind of a good, healthy time to listen to my father-in-law and maybe try a management a little bit. By that time I had 15 years of biology in so I thought I knew a little bit more about biology too, and was I going to keep learning stuff or was it going to get boring, you keep doing the same eco-survey every year for 15 years in a row, to me you learned a lot each year but I wanted to try new and different stuff, so wanted a change.

Mendel: Well that would have been a big difference because you're going from, you're changing regions for one thing, Region 1 to Region 6.

Steve: Region 2.

Mendel: Region 2 I mean. And then different set of people, different set issues, right?

Steve: Well, we were at the first staff meeting, I was used to being the biologist being critical of the manager or raising my smarts and telling him what to do, and now I'm sitting at a table of 15 people and they're going through all this stuff and on day one and there's four or five big hard controversial decisions. One person says one thing, the maintenance guy says another thing, the biologist says something else, the outdoor recreation planner said something else, and I'm just listening thinking boy this is great, we're having a bid ole refuge discussion. Then somebody says, "Well what do you what to do Steve?" And I thought, "Oh no, I'm the refuge manager now. I've got to try and figure out all these four or five different arguments on an issue and tell us what direction we're going into the future." And that was a shocker to me, that was a really big change, and so I found that much more shocking going from biologist to manager was, at that level of GS12 at a controversial place, with a smart, dedicated staff with 200,000 visitors there. I found that really shocking to me, the first couple months, first year really was trying to learn how to make a wise decision and try not to have everybody say, "Well that's the dumbest guy at the end of the table I've ever seen, he doesn't know nothing about nothing."

Mendel: Were you worried about that, did that bother you?

Steve: Yeah. I worried and I had some other good biologists, and liked talking to Mazzoni and the refuge supervisor and other people. When I get scared or nervous, I would usually try to call somebody senior and ask them, "Have you had this thing before? This is a problem, there's about 18 different solutions here, have you ever picked this one out or got the right one,

or what would you suggest? What's an answer here that would work?" And sometimes you had to go against the whole staff and say, "You guys all recommend going left, but the future is different and we're going to have to learn how to go right because that's what Mazzoni and Mike Spear are really controversial, smart, tough regional director and he's demanding now that we change these things. So we've been here forever doing this stuff, but that's not going to work anymore."

Mendel: So Mike Spear was the regional director in 2 during that time.

Steve: Yeah, and he called me a lot too. He used to come down and he'd take all the assistant regional directors over to the island, to South Padre Island and then he'd go ride around with me for like six hours. And here I am as a GS 12 refuge manager riding with the Regional Director, and man is he going through controversial, smart, hard stuff and wanting to know what I think and I'm thinking, "I've only been here a week, I don't know enough to," this is a different region for me, Texas is different with all the border issues, just starting to meet some of the really influential farmers and ranchers around me, which I got to do which was great. So that was, Mike was, he knew I was in a really controversial, hard, difficult station and as a brand new refuge manager, he was trying to influence me into doing things a certain way to do, so I could I lead the rest of the refuge managers in that direction. So I found that frightening as heck, because I just, I didn't know if I could do that.

Mendel: Because you were new?

Steve: I'm brand new, I know a lot about biology, I'm learning more about, as your biology knowledge goes down a little bit, you're management knowledge increases and you start to learn more. And so that was, I'm starting to learn more from him and Mazzoni. I'm picking up lots of stuff, but now I've also got conflict on my own station; I've got people that's been there 30 years and they're telling me that would be the dumbest thing, one guy tried that 20 years ago and it failed and we're not doing that again and so it was a huge change for me. And we were living on the refuge too, which I found fascinating, got to know some of the locals around there, and the kids, having the kids on a wildlife refuge in the middle of nowhere; that was a 30 minute commute back and forth to school for them. So that was a big change for me, going from biologist half my career to trying to be a manager. A great place to go if you can survive.

Mendel: But basically you got recruited into the management series.

Steve: I got, I guess I really wasn't smart enough to know that either, I thought wow this is really a compliment, somebody wants me to be a refuge manager. I got troubles here with this Stillwater thing and the politics and the lawsuits and everything else, I'm even being told I'm going to be thrown out of my job by the Secretary, the republican Secretary is going to get rid of me; the President's involved, it's like things were just way, way over my head as a GS11 so it was time to change. But I didn't know, I could have gone to any place, I was just really lucky to go to a place where I had a lot of other supporters and a lot of

other people asking me to change, that was pretty good, but it was really hard, really frightening.

Mendel: Did you have any big endangered species issues at Laguna Atascosa [unintelligible@00:49:50]?

Steve: Yeah, we had aplomado falcons and ocelots were the two biggest ones. Aplomados were down to zero nesting pairs from a big number. I'm there one week and the Peregrine Fund shows up and says, "We've got a truck load of five aplomado chicks in the back of the truck, we're going to throw them out on your refuge." And I said, "Well timeout, wait a minute. I think I need a permit, or I need something here." So I had to spend the whole day writing up a permit, a refuge permit for them to stick these falcons up in a box that they had up there. And the other manager, when he switched over, he didn't get it done and so I had to do all this writing up and scientific stuff and paper and get it all done. And I didn't know the Peregrine Fund, and just a little bit I've heard of them and stuff before from the condors and other things, but here they are ready to go. So I decided to take a chance with them too, which was the best thing I ever did because what we could do for aplomado falcons with the Fish and Wildlife Service was limited and they could go started us talking, he and I, went to Pete Jenny and I went to start to talk to all the local ranchers all around us, and see if they would take falcons. And ended up with a safe harbor there for a million acres that would have never happened without the Peregrine Fund. Because they can go talk to a private citizen and bring you along and introduce you, and tell them that you're not going write them a ticket or try to screw them over, you want to have falcons on their property that reproduce and do well and here's how we do it. And when I asked the local landowners for help, they all said, there wasn't a single one, King Ranch had 800,000 acres right there, and met with the most influential Texas ranchers at a bar-b-que at their place and I asked them for help and guys go, "Yeah, we can probably do that. You're not going to write us a ticket right."

Mendel: Well that's because they didn't have the regulatory burden [@00:51:53] that a federal employee does.

Steve: Yeah, you take that away [unintelligible@00:51:55, talking at same time] you give them. And the Peregrine Fund had the birds and the nest boxes and they could go out there, where we would have been so slow and difficult for our 12 people; to expand off the refuge would have taken a whole big budget, which we didn't have. So they brought in private money and private experience and really talented people. And their communication skills were incredible, I learned so much from them. One of our neighbors was Lee Bass and we had the King Ranch and the Bass's and they had me have a bar-b-que over there and had a lunch with Harry Cullen, and those were the biggest, most influential people in south Texas. And when you sit down with a table of 20 people and you just have a nice lunch, and you bring the falcons up and you show them or you show them pictures, or you give them paintings and stuff like that, and then you ask them for help, 99.9% of them said, "We're happy to help. We would love to have falcons back again, they're really a cute, cool bird." And we talked the same thing about ocelots

too, and they loved ocelots. They didn't want the ticket, that ES offices were stronger and trying to stop any kind of brush clearing or any kind of involvement with the landscape, they would try to take them through the ringer and get a permits out of them or make them do all this stuff or spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and I was more on the other end of, "What you already have is beautiful, and I've been out to a few of you guys places, you've got brush, you've got grasslands, these cows are okay. Let's just write this up and get you a permit that goes on for a lifetime and if you want to do this and not be threatened by it." So a lot of them really were just super, super helpful down there. And now aplomados are up to 35 nesting pairs after all this time, but so they're recovered and doing well. They could come off the list even in south Texas, but without the Peregrine Fund, without a refuge manager and staff that didn't want to work with people, we'd never got it done. If we did try to regulate, there'd still only be five pairs, there'd be nothing there.

Mendel: If the staff had been the regulatory side instead of the relationship side, is that what you're saying?

Steve: They were scared to death of the landowners because they thought, I've got an ocelot out there or I see an aplomado falcon across that fence, but they've told me, they're very strict no trespassing laws; if you go on the property you can get arrested or shot or taken out. So our biologists were scared to death. So I had them meet and there's the fence, if you see one it's okay but we're not writing a ticket. If you see one hit a fence or hit a wall or there are accidents out there that happen with wildlife and you're not going to take them the cleaners, we're going to help fix that problem. And so it turned, it took ten years but it really turned things around, we got up on a much, much better place.

Mendel: Well you had to comprise too, you had to give some and not just regulate.

Steve: And then I would look at, you know if you've got a perfect 100 acres or not quite perfect but really, really good on a million acres, what's better? And so for me it was the bigger picture, again that was from, I flew a lot of helicopter time too looking around I'm going, our biologists sometimes get so worried about one acre and that really wasn't our problem. Our problem was a million acres not one acre. And so when you think about that then one little acre here or there, one way or another, that's not the end of the world, it's getting the big picture to work right.

