Special Topic: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Interviewee: Ronald A. Joseph

In Sidney, Maine

Interviewer: Libby Herland

In Pittsfield, Massachusetts

January 29, 2021 (interview conducted by phone)

Oral History Cover Sheet

Approximate years worked for in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program: 20

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Private Lands State Coordinator, Maine Field Office, Orono, Maine

Most Important Projects: Working with the Farmers Home Administration/Farm Services Agency to protect wetlands and floodplains through easements and fee title transfers to the Fish and Wildlife Service, implementing Swampbuster, and establishing a habitat restoration program on private lands.

Colleagues and Mentors Mentioned in Interview: Wendy Mahaney, Gordon Russell, Carl Schwartz, Bob Scheirer, Doug Mullen, Ken Carr, Dan McCauley, Jerry Longcore, Merton Richards, Stu Fefer, Fred Seavey

Brief Summary of Interview: Ron describes moving to the Maine Field Office when it opened to work on the 1985 Farm Bill. He discusses working on Farmers Home Administration conservation easement reviews, Swampbuster, and the Conservation Reserve Program. Ron describes knocking on doors to generate participation in the private lands habitat restoration program and he describes several of the projects he was involved in throughout the state of Maine. He describes working with staff from Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge, his federal counterparts at the Farmers Home Administration/Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, his state counterparts at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, conservation partners at Ducks Unlimited and The Nature Conservancy, and also working with tribal members from the Penobscot Tribe and the Houlton Band of Maliseets and Micmacs.

The Interview

LIBBY HERLAND: Hi. This is Libby Herland. I'm the retired representative on the Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. Today I am speaking with Ron Joseph, a retired Partners for Fish and Wildlife coordinator for Maine. We are doing this interview – it's January 29, 2021 – we're doing this interview by phone. It is a special topic interview of the Heritage Committee on the establishment and the implementation, evolution of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program in the Fish and Wildlife Service. Ron Joseph was the state coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service in the State of Maine. So, we are going to learn about how the Partners program was implemented in Maine today. So, Ron, thank you so much for agreeing to be, to talk to us about your experiences with the Partners program.

RON JOSEPH: Well, Libby, thanks for the invitation. It's an honor to be on this program and to be able to speak about this. I started in 1990. In fact, I was actually the first person in the office – Maine had just opened up a new field office on the campus of the University of Maine. I think I was the first person to show up at the office. We were located on campus. Wendy Mahaney came in the day after - our 404 coordinator. New office and a new position. Fish and Wildlife Maine Partners – it was actually called Partners for Wildlife program at that time.

LIBBY: Right.

RON: We added "Fish" later (laughter) as we should, really. But I have to say, I was [coordinator from] 1990 until 2010 when I retired. For 20 years, I was the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Coordinator in the state of Maine. It was – I had a 30-year career in the Fish and Wildlife Service – and by far, this was the most rewarding job I ever had in the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was great. I mean, it was a lot, a steep learning curve in the beginning. I thank you for sending me over to New York and for several weeks one summer – maybe the first summer I was there in Orono – to sort of get my feet on the ground, so to speak, and work with Carl [Schwartz] to see exactly how this habitat restoration work played out in the field. Also, I think I participated in a couple of Farmers Home Administration conservation easement reviews, too. That was really, that was really quite valuable.

LIBBY: Right. Yes. So, you were in Ecological Services in Region 5. For our listeners and readers of the transcript, at the time, we were in, this was Region 5 of the Fish and Wildlife Service. We now call that legacy Region 5 because the Fish and Wildlife Service has reorganized. It was reorganized under the Trump administration, so it has a different region now. But when we say "Region 5" we're referring to the northeast region of the Fish and Wildlife Service. In Region 5, the program was coordinated out of Ecological Services, as it was nationally. Was Bob Scheirer the, had [he] been the New England coordinator at that time?

RON: Yes, he was in the New England Office in Concord, New Hampshire. At first, we were a satellite office of the New England Field Office out of Concord, New Hampshire. So, yes, you are right. I handled Maine.

LIBBY: Right. You handled the State of Maine. I know when the program started, because I was the Regional Coordinator from October 1988 to January of 1995, so Bob Scheirer originally had 6 states to cover. So that's obviously a lot of area. I don't know how much work got done in Maine before you got there but obviously there was a need to have a Partners program, so we knew that we had projects up

there that needed to be addressed. So, let's start with that, because at the early beginning of the Partners program, we called in "Private Lands". We called it "Farm Bill".

RON: Yes, we did. You're right.

LIBBY: It had a couple of different names. I still call it, I still sometimes think of myself as the former "Private Lands Coordinator" or the "Farm Bill Coordinator". But it became Partners for Wildlife and then later Partners for Fish and Wildlife. But the focus was really on Farm Bill implementation. That 1985 Farm Bill.

RON: Correct.

LIBBY: Is that what you started doing when you went to the Maine office?

RON: Yes. In fact, I guess probably one of the biggest reasons that they opened up a field office, one of the reasons to open up a field office in Maine was that – well, Gordon Russell was working on hydro projects - a lot of his hydro projects - out of Concord, New Hampshire. They were in Maine. He was traveling a lot to Maine. Bob Scheirer was travelling a lot to Maine to handle Farmers Home Administration conservation easement program. That's a long drive from there to Aroostook County. That's probably a 10-hour drive for him to get up there. So, he was stretched pretty thin covering 6 states. So, you're right. We opened up a Maine field office on campus at the University of Maine. I handled the Partners program. Then we actually hired someone in the 404 program – Wendy Mahaney. Gordon Russell was there as our supervisor. So, we kind of expanded out. But I was there, you're right, primarily to get started to work in the Farmers Home Administration easement program.