Mendel: Because that falcon needed a big area right?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: And that refuge, the refuge wasn't big enough. You had to have partnerships; you had to go outside the refuge sign, as we say.

Steve: Yeah, we had 45,000 acres but it wasn't near enough at that time for, we needed more like two or three hundred thousand or half a million, five hundred thousand to get the ocelots back up where they've got to go. Aplomados was the same thing, it was all grassland so we had nice little chunks of brush that

was 80 years old, and nice brush for ocelots and then the grassland right next to it, which was good for ocelots too to feed on, the aplomados like the open grassland with some burning in it and all kinds of stuff from management cows, all that was positive. So getting people to sign up for that, that they're willing to do what they're already doing and getting our biologists to be a little bit lighter on the heavy fist that they were trying to get them to go something with; that was hard for me and our own staff and with the State a little bit too, but not so much the State. But you've got to turn your biologists and all these different refuges got to think that maybe working with somebody is better than working against them. And that's really hard to do; I learned a lot there on that. And mostly by showing success, you can show the biologist, ocelot biologist, that and have them go up and have them trap on the private property, catch one, learn that other new stuff and all a sudden they came back like they were big fans once they learned that it was okay to have cows and ocelots. Fire was a problem, but the biggest problem was just cleaning brush out with the cats and the equipment, and just knocking it all down because they didn't want to get caught with ocelots.

Mendel: Was the brush was a fire hazard, that's why the brush needed to be cleared?

Steve: No, it was just less grass there for cows. So when the cattlemen were there, they looked at the brush coming in, if you overgraze it then the brush starts to come in more, more, more and you need to clear it out. So they were trying to clear out more grasslands.

Mendel: And that was less habitat for ocelots.

Steve: Yeah, and the stuff was really good ocelot stuff was really higher ground and not really very good grassland. But they were afraid it was going to put more brush on their property. So they would go clear that mostly just to get rid of the fear, if you've got a cat out there already then go knock down the ocelot stuff then you don't have any problems with ocelots, you don't have an endangered species permits and other things. You know they get other permits from like Cattlemen Associations or things like or the Federal government and if they say you can't get one because you've got an ocelot, then they just turn, they got real negative about ocelots and aplomados. We turned them around and get them very positive, and mostly the Lee Bass's, and Harry Cullen's, and I just spent a lot of time with them upfront learning from them. But if you can get two or three influential cattlemen that are willing to host an event, totally turns your world around. But you've got to go, you got to go sit with them, you've got to talk to them and you can't be driving up in your government truck and your government uniform with your law enforcement gear on; probably not a good start. A couple of them I must meant on a fence building a fence, I'd take a cup of coffee, a thermos of coffee, which I don't drink coffee. But I'd say, "Do you need help on that fence?" And they'd be banging away on it going, "Yeah. I guess you could help me a little bit." And I wouldn't say anything for like an hour. Then the guy would stop and drink a cup of coffee and it's hotter than hell and he'd go, "Who are you again now? What do you do? I've heard about that." So you start relationships just friendly. And then some of them

could get easements, and it was funny how just a little bit of money to the equation too, if you could get an conservation easement for doing what you're doing already and sign up for that, Yturria's and some of the other big ranchers took some of those and that totally turned the world around, because they got a check for doing what they were already doing. So they were much more helpful.

Mendel: And then did you find if you got one that was influential that made a big difference with the others?

Steve: Yeah. We had the Lower Rio Grande Wildlife Refuge going on down there too and they were building up all kinds of land bases, so getting corporative, big, huge cattlemen to do a little bit of wildlife work on their property and get paid for it was a huge, big deal. And we had Senators and Senator Bentsen, and a Congressman who was Chairman of the Appropriations down there too. So I actually had to go sit with them and also bring, I brought in some farmers and ranchers with me, and talked to them about, we think we have a deal here, we think this how this works, this is really beneficial for wildlife, but it's also pretty good for them and it helps them. So they got, the Land Acquisition Program we had with Senator Bentsen was like two million a year, went up to like ten million, which was a really big deal. And a bunch of other programs got big financial increases because of congressional support.

Mendel: That's really big.

Steve: Yeah, back then it was huge.

Mendel: Yeah, that's big, that's giant.

Steve: So they were kind of funny too because Senator Bentsen used to call me on the phone every once in a while and somebody would be in his office and told him I really screwed up and I did this, this, and this. So he'd call me, "Hey Steve, I understand you did this, this, and this, and this." I said, "Yeah, I guess I did." So I had to learn to admit things that I thought were right at the time but I made a mistake, from I didn't know the landowner well enough or know the issue well enough. But I had to tell them and other people, don't worry, I even apologized to the person that I think I goofed up there, I'm sorry.

Mendel: Can you think of an example?

Steve: Trying to think, one of them, there was a big golf course they were going to put in down there and we had ocelot habitat that, we took more than we should have taken in that analysis. And when we went back and studied with nests later on, catching them, you could actually get away for what they wanted for the golf course. So I had to say, "I'm sorry that I fought the golf course, that actually the way you designed this can work and we can make it work," and stuff like that. Or with cattlemen, sometimes you didn't, I didn't understand all the time some of that brush that they had or what they were doing with it. And could see a big caterpillar out there knocking it down and so I might get upset over something like that and talk to them about that. And then when they came back with a big map they could show me well, yeah, "We did knock down a little bit ocelot stuff over here but there's no ocelot's in it, but there might be

later on. But we protected and saved all this stuff over here," so those kinds of things were real educational for me in not being so emotional so fast. So learned a lot on that too. You can't just have your emergency reaction, you have to kind of think through it. And then you've got to know that person and you've got to know what they're doing, and then you've got to understand wildlife, how you may not; we didn't have any cattle on our refuge, we did some burning, a lot of burning. But when I went out and looked at the cattle places and saw all this wildlife there too, then I'm going, huh, we kicked the cows off a long time ago and that's okay and there's a lot of interesting new things with not having cows on the place, but there's also good things about having cows on the place. And so how heavy you graze and what you do with them is really important, so I learned a lot about that kind of stuff too. Probably had mistakes here too by calling it by my research papers and biologists and they said one thing but when we all went out there it was like uh-oh, this has got a lot of the same benefits and we just didn't know it.

Mendel: Sounds normal.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: You learn that first impressions might not always be right.

Steve: Yeah, it's more complicated.

Mendel: Well how old were your girls during that time?

Steve: Let's see, girls were grade school, or junior high and beginning of high school. We were there for almost six years so they went through; that was hard on them too because it's 85% Hispanic down there so two white girls in an Hispanic school had a lot of really great things to it, but it was also the first time they got experience to be a minority and some prejudice and some problems there. They had to learn to adapt to a completely different culture. And Mexico, it's sort of, that border town is about half Mexico and half United States and even talking in a lot of conversations, it's a mixture between Spanish, English, and a combination of the two, so a sentence might have all three languages in it, so you're trying figure out what somebody just said. And so that was different too, that was a real change culturally. And learned a lot from what Hispanics think about the world, the whole staff was basically Hispanic so you're trying to understand what they think is important and why they're there. And they turned out to be really helpful on a lot of stuff too, once I figured out more them and learned more about them.

Mendel: How were you accepted as a white Anglo-Saxon in a Spanish speaking community?

Steve: At first, not very good I think the first white refuge manager to walk in the door, a lot of staff had another guy or two that had been there longer that they wanted to have the job. And so I was, I don't know, treated not mean particularly but just very strict and you are white and we are not. And so yeah that was a little rough for the first six months or so. But then I just tried to, again, learn and smile and try to adjust, but it was frightening for me too because you

don't, I'd never been a minority before, I never had experienced the flip side of that equation. So that was a totally different world for me, but it turned out really well. Actually got to know people, you think people are talking about you and half the time they're not talking anything about you, but you're all worried because they're speaking Spanish and it sounds like they're looking at you and rolling their eyes and making funny faces, had nothing to do with you, but you thought it was so you get all nervous and paranoid.

Mendel: Well you found out what it's like to be the minority.

Steve: Yeah, no it's really, it's a very odd feeling. And after a while, we got rid of that pretty much. I'm sure people still you as white, but we got a lot of stuff done together and worked together and so that was okay. So it's just a different culture.

Mendel: Well we've been talking for about an hour, and we're just now getting into the, that was like your learning years right?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: Of life and learning about politics and all of that, and then you get to really go into politics, so I'd like to get into that but you want to take a break?

Steve: I'm okay, if you're okay.

Mendel: I'm fine. Because the next thing you did, there's a story I think, that I've heard you tell more than once, I think, about you complaining. Didn't you complain, you went to headquarters and complained to somebody and they, so that's how you ended up in headquarters, there's some story like that.

Steve: Well they had a real interesting, the whole Directorate had a Directorate meeting at South Padre Island that came out to the refuge, and Mollie Beattie was the Director. And she had a closed door session with me up at the headquarters and says, "I'm a new Director, I've got all these problems and all these issues and I'd really love to have somebody like you that's got all these different experiences and good biological background to come up and be a branch chief or something up there." And I looked at her and I said, "I've been to D.C. before on Nevada stuff and that's a worthless place and there's no way I'm going back there, and no way in hell." And so she said, "Okay, well I'll be back to talk to you again in about a month or two, you think about it." I said, "They don't need to come back here, I'm a refuge manager in heaven and I'm not going up there for nothing." And then about a couple months later she called down and a bunch of other people called down from Washington, in the Secretary's office and all these people. And about that time I started thinking about advanced management too, I was only doing certain things I could learn and I was starting to go through this same cycle again as a refuge manager after six years, started doing some of the same stuff over again. And I thought we made a lot of progress on a lot of stuff, and I worried sometimes that my personality gets old and maybe a new person coming in could actually move it farther and thinking bigger and do things that I would miss and not understand. So I

started thinking about that. And then they sent me back there for a little bit, turned out Washington D.C. wasn't, as a branch chief job, was not nearly as bad as I thought. So I did apply, end up getting the job.

Mendel: What year was that?

Steve: What year was that, I have to think for a second.

Mendel: '94, '95?

Steve: Yeah I think it was the area in there somewhere.

Mendel: Would have been '94 or '95 I think.

Steve: Yeah, '95 thru '98 was at the headquarters. And then when I first get in there one of the first things they bring up is Jim Kurth, who is now our Deputy Director, but they decided they wanted to drill on Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the refuge manager has to come down; I have to go see like 60 Senators. The Refuge Improvement Act was just getting started and they had a year or two of banging on that and they weren't getting very far and so Rob says, "You're in charge of that, now you go—"

Mendel: Rob Shallenberger.

Steve: Yeah, He said, "I want you to make sure you get that," he was frustrated with it and so bringing in a lot of people to write up how the refuge system would work, having somebody that wanted to drill on the refuge; 60 Senators and me, it was fascinating. I mean the politics went into high gear so much faster and more complicated and more difficult than I had ever seen as a refuge manager.

Mendel: So '95 was during the Clinton Administration right?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: So it was a relatively positive administration from the standpoint of conservation.

Steve: Yeah, they were, for wildlife refuges they really like refuges and were supportive. He was going through a lot of problems and different issues, but I got to meet him four or five times out in Arkansas and other places like that.

Mendel: President Clinton?

Steve: Yeah. He was smart, cared about wildlife, had one duck I think in a bag one time where he shot a duck one time. But all the people in there, the Director was incredibly bright, she was—

Mendel: That was Mollie?

Steve: Yeah, and she really wanted to make sure that we didn't drill, she told me, "We will not drill on Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." But the vote was going to be very close. And so we spent six months going over to the Hill and briefing different senators and staff and Congressman, was mostly focused on the Senate because look like that's where the bill either was going to pass or fail.

Mendel: What year was that vote, shortly after you got there?

Steve: Yeah, it was like a year and a half after I got there, probably '96 or '97 probably.

Mendel: The Refuge Improvement Act passed in '97.

Steve: Yeah, that was incredible because we spent a lot of time with the Secretary and trying to get—

Mendel: And that was Babbit?

Steve: Yeah. And we had just a great turnout over there, they were trying to really help, they really wanted to do it the first time ever that we had overall legislation about the four primary purposes we had, what we were trying to do, that was hard to write up. And then we had Pete Jerome [unintelligible@1:11:56] and a whole bunch of great people on the staff, you and there's others; a lot of people on there that were trying hard to write these sections up and get them right and they all fought and argued wanted more of this and less of this and I have to go see Dan Ashe over in the other Main Interior building and he was starting to figure it out too.

Mendel: Was there a team of people that were—?

Steve: We had a team of about seven or eight.

Mendel: To write the language for the Refuge Improvement Act?

Steve: Yeah, we had seven or eight people.

Mendel: And what was your role in that?

Steve: Well I was really just trying to keep them pointed in one direction and then take the different seven or eight sections of it and give it to somebody and then have them bring it back and then try to air it out with all the other outside; we had a lot of NRA, a lot of just different groups that didn't like the refuge system changing at all except for if it had a lot more hunting and fishing, so hunting and fishing became a big deal for us. But there was a lot environmental groups that hated it and liked it and so I had to spend a lot of time taking all those packages and then go over an see an environmental group or somebody and sit down and talk with them and ask them what they thought. And then try to get positive suggestion from them, which was always a mixed of everything, it never was clear. They were staff that would get really upset and then you try to ask them, "Well what would you write in there?" And they would take a month or two months or six months and they might write something but it was so bad when you got it that it wasn't going to fit legislation on a national level, it was more their specific interest of what they wanted. So we tried to work in a lot of that stuff too, but that was really challenging because you learn a lot about your politics and what your President and what your Secretary and what Director want to do. And you learn about all these other groups that care about wildlife refuges, which were very many, and then you got your own staff which are specialists and very knowledgeable about something much more than I knew about public use or hunting and fishing.

Mendel: And that's where these other people brought that expertise in.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: You were kind of the person who had to bring those ideas together and try to get the language in a way that balanced all of those competing interests?

Steve: Yeah, I think I was just more of leader or a navigator; I was really just sort of trying to keep them on it. And we never knew if we'd ever finish or not, because it's been in the system so long and going nowhere, and a lot of legislation takes between three to seven years to get through, so we were on like year four or five when I get it. And frustrated and not getting anywhere and the House and the Senate would all say, "No, we'd never vote for that, we want this, this, and this." And so it was a mess, it was a huge mess. So I think my job was just sort of to try to hold it all together and bring something. I had the job of bringing something, a piece of paper, said, "Here's the legislation, here's what it said." And then the attorneys, there's a whole stable full of different attorneys and each time you had to go over there I had to go talk to all of them too and there would be one attorney on public use, one on hunting, one on migratory birds, one on this, and they would all have, "Well that's great, but you need paragraph 7.3.2.1 that says, blah, blah, blah." [Unintelligible@1:15:12, speaking at same time] some other paragraph.

Mendel: -- Alan Palensol was one of those attorneys, Alan Palensol.

Steve: Yeah, he was great, he was the most balance one in there and actually he was really good about his group. He had a lot of attorneys working for him and Alan was a guy that could see the big picture and he got really excited about boy if we could get his through, what I was just trying to do was raise the bar for refuge management and to [unintelligible@0:15:36] if it's at a three or a four to bring to a five or a seven or make it better, a lot better for everybody, and run those refuges better, and he was one of the solicitors that was outstanding, he was great. He was really helpful. And he helped me get through, a lot of different sections you'd get to.

Mendel: Well like compatibility, compatibility was a big issue.

Steve: That was a big, big issue.

Mendel: Trying to figure out how to write that and what it meant and planning, was another one. CCP's and how to do that because we'd never done a good job of really; he had fits and starts at doing planning right?

Steve: Yeah. So it was one of the most exciting things I ever worked on, but also one of the most difficult because here I'm thinking I'm a biologist and a manger, but I've only been to 10 refuges and we've got hundreds of refuges from the Arctic all the way through to the Caribbean. So if you think of something you think is working pretty good in Texas, you take it to the Caribbean, it might not work at all. So you had to write a broaden enough and general enough that everybody could benefit from it. So that

was, it was really hard. And I really learned a lot about the whole refuge system, which was exciting to me. And that's not you're doing everyday all day, so you've got part of that and an issue like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and oil drilling and here's the manager sitting there at your desks going, "Where we going today?" And I go, "We've got three Senators, we're going here, here, and here." And I need the briefing papers, we've got to have those right, you got to speak honestly and straight up and you're going to get asked really hard questions by some of them that want to drill and you have to answer it straight up, you can't just say, I don't like it, I'm not going to do it.

Mendel: Is that the first time you met Jim, [unintelligible@1:17:23, talking at same time].

Steve: Yeah, that was the first time I met Jim Kurth really, he'd been to a lot of refuges too all over the south and was a really good refuge manager. And he came in, when you're up in the Arctic in the middle of nowhere and somebody says you've got to go see a Senator in Washington D.C., that was a big change for him too, really tough, but he did a great job at it. And we got yelled at by Senator Murkowski one time, just chewed me out with his staff and sitting right there and went through a whole bunch of stuff. And he said, "Just a second Steve, I have to go downstairs." And he goes down and speaks, I'm watching this little tiny TV with the staff and he's up there telling Steve Thompson is basically a dumbo idiot and he can't do this, and Steve Thompson, Steve Thompson, Steve Thompson. Wow that's the first time I've ever been on TV, and it's not very positive. He comes back out and goes, "Well what you think of that?" And I go, "Well that's the first time I've ever been on, but I think we've got some problems we've got to try to work through."

Mendel: He was there as, one of the Senators of from Alaska.

Steve: Senator from Alaska, yeah and he wanted to drill.

Mendel: And he was on the Senate floor talking about you?

Steve: Yeah, yeah. And the drilling and the Fish and Wildlife Service, and people like Steve Thompson and he just went through this—

Mendel: You were famous.

Steve: Well yeah, but I was famous in a way that I'd never quite heard before.

Mendel: Not the way you wanted to be.

Steve: I had to giggle a little bit about it, but it was really; that was like total shock.

Mendel: So that was Jim coming in for a visit for a week?

Steve: He would come in sometime for a week or two at a time but he probably spent a month or two in there.

Mendel: During that time period.

Steve: During that time period. I really wanted him there because, you know the politicians are really famous for being, "I don't like this, or I don't like that." But when they actually ask you really hard questions, I'd never been there so I didn't know the refuge as well as he did. And so I tried to get somebody that actually been there, so when they said, "This is not going to hurt something." He could say, "Well, maybe not going to kill them all, but it would impact these species this way." So he was really great about just getting the facts out there better than me reading a report to them or handing a piece of paper. So that was really important and worked out really well.

Mendel: Well he was at Arctic I think for eleven years.

Steve: A long time.

Mendel: A long time.

Steve: He'd been there a long quite a while.

Mendel: He'd been there for a while.

Steve: Yeah, and he'd been through the thrill and the challenge about drilling on Arctic has been around for a long time, so it'd been back and forth and people talked about it a lot. But this is the first time they had really serious legislation going through and it looked really close. And we ended up actually losing like 52 to 48 or something like that, but they needed 60 to overturn the President's, to veto his, so we ended up actually getting; we won but we lost. So that was another weird thing too because I remember seeing the vote and being really depressed and then somebody went, "You won, you did a great job!" And I'm going, "But I got 52 in favor." And they go, "Yeah, but they can't get to the 60 on the next one." So that was a weird, talk about going up. The complication with politics was way above my head; I didn't understand any of that stuff.

Mendel: Well politics with a big "P". You've done a lot of politics, little "p" politics.

Steve: Little politics with the county or with the state or something, that's different, but getting on a Federal level on an issue and having a national wildlife refuge be the center of attention for all kinds of people including the President's desk; that was a must bigger "P" than I ever seen or understood so it was new politics for me; learned a lot.

Mendel: So you did that, but go back to the stuff about the Refuge Improvement Act and compatibility and where was Dan Ashe during that time, what was he doing?

Steve: I think he was the Assistant Director for politics that part.

Mendel: External Affairs.

Steve: External Affairs and Politics, yes. And he also came from the House before that so he had a real strong Congressional background. And Dan and I

would actually have to have some nose to nose discussions and try to get there and then he'd go up and talk to the Secretary and then call me and then go over and see the Secretary and go see the Congressional folks. And we had a really up and down, within Interior, battle over all those compatibility issues, everything was just not very simple. But Dan was good about trying to pull together or tell me, "Well that number, number 2 that you're working on there, boy I don't know. I don't think we can get that through, so can you adjust that." And so we did a lot of that trying to figure that too to get a good bill to go through, which we finally got to, Dan was really helpful in that. And then we did finally get it over to the, it passed and got to the White House and so I got a call from him one day to go over to the White House and sign this bill, I'm going here I'm wearing white pants, a puffin tie, I got a blue jacket but that's it, so I'm like, look like an idiot. But I did go over that morning and got to sit with the President and watch him sign the bill and take a pen, they go down and they put each letter down and they take a pen for each one and then they hand out pens at the end. I'm standing there with Babbitt and he goes, "I don't think they have enough pens so you're going to get one." I said, "Gosh, darn." So get all the way around to the end and there's an extra pen and he gives it too me and I took it and got to take it back over to the main office and stuff like that.

Mendel: Is that the one that got framed, didn't you get that framed?

Steve: Yeah I it framed at the Headquarters Office.

Mendel: And left it there. Got it framed with a copy of the Act.

Steve: A copy of the signing of the bill. But it was interesting, the President was really funny and cracking a lot of jokes and it was a tremendous turnout from the State and Federal, State Directors from all over, wildlife directors, Babbitt and Dan Ashe and it was just really cool to see all the people in there and Jamie Clark was there as the Director then. So we all got to sit up there and get our picture taken with the President and sign a bill that was the future of the refuge system forever. So I always felt really good about that hour, it was really kind of a spectacular; talk about big "P" that was the biggest politics you could have. I felt a little funny in my outfit, in my little white pants and my puffin tie.

Mendel: Well I think the story is that you were wearing those khakis and not a tie at the time, but you had a tie just in case you ever needed to go up.

Steve: I had a tie hanging a coat.

Mendel: So when they called you, whatever you wearing, you had to stick that coat and tie on and that's what you went in.

Steve: When I got over there too, and somebody had committed suicide at the gate and I was the last one in just got in that morning because they had an extra spot. So they called me that morning, I got to race over there to get in there, somebody has tried to commit suicide at the gate and there's blood over and they're washing it a hose and I'm getting blood on my

pants now, trying to jump out of that thing. The guards go, "Who are you again?" They go through that stuff. And so Jamie and Dan and they all go through, Babbitt, they go through and they go in there and they can see where they're going into the White House. They say, "You stay right here until we're done checking you out." So I'm there for another half hour, forty-five minutes and think I've missed the whole thing. So finally a guy goes, "Get over here, you can go through." And I walk through and there's no guide, there's nobody, he said, "Just go over to the awning over there and you go right into the White House, there'll be somebody to pick you right there." So I'm walking through the White House structure, nobody around, nobody to see and I go through the gate and I go through the door, there's nobody there. So I'm looking for the Oval Office, just wandering around and I finally get in there and that's when they open the door and I'm like second in line now because nobody else is lined up. I go through shaking hands with the President, I'm going boy this is the weirdest day I ever had, I almost didn't get through and now I'm shaking hands with the President and going to watch him sign it. It was really fun, it was really a cool, cool morning. It was all due to, that's something where I got credit for everybody else. It was sort of, I felt a little funny on that one because you get to go do the really incredible stuff, but I was part of a team, I was just trying to help lead it. And everybody else did so much hard work and they did all the stuff that was really critical and important. I didn't write any of the really important stuff and I tried to help it a little bit.

Mendel: What was your view then and what's your view now of the Refuge Improvement Act?

Steve: I think it's still pretty good, I mean it's a good basic plan. But refuges are complexed and changing and it's a lot, sometimes people pay attention to the rules and regulations of the law and sometimes they don't. So it'd be great if it could be updated and really take a hard look at that compatibility issue, hunting and fishing now, is that still the same way. And wildlife primary values, it's sort of complicated in how you figure that out, a lot of stations, so it would be, I think it would be really good to update the law again right now.

Mendel: Twenty years later.

Steve: Yeah, now would be a good time to [unintelligible@1:26:37].

Mendel: It hits you when you say that.

Steve: I think it would be, you know it'd take you five to ten years, it's not something you can do overnight. But folks like you and me who've been around refuges forever and you look at all the changes we've had in personal and the way we look at issues and all the people changes too, the demands from the public are so much more than they were 20 years ago. So it'd be really good to take a look at it, but I think it's basically; the basics of it are pretty good.

Mendel: You talking about the law or are you talking about the regulations and policies that came after?

Steve: I really think the law was better, I think the regulations and rules in politics get a little funny sometimes. And that's just with republicans or

democrats coming in, they all have a different idea about what something should and how they interpret that. It was written that way in the beginning just to be broad in general and so that's, the rules and regulations are probably even better to sit down with and walk through.

Mendel: Well you recognize, I think that's about the time that you and I met.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: You recognized, you smart people, you recognized that that was going to be a need. The law's been passed and now we have to right the rules and regulations related to this law to step it down. And you brought in some really smart people like Ken McDermott, I don't know if he was already there. What was the timeline with him, was he there before the signature and then you asked him to move through the regulations and policies or was it—?

Steve: I think I brought him in just right before the signature, but right about at the same time, so Ken McDermott was the type of people I tried to bring in that could have a big broad base of experience but could write well too. Then how do you take the big law and push that into rules and regulations that make some sense. And then people could work from, I liked the fact that he'd been on a lot of different refuges all over so again the Caribbean and Alaska are quite different and Alaska has its own rules and regulations. And then you've got Malheur Refuge and Stillwater and places I've been before, and Texas Laguna Atascosa, they're all different. So it's hard to get a good general rule about how you deal with the public and how you deal with wildlife management and how your biologist sees that, and your outdoor recreation planner, and how they're competitive a lot times for limited dollars and staff and things like that. Yeah, rules and regulations are, always need help and work and continually need a good crew working on them, good field people I think. And the ones that I've communicated too, they know how to solve the problem. So how do you use the refuges is an example, next door neighbor, so if you do this here on your refuge does it help your neighbors do a better job too.

Mendel: Many of the people that you've brought in were smart, Ken Edwards, Ken McDermott, they were smart people, they knew how to write, they had the ability to make that work.

Steve: I brought a lot of people in when I was branch chief there, what I'd do was try to get somebody in for two weeks, try to get them in on a detail because they'd all be very negative like I was about going back to Washington D.C. And you'd sit there for two weeks and you'd see some of the stuff and then I'd try to put something really appealing and exciting on their desk and pretty soon they'd read that and then they'd start back in the next day or two and they go, "Well what is this again?" And they get, some of them, about half of them will come back, the other half wouldn't come back but they wouldn't be negative about Washington D.C. so it was important to get; you've got to recruit a lot of people in all the time. And you've got to spend, there's only so much time as a branch chief and you've got to spend a lot of time

thinking about people, your people, issues. But if you can get 50 more people that think better than you do, then that's always my job was to get somebody better than I was at something or know more about it.

Mendel: Well I don't remember the exact date, but I think, I don't remember if I'm right, but I think it was April 6th, 1997 is when the Refuge Improvement Act was signed.

Steve: Yeah, I think so.

Mendel: Something like that. So then we did the, oh you've got it right there on the wall.

Steve: Yeah. October 9, 1997.

Mendel: October 9, okay I wasn't even close, but it was '97, October 9, 1997.

Steve: I've got a picture of it and I framed it and I've got a picture of the signing right there and a picture shaking hands with the President and a copy of the bill. And then that, to me has always been, for me being a young biologist started out to finding myself in the White House shaking hands with the President to write the future of the refuge system, it was a really big deal for me. I felt like I really helped a lot, but I felt like everybody else did it, but I got a lot of credit for it.

Mendel: But you got your picture with the President.

Steve: I got my picture with the President, so that's the most important part.

Mendel: If it was me, it would be like Forrest Gump; I'd be more like Forrest Gump. But after that, then there were changes in the Fish and Wildlife Service, the PARDS and GARDS and those kinds of things started happening and so it affected you and you ended up leaving actually about '98. But before you left, though, before you left I think we had the refuge conference, the first National Refuge System Conference, it was in Keystone, right?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: Did you have a big role in that?

Steve: I got the first, well it was one of the refuge manager of the year, it was the first one so I got to speak at that with the other Refuge Manager of the Year. So that was, to me, very dramatic because such an emotional thing to talk about your past and what you did. And also at that time, chief of refuges, I put in for that and didn't get that job, so all that stuff was kind of going on in my head and I'm thinking I've been in the White House but I didn't go to the top jobs, so that's sort of interesting. And then speaking at that thing with, I've never been in front of a big light system before and they turned all the lights down and they're on you and you're speaking, I could hear people out there but I can't see anybody, hundreds of people there. And I'm trying to talk about what we just talked about today here, a little bit about how do you learn to lead and how lucky I've been and stuff like that. That was a very emotional speech for me, probably one of the better ones I've ever done but it was really; I had a hard time getting through it, it was really difficult.

Mendel: There were over 800 people there, so you had a big audience.

Steve: That was way too many people. I've never spoke, maybe a 150 would have been a large audience for me, so 800 was just incredible.

Mendel: And you were Refuge Manager of the Year when you were in Texas right?

Steve: Yeah, at Laguna Atascosa I got the first refuge manager of the year they put together from the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which was a big honor and really it was from all the people I talked about learning to know and everything else. The only reason I got that job, or that award was because the county supervisor, ranchers, farmers, environmental groups, all wrote in a letter that said, "Hey this guy is not a bad manager." So that's why I got it. And that's what I was trying to talk about at, with 800 people in front of you is learn to, we all need to learn to do better and how to work with people, how to listen to them, and then how to go get something done together. So that was a hard speech, I really enjoyed that one, but it scared the hell out of me. I'm not a, to get in front of that many people was pretty intimidating to me, so it was tough.

Mendel: Welcome to management.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: Well shortly after that, you did leave Washington.

Steve: Yeah, Sam Hamilton was an old friend and Dale Hall and they flew me to the Caribbean to look at the Caribbean and said, "You'll be in charge of this and refuges." And that was the time when the GARD PARD was going through. So I thought if I got a GARD area, which was the Caribbean and Florida, and I got refuges on top of it too, I got all that, it'd be great. But it turned out you just end up getting the GARD part which was a geographic thing.

Mendel: So all programs?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: You had to manage ES, and Fisheries.

Steve: But you had a certain area too, it was only a few states and so I got to learn a lot more about the Caribbean and it was real exciting, and Florida was a real controversy place, more like my water problem with the Everglades and all this other stuff, so I enjoyed that. And I had a great crew of people, a lot of people and Sam and Dale were really progressive, Cindy Dohner, Mitch King, we had a great regional office in there, a lot of talented people.

Mendel: So Sam was the Regional Director and who was the Deputy?

Steve: Dale Hall.

Mendel: Dale was the Deputy.

Steve: Yeah, he was the deputy. So a lot of times Dale and I would, during the week we'd meet Friday for lunch and bar-b-que and a beer if we could get one and just try to talk about what the heck is going on in the Region and who's doing what again now, why are they doing that. And there's so many different Congressional 13, 14 states with Senators and Congressmen, so our job was try to keep Sam alive and keep the regional director okay, and try to keep things going in the right direction. I really enjoyed that too, I learned a lot in that job, it was really great.

Mendel: Weren't there big DOD issues with Navy in the Caribbean?

Steve: Yeah, there was a couple of the islands and stuff had hunting, or target practice and things like that.

Mendel: Bombardment [unintelligible@1:36:20].

Steve: Yeah, endangered species.

Mendel: People lived on the island.

Steve: Puerto Rico and a lot of bad blood between the Navy and different people living there sometimes, and fights.

Mendel: They were trying to give it to us as a refuge I think.

Steve: Yeah. So that whole Puerto Rico thing was way out of control and so we had to send people down there all the time, and law enforcement people down there. And different cultures again, and just one issue after another, just like everything was going wrong. And that was just, the Lower Mississippi River had a lot of problems too with the low stacking and backing of the water and then farmers came out and starting clearing more and more trees, and that had a huge impact on migratory birds. So we worked on a program with NRCS to put 100,000 acres back into trees and re-flood again and stuff like that. So those programs were difficult but making real progress too. And the Fish and Wildlife Service had a big lead on that, Sam was having to go out front and speak and then we had to deliver, so it was a big deal; learned a lot there about too.

Mendel: So you left in about '98, did you leave in '98?

Steve: For?

Mendel: When you went to the GARD job.

Steve: Oh the GARD job, yeah that was '98.

Mendel: So you were there for not very long because PARD GARD thing didn't last very long.

Steve: Well they switched it over, they had it back and forth to a couple different jobs, but yeah it didn't last very long. And I had Florida for a while and the Caribbean and then they wanted me to do the Mississippi River so I had all that. Then about all that time they started going back to being refuge stuff again so that was really confusing for a couple years, interesting but a lot of personalities and at the upper

level in the region a lot of worry and whether you're going to keep your GS 15 or not and who was going to get it and who's going to happen to who and all that kind of good stuff. So yeah it was very controversial. But I loved, I didn't want to really go to Atlanta, it was not a place I wanted to move to, but when I got down there I really enjoyed it. And loved the people down there and it was a great, great group of refuges; really interesting refuge managers and a lot of touch topics, but they were cranking out a ton of birds, I mean it was just really great to watch all the wildlife.

Mendel: But you learned some southern slang like "I'll tell you what."

Steve: "Tell you what." The first speech I ever gave down there Larry Mallard was a refuge manager down there and I got a 150 refuge managers in one room, and I start talking and I see a hand come up in the back of the room and Larry goes, [in a southern accent] "Hey Steve, can you talk a little slower, we're only catching about every third word you're going on here." I said, "What!" So I had to learn to talk slower and listen a lot differently. And then I gained 20 pounds because everywhere I went was catfish and fried food and big bar-b-ques every night. And I started eating that stuff and awe man this is great, so I had to start doing master swimming when I got back because I gained so much weight it was unbelievable. Yeah, that was tough going.

Mendel: Well you were there from '98 in Atlanta for how long, and that's when you came out to California on a detail or something?

Steve: Yeah, I was there from '98 to 2001 in Atlanta. And in 2000 Mike Spear, they changed election and they were getting rid of the regional director because he was a democrat. And so I got this phone call that said, "We want you to go out and act as Mike Spear's acting," it wasn't regional director though, it was called a CNO Manager and the California/Nevada office was like a little mini region. And they said, "We want you to go out and act out there."

Mendel: Mike was leaving.

Steve: They moved him out, he retired but they basically said you're going and you're out of here. And so I got that phone call. And then I said, "Well I'm a GS 15, for Senior Executive Service, I'd have to apply." And they go, "Yeah, we know that and so go ahead and apply." So they advertise it, there were only three or four people who put in for it. But I didn't want to do the job, I wanted to stay with Sam and Dale and I loved Atlanta and all the refuges and was having a good time. But then I got told if I don't apply, "We're going to put you into Washington D.C. and you're going to be in charge of taking binders and taking the black one and taking all the paper out of the black one and put it in the white one right down from the Secretary. We're going to put you right down here in this corridor." And I said, "Well let me talk to my wife." So Renee and I talked and I said, "Yes, I would love to go Sacramento. I'd love to do that." But it took them ten months to fill that job. You had to apply and I was acting for ten months. And that was a mind blower for me because California had so many problems and they were changing from a huge democratic viewpoint on things to a republican more

active business approach, and just a lot different viewpoint on almost everything issue that was in front of us from water to endangered species, through Klamath, Colorado River; huge, big issues that were just blowing up and the fastest growing spot in the country. And endangered species, public policy and laws, they were total conflict with all the growth and so it was a huge, huge change.

Mendel: That was 2001.

Steve: Yeah, 2000 I got acting.

Mendel: It was still CNO Manager.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: But it was SES?

Steve: Yeah, Senior Executive Service, which was interesting because it wasn't, it didn't have the title of regional director, all the others had that title. But you, Mike Spear had made it where he was so powerful in Washington D.C. so much, there was actually the equivalent or more powerful than the regional directors with the influence you had and the politics and the things going on. Senator Feinstein was very helpful, Senator Reid from Nevada, they were both really high in the democratic side of things. We had a republican administration with very high level democrats trying to tell you what to do. It was probably the toughest political job in the Fish and Wildlife Service from a regional director type position.

Mendel: It may still be.

Steve: Yeah, I think it is. It's still, it's a really hard job because you've got the state too, California State politics are very different and very complicated and lots more state politics than any other state. And then between the Bureau of Reclamation, the Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife Service, all the Federal agencies are complicated and a big mess over water and endangered species, so it's a tough state.

Mendel: Well you oversaw the change from the CNO to becoming the first Region 8.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: So you were there and changed titles with that as you went from being CNO Manager to regional director, right?

Steve: Yeah. There wasn't much change in that other than kind of a funny; the other regional directors were resentful to certain a extent, and now you were equivalent for them and you had to compete; when we'd compete for national money, then all a sudden instead of being CNO, which was part of Region 1, but it was split in half, and you started going after their money too. And so a lot of regional directors didn't like that. They liked me, it wasn't a personal thing, it was just, I really didn't have any problems with any regional directors per say, but there was a lot of fighting going on about money and who got what money and how much. And why does California get so much money compared to the rest of us, so it was a big struggle. That was part changing, that was

different. And a little bit between Portland and Sacramento was a little interesting too, but not bad. And then at the Washington D.C. level, more support really for CNO going to Region 8, we had a lot of support from the Secretary's office. And then having Senate appropriation stuff was really good too, that was really helpful to us. Jerry Lewis was the House Chairmen of Appropriations, so he would call me down there and I'd sit with and he'd even have his office open and sit me in there and talk to me personally for two hours about budget issues and who got what money and where did we need help and support, and how could we help business do a better job for wildlife and things like that. So you talk about your big "P" in politics and everything, this one was; Region 8 was fascinating and you get to spend a lot of time talking about money and issues and had a lot of different viewpoints on it. But you have to be cool and calm and try to go in and try to fix the problem.

Mendel: Well it wasn't easy establishing it as a region because not only maybe internally, but also externally. Congress had to say yes, they had to prove that, right? Because it changed our budget structure, that's what you're referring to but specifically, there was a lot of difficulties, we had to convince them let us do it.

Steve: It was mostly on the House side.

Mendel: And it took a long time.

Steve: Yeah, it took about four years, and it was mostly on the House side. Those committees didn't want to put another division in the budget, so instead of being 7, there's 8 and they didn't want to do that. And they also have, a lot of them were from different states, so for them representing California was always just kind of a big pain, way too much problems and people and you want more money out there and they didn't want to put more money out there. So it was a big conflict. Had to go spend a lot of time over there in the House committees and getting in trouble; and if I ever said, "Yes, I'd like to do that." And they were no, I got in trouble with the Director. Dale Hall finally came in and was able to kind of get it through but it took a couple years too of just working through the issue about do we need one more region, how much money does it cost us, and do you divide up the regional top at Washington D.C. and does it hurt the field or not hurt the field. So those were the real issues that were tough to get through.

Mendel: Did you personally have to do a lot of explaining?

Steve: Yeah, no I spent; we started out with just 18 people in the CNO Office where a regional office normally has 100, 150. And then I put a budget together that was, with Toni Deery's help and others, it just basically said, "No, we're only going to ever, we'll only ever max out at 80." Which is a lot less than any other region. So we wanted to show ourselves as the leanest, meanest region with the least amount of people and the smallest budget. But that would have to come, if you kept it all flat than everybody else in other regions had to go down from a 150 or 125 down to 80.

Mendel: Because that's where the FTE's were going to come from, is from other regions. So they weren't going to give you any new money you had to take it from what you were getting.

Steve: Take it from the other regions basically and say, "You're all going to look like this." So it was a real struggle I think and most regional directors liked what they had and wanted to stay the same size.

Mendel: That's difficult.

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: I understand that. So what year, do you remember what year it became a region?

Steve: I think it was either 2005 or 2006 and that was a bid deal for all of us in the region, but really didn't change hardly anything. We increased the staff a little bit, but I tried to keep it small. And then also felt like it was really important, since we had great project leaders like you and a bunch of others, to try to make sure that we spent time, even though we were a region, like the Cargill, San Francisco Bay, I wanted to make sure we did things that accomplished thing on the ground. And got the Senators like Feinstein and others to help us, so it turned out to be an advantage for us a lot. But trying not to be too bigheaded about it, or I didn't like a whole bunch of people in the regional office either. I tried to always surround myself with really smart people like the Paul Henson's of the world and get people that were smart enough that you could just sort of tell them what to do and they go off and do it. And they don't need ten people do to that, you probably can get away with three or four or five. So trying to get smart, sharp, good people in there.

Mendel: You had some good people in the regional office.

Steve: Yeah, we were lucky.

Mendel: You brought Ken McDermott, wasn't he the first deputy?

Steve: Brought him in, it was really weird because most Ecological Services stuff and we've got two refuge manager types in there, me as a refuge manager, ex refuge manager, and Ken McDermott as a refuge guy, as the Deputy Regional Director, but Ken was really good. I was more trying to think about big issues and big things and keep myself to like five big issues. And then everyday grunt, problem, troubles, struggles, poor Ken McDermott as the Deputy, he had to supervise all the assistant regional directors, he has to make sure whatever I just said that he'd; he would honestly fight with me really good about him telling me that was really dumb or that doesn't make any sense or we can't do that. But if we ended up having to do it, he would go try to find a way to do it. But he would tell me really honestly all the things that would work and maybe not work, but he was great. Once he got there and understood what the challenge and what he was up against, he would go really try hard to, as a Deputy Regional Director, he was incredible and really got along with people, and he could talk to them really well about hard stuff. And some of it would be, "Steve doesn't know what

the hell he's doing," and "Boy, this is really dumb," and "They're coming from Washington D.C. and we've got to go do this, but I need you to help me go do it." And most of them would listen and say, "Okay, well we can go try that." So he was great at communication, a good writer, and very cool, calm, friendly, just a great man, just a really good person. So that was, one of the things I learned too, the higher up you go in an organization, all the refuge managers, all of your key decision makers, project leaders, if you can find these really cool headed, normal, good people, it makes a huge difference in leadership, it really gives you chance to do much more. And again as a regional director, you get credit for all that, but they do all the work. They would usually all smile at me for a couple minutes in the morning and tell me how smart I was and how nice I was, and then they go off and do the important stuff and get it all done. So I liked that part, I got my ten minutes in the morning of respect, so that was good.

Mendel: Well I don't know them all but I know the ones I remember fit the bill of what you talk about, Ken, Paul Henson, Ken McDermott, they were very much that kind of personality.

Steve: Incredible people.

Mendel: I saw Paul, he's still that way.

Steve: Yeah, no they're very, very smart and they also took to solving problems, which a lot of people that are really smart sometimes are not good with communication and solving a problem. And we had a lot of meetings where we'd bring in all the controversial groups like the California Cattlemen Association with environmental groups, we'd sit them in a big room and try to get everybody to talk to each other and start solving a problem, and these guys were really good at that, they were really talented.

Mendel: Well you had one big, you had many, probably, issues, but one of them was the Klamath. It was your big issue, I think, for the most part wasn't it?

Steve: Right, that was a weird one and I got to be, you know I'm the CNO Manager and I've got to go met the Secretary, Kempthorne, in Newport, Oregon on a regional director meeting we had with him. And met on the third floor above a 150 foot cliff and I'm supposed to meet him on a porch and I've got to tell him about all the things we're going to try to do in the Klamath. And Dale Hall, the Director goes, "You better go talk to him because I think he's going to throw you off that floor there and onto the coastline." So I get in and talk to him for, it's supposed to be a half hour meeting, it was three and half hours. And it was talk about taking the dams out, working with the tribes, working with all the farmers. And I kept asking him how much I needed his help as Secretary to we have endangered species, we have water problems, we had big lawsuits, we've got all kinds of, two states, we've got a million problems. And the Secretary of Interior is going to have to fix this but you need to let me go do the following things. And I'd been working at it for a couple years already and had a lot of support from tribes and environmental groups, so I had some solutions for him. But he actually, Kempthorne at first said, "I just told the President when the President's election was just over, and we said we're not taking

any dams out and you're saying I'm going to go take three or four out, right." And I said, "Yeah, we have to take four dams down." And he goes, "So you want me to go in and talk to the President and tell him the election was a joke and we're going to take four dams down." And I go, "Yeah." He goes, "Who are you anyway?" So it was, started out kind of little rough, but he listened really carefully. And I think when he got all done with that session, because they kept coming in to try to get him to go to other meetings and everything else, he kept saying, "Nope, no stop, we're still talking here." So he listened very carefully. I think he understood he had a big challenge in front of him, but it might actually work. And if you could help farmers and tribes together, and get a few environmental groups to settle in on it, then it was worth trying. He did a great job of having a lot of meetings back in Washington D.C., we went back there a lot and sat at his big conference room table and when we got stuck he would kind of help us get over the hump.

Mendel: Well you got some things in place that made some differences.

Steve: Yeah, we got right to the [unintelligible@1:55:08], we ran out of time with the President. If we'd have another six months, we had signed documents, we had all this stuff ready for legislation, we had everything done, which would have worked. And then we had a Presidential election, that's when I, I was just like we're not going to make it. And they're still working on a lot of stuff, they've got the same stuff, I just got a really nice note from the Klamath group telling me how much they appreciated what we did and where we got to and that they wish they could just go finish it up and get her done.

Mendel: Well that through the Bush administration right?

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: Kempthorne, Dirk Kempthorne.

Steve: Yeah, we just ran out time politically. But anytime you get environmental groups and tribes and farmers, all come together took two years, and then to get that into writing took another year with all the different lawyers, literally a hundred lawyers in a room.

Mendel: You spent a lot of road time traveling as Regional Director, you were gone a lot, weren't you, away from your family. Your girls are now, they're in college?

Steve: Yeah. So they're out and gone, but I got, Renee's, not seeing her much and I had to go with; I did a lot of meetings up in like Klamath in the middle of the wintertime and took the Bureau of Reclamation Regional Director or Project Leader with me and a tribal chairman and I had four or five of us stand up and give a talk to a 150 cattlemen or farmers that were very much against everything, and I asked them for help. I said, "Here's what we think will work. Here's how we get through the water problem. Here's how we do this and that. But if you think you can help us, then we can probably do this." And I was shocked

how many times that the people that live in a community, when those; we were all from out of town, the lawyers too that I had with me were from out of town. But if you asked them for help instead of telling them what to do, most of the time they will sit there and think about it a little bit and generally they'll try to help you. But if you tell them, here's the new rules and regulations and the water flows are "x", then they're going to go get their lawyer and fight you all the way through. So we made a lot of progress in the community by community, we probably did 50 of those or talked to different, either it was 10 people or 150 people, just sat down and tried to have a conservation with them. But that was a lot of travel for me, I spent a lot of time away from the Regional Office issues [unintelligible@1:57:32] down here, but I had like five issues I tried to do as a Regional Director and some of them just took a lot of your personal time. You just got to go, and you've got to sit down with somebody and you got to earn their respect, and that's hard to do.

Mendel: Well you'd be on phone calls back to Headquarters and the Hill and the Department a lot early in the morning because of the time difference right?

Steve: Yeah, they did that.

Mendel: So you'd start early sometimes.

Steve: I had to fly back, the reason I retired actually was because doing so much of that, like for instance I had to fly back on a redeye a couple times like twice a week, so I go back on like a Sunday night, have meetings all day Monday, fly back Monday night for a meeting with Feinstein, then get on the plane again Tuesday night, and fly back for all day Wednesday and I just got so exhausted, I just completely wore out. And I wasn't, I don't know if you get older or just more tired or just too much travel. And there wasn't enough vacation time, I took a lot of it too but it really wasn't enough time to get away from all this stuff. Then you get something like Klamath, you get somebody really important and along with a lot of the farmers up there, and so when they would call me and tell me you have to be up here, and sometimes I'd have meetings in the office there and then they'd throw me out in their truck while it was snowing and raining and we'd sit out there for two hours while they were trying to figure out what I said and come back in again. But I got to know about 20 of them really well, and so to me that was more personal, more about becoming friends with somebody that has a really hot, controversial issue. I think Fish and Wildlife Service people that can do that have a big chance to influence a local, national; there's a lot of situations where you can have some influence if you can actually talk with somebody.

Mendel: Well I think one of things you said, you said it more than once as we've been talking, is about instead of telling people what they can't do, ask them for your help. "How can you help me, here's what I need. We could sure use your help with this," whatever it is, species or whatever. And you seem to have a deep understanding of that, I think that is something that is [unintelligible@1:59:51] lacking.

Steve: I think being smart enough to figure out who the right people to ask for help are. Once you get the challenge figured and the problem figured out, then who has influence on that challenge and then are they influenced, on a big shot and a big deal on that. And then can you go meet them and ask for help. If you can, 99% of the people we ever asked said they would be willing to help us, as long as there wasn't a punishment ticket with it. If you could take away the bad treatment to them that treated them badly, and just stay mostly on positive stuff, most of them will help you and kind of go there. It was a hard thing to learn and hard thing to do better and better as you get older you figure out more things.

Mendel: I know the Klamath was one of the things that you worked hard on and you were as successful as anybody ever been in bringing people together up there and it's hard. But another thing I know that you did that was really successful was the acquisition of San Francisco Bay.

Steve: Oh yeah.

Mendel: It was a 100 million dollar acquisition of salt ponds from Cargill, and there was a video made that documents that story of how all the people came together and did all that. But could you tell me a little bit about what you remember how all that happened.

Steve: Well Mike Spear had worked on that, got it started between Cargill and the refuge manager there. And they had 16,000 acres, they had more than that, but look like there was a 250 million dollar purchase of land in the San Francisco Bay that could have a tremendous impact on the wildlife refuge but it was going to be the most expensive land we ever brought; it was going to be 150 to 250 million dollars. And when he left then Cargill came in, the vice president, and Barbara Ransom came in, Bill Britt and him, and her, they sat down, they tried to explain what they were trying to do and they wanted us to cut a deal. And I said—

Mendel: Barbara Boxer or Barbara Feinstein, I mean Dianne Feinstein.

Steve: No, Barbara Ransom and Bill Britt worked for Cargill.

Mendel: Oh, Barbara—

Steve: Barbara Ransom. But she and Bill Britt came over from Cargill and they said they wanted to think about selling this thing but they had all kinds of problems with Fish and Wildlife Service and with the State, and mostly the State stuff. And then the State Wildlife Director came over, I talked to him, and so then I just started getting everybody in the room at one time trying figure out, "Well you quite saying one thing and go there and you do this and you do that, let's all get in one room." And so it took us a year, and then about that time Feinstein started figuring it out too, because a lot of people went to her. And the environmental groups just basically hated it; they wanted the whole thing, the whole 250 million dollar purchase. I knew we could only come up with maybe a hundred million if we're lucky from the state, and Federal government only came up eight or ten, and

getting 90 million out of the state at one time was just unbelievable. So the governor's office, the republicans and the democrats and all this amazing stuff going on. But really it was about sitting in rooms with people, trying to be really polite, trying to work through problems together, and trying to figure it out. And everybody used to yell at me all the time and I got used to that kind of, and I just keep smiling and keep thinking, boy one of the biggest things I could ever do in my life was see if I could be helpful to get this back to the refuge. And we did, but it was a lot of yelling and screaming and I remember one time we had an office meeting with Feinstein and we were down to the very end, the very last part and she said, "This is the deal, this is what's going to happen." And Bill Britt was there from Cargill, and myself, and the State Director. So I had to call the Secretary of Interior and tell her, I couldn't reach the Director, I had to go to the Secretary of Interior, "Here's the deal, here's what it looks like."

Mendel: Is that Gale Norton?

Steve: Yeah. And she was all excited about it, really positive and that was a shocker. So anyway in about 30 minutes we cut the final deal, and Feinstein went down to talk to, 30 different cameras were down there and all of us had to sit there and talk and do news media stuff about what a great deal this was and how we're going to try and pull it off and everything else, and so that was a huge shocker. But once it got through, and she was really good with the environmental groups about this is all we can do, and so they backed off from yelling at me so much about, "you need to do everything." I said, "I don't think I can do that either." So we didn't get the whole thing for the refuge, but we got most of it and all the good stuff, and we got an amount of money that was a record setting amount of money. And I was so excited about that one, that really turned out well all the way from the refuge manager all the way up, people working hard on it, and a major accomplishment; this has been one of the biggest ones I ever did in my life. I was so proud of that, it was incredible, so a lot done there.

Mendel: Yeah that was a big one.

Steve: But again if people got to do that stuff, you're going to get yelled at a lot, and you just got to keep your cool, keep a little sense of humor and then try to solve, keep trying to solve the problem. Bring it up, figure it out who can do what and then convince, like Cargill was a big company that had to be convinced that this was a better path for them too.

Mendel: Ransom

Steve: Yeah.

Mendel: Finally. Barbara Ransom.

Steve: Yeah Barbara Ransom, she was great. I still look up to her a lot because, it's just like in the Fish and Wildlife Service, each company or each different state agency or whatever, their staff and people in there that help you actually get something done, and she was great. And I remember telling her something like, I'm not very religious but I said, "This is something God wants us all to do." And she was

religious, and she goes, "Aw shoot, God wants us to do it." [Mendel laughing] She got really serious about it too.

Mendel: You put the pressure on her.

Steve: I put the, I put pressure on everybody. We had to solve the problem, and we only had so much time. And with these administrations changing, you have to figure out, you know like with the State being democrat, and a President being republican, and having them ever coming together and agree on stuff and being in a state like California, which is all democrat, it's really hard to bring that politics together. But if you have a great deal and a company that will get behind it and accept it, then you're going to do something fantastic for the wildlife refuge system, which is just one of the biggest things we've ever done, it's just incredible so it was a big deal.

Mendel: So you've been Regional Director now for seven or eight years?

Steve: Yeah, it was 2000 acting to 2008.

Mendel: So at some point you started deciding maybe it's time to do something different.

Steve: Yeah, what happened to me was I got exhausted. And for eight years trying to help everybody and trying to help your crew and having a big job with a lot of responsibility, I just wore out. And I could feel myself getting tired and harder to travel, not able to keep up the level of energy I had before and not be able to help people. So I figured I'm 55 years old and I've done a great, to me a wonderful life and had a good life, but it's time to think about trying to do something else. So I retired because I was just too tired, I was just exhausted. And I really missed it when I first retired because of all the action, but I took a lot of consulting work on; I did a lot of the same stuff, so that was helpful too. And went from 800 people to one person, so that was a lot better crew to work with, you don't have to put up with as much stuff. But I really miss all the, I still miss the Fish and Wildlife Service people, I miss what they do. It's an incredible organization with so much potential, and so I miss that. And sometimes I can help people a little bit still by kind of sharing some past experiences and what happened and how it works, and what didn't work, and what did work. But yeah, I was just worn out.

Mendel: You still provide council to leaders in the Service.

Steve: I still talk to a lot of different key people that I know.

Mendel: Paul Souza, current Regional Director.

Steve: Yeah, I've talked to Paul a lot because he's in the same job, and it's confusing and difficult and also I still know the 50 key people in the State, I still know and still talk to, so it's nice to be able to introduce him to some of those people and see who they are and see if he wants to establish a relationship with them and see if he can do things with them. And most of them still really look forward to working with Fish and Wildlife Service, not against Fish and Wildlife

Service. Working against the Fish and Wildlife Service is expensive, time consuming, and not very productive thing. And if you're the other side of it trying to push something through really hard, usually takes forever and not much really gets done. Much better off to the Cargill's of the world And the San Francisco Bay Refuge with cooperation and trying to work hard with people, so I'm a big fan of that still.

Mendel: In retirement, you not only started a consulting business but you also worked with your daughter. She came on board and she went on to get a degree in, was it natural resource management or wildlife?

Steve: Wildlife management, and both my daughters grew up on national wildlife refuges and they're both in natural history stuff. Jena works for the Conservation Fund and Maya worked for the California Fish and Wildlife for a while and then they went to cutting back time and days and stuff like that, and so she's come over and we have a company together and work together on all kinds of the same stuff. So that's worked out great too because both kids are really interested in nature and wildlife, and they know how to work with people and organizations. So they get a lot done; they learned on refuges growing up on them, it's been really great for them.

Mendel: That's very cool. But when you left the Service, you still continued to work with the refuge system, because you worked with the National Wildlife Refuge Association; you were on the board.

Steve: I was on the board for a while, and a couple other boards like the Peregrine Fund and some other things, so I've been; the Refuge Association Board was great. And it was great to see from a different perspective, when you're not in the system, you're watching it from the outside and what's going on. So they had, I was on there for eight years and it was great, learned a lot. And my daughter was on there, Maya was on there for a while. And it's just you learn, and I got a key board members to get on too, so enjoyed that. And it's always a lot of fun to look at what you can do from the outside of the refuge system and try to help them.

Mendel: That's really cool. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that we missed that we should talk about?

Steve: No, I can't think of anything; that's everything and more. You got a bonus on that one.

Mendel: Well that's one of the questions I'm supposed to ask, it's a good one though. Because I know so much about you, I was able to touch on a lot of things that I thought were good. Do you know what your retirement date was?

Steve: Yeah, August in 2008.

Mendel: August of 2008.

Steve: It'll be ten years now here coming up pretty quick. The interesting thing about being retired for ten years, you're still engaged with a lot Fish and Wildlife Service people, talking to them and a lot of

the problems are very similar. And there's a lot of curiosity on how to deal with some of these issues, that sometimes the old ten years ago might help you actually do a better job. So it's always good to talk about that stuff.

Mendel: While this is still going I want to tell you that John Cornely said he met you in 1978 and he wanted me to tell you that you were one of his favorite people.

Steve: He was one of mine too. I applied for the big biologist there, I think it was a GS 11, and he got it and he was a PhD. And it was really fascinating for me to meet somebody that was so smart and could write so well. He came from a more hands on, practical kind of guy, so we got to be really great friends; he was a great guy.

Mendel: I've just gotten to know him recently.

Steve: Yeah, he's had a great career.

Mendel: I called him up and he prompted with several things—

Steve: Yeah, he's an incredible guy. And that's the thing I love so much about Fish and Wildlife is the quality of people, the numbers of fantastic people that are in the organization is just amazing, and what they try to do is really important work. So we're so lucky to have a Fish and Wildlife Service and the great people we have, and trying to get to think about how to solve big problems, watching people learn and grow is really fascinating to me; we're really, really lucky. It's a great organization.

Mendel: Well that kind of finds with the kind of maybe the last question is the future. Kind of touched a little bit on changes, what it was like in the past, but what do you think is going to happen in the future, what's the future of wildlife conservation or the refuge system or the Fish and Wildlife Service or all three?

Steve: Sometimes I worry a little bit about too much that if the Fish and Wildlife Service gets to be too much a government organization and loses track of just being part of a community and being part of a problem solving group of people, then that can be a challenge. And I think now-a-days more and more people get, it's easier just get your eight hours of work and have your laptop and you don't have to; there's more rules and regulations and committee meetings and things like that verses the things I was talking about, softball, having lunch with somebody, just talking to them and getting to know them a little bit. That seems to be disappearing and I think that makes solutions that are so complicated the Fish and Wildlife Service have, it makes them harder to solve. And they don't usually go very fast and they don't go anywhere, so that's the thing I worry about the most that our people are not getting enough experience to work with big decision makers and people and try to get something solved. So that'd be my biggest concern. But it's great people, they're all so really, really smart; they're smarter than I ever was, I can you guarantee that. They've got their laptop and masters and PhD's and they're extremely brilliant people. But

how do we get those people to talk normal people, how are we going to resolve problems, I think that's a challenge.

Mendel: Well, Steve thank you.

Steve: Thank you, that was really interesting. So I hope it turns out and I hope it works.

Mendel: Me too.