LIBBY: Right. That was, you know those were folks that had – did you find that most of the farmers, were they the existing landowners that had Farmers Home loans and they were trying to just keep their property and keep the loan, or were you ending up working on projects were the farmer had actually lost his property?

RON: Both. Actually, did both, Libby. The idea of course was to try to keep them in to farming. As we know, or maybe some of the readers don't know, Farmers Home Administration, or Farm Service Agency, was the lender of last resort. I think in order to qualify for a loan, they had to have been turned down by a couple of commercial banks. So, they are already sort of an "at risk" farmer. But the whole idea was to try to keep them in farming. The properties that I looked at, mostly in Aroostook County, were potato farms. Small potato farms. Some of them were actually much bigger. But the whole idea was we were trying to work on putting some land into conservation easements that wouldn't take cropland out of production. That was a really important issue in the State. I'm sure it was nationally, too. So, we don't want to handcuff these farmers. We want to try to keep them in farming, but also try to give them a break or somehow give them a break on their loans, because actually the public being the loan – we're the ones giving them the loan. We should get something back in return. So, we actually put some conservation easements on mostly forest land and wetlands that were of really very little value to them from an agricultural standpoint, to get their debt reduced. But sometimes it didn't work, and they would be foreclosed on by the Farmers Home Administration. Then we would look at the property. I can give you one example. It's right now, it's only – it's in central Maine, the town of Benton. It's the former Cramer farm. It was a big dairy farm – 400 and some acres. The Farmers Home Administration actually foreclosed on them and said, "Well, we're going to sell this. Why don't you, Ron, go out and look at it

and tell us what you think should be put into conservation easement." I went there with Doug Mullen, who was the refuge manager from Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge. We always worked together. Whenever I looked at a conservation, whenever I looked at a Farmers Home Administration property, I had somebody from Refuges with me, because they had to have some input, because once it was deeded in, a conservation easement was in the deed, Refuges took over that responsibility of overseeing it.

LIBBY: Right.

RON: So, you wanted to know. You wanted to make sure that they knew what they were getting, that they had some input in this. So, Doug went with me to this particular farm. Being the birder that I am, I'm an avid birder, it was a beautiful farm. There's nobody – the farmhouse was still there but nobody's there, and I'm walking down through this drainage ditch, and lo and behold – this is one of my favorite stories by the way – I'm walking down this drainage ditch with this tall reed canary grass and there's a sedge wren singing. Well, sedge wren is a State-endangered bird.

LIBBY: Right. Right.

RON: This property had a sedge wren. It was singing. I went back a week or two later and found the nest. So, I went to Farmers Home Administration and said, "Well," – and that sort of elevates it, once you have established there are threatened or endangered species on the property. That elevates it. So, Farmers Home Administration says, "Well, do you want the property? We'll just give you the property." (laughter)

LIBBY: Wow.

RON: I think they were looking for a reason to give the property to the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, I wrote it up and it went to the Bangor Office of the Farmers Home Administration, and they said, "Yeah, we're going to have a, let's have a ceremony!" They wanted to get some good publicity out of this as well. I can't remember if you came up to that ceremony or not, Libby.

LIBBY: Ah huh [yes].

RON: The land was 485 acres, transferred over to the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's now a refuge. This is, to me it's a really big success story because the farm was pretty marginal to begin with. It was very wet, the fields were very wet. Barely hanging on there as a dairy farm. And now, we've got a 485-piece of federal property – a refuge - in central Maine where there is very little public land. I know for a fact that a lot of people hike there and hunt there. It's become a real magnet for the public. I take great joy in that, knowing that that happened.

LIBBY: Is it still managed by Moosehorn, the folks at Moosehorn refuge?

RON: It's actually now I think managed out of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

LIBBY: Okay. Right. That might be, that's closer.

RON: And for the longest time, they spent quite a bit of time – I encouraged them to keep fields mowed. Of course, dairy farming in Maine has always been marginal and when the property was transferred to us, we had a lot of farmers lined up trying to compete with each other, paying the Fish and Wildlife Service to hay the fields and take the hay. Then, over a period of 10 or 15 years, that really flipped

where we, dairy farms were falling to the wayside and we to actually end up having to pay farmers to cut and remove the hay. 'Cause fields are really important. I mean, these sedge wrens wouldn't have been there had that all reverted back to forest land.

LIBBY: Right.

RON: In Maine, you can't – if you leave a spot uncut for a long time, a hay field for example – this state knows how to grow trees! It would have reverted back to a forest. Not that there's anything wrong with that, 'cause we all know that species adapt, we have various species associated with different kinds of habitat. But this is a pretty unique little spot and to have sedge wrens there I think spoke to it. We ended up doing some restoration on that site, too, 'cause these huge drainage ditches we ended up plugging and creating some beautiful wetlands.

LIBBY: Right. So, what was your working relationship [with Refuges] like? You said you always brought folks from Refuges out to these sites with you. Did they, did you eventually, did you sometimes go to some properties, and you thought they should be protected but Refuges didn't?

RON: No. I never had that. I know it was an issue in some other places, but I never had that issue. 'Cause I honestly took some pride in working with all the refuge managers, listening to what they had to say, and if they said, "Ron, you know, this meets it but I'm not sure that this is something. It's so small, 5 acres, we really don't want to be hand-strapped with that." I couldn't disagree with them. I had developed quite a rapport with Refuges. I think that it all comes down to personal rapport, relationships with people. No matter if it's the farmer or somebody in Refuges. I kind of took pride in trying to get along with people and being reasonable and working things out. I think that really boded well for the Partners program, especially with the Farmers – I keep calling it the Farmers Home Administration - that became the Farm Service Agency.

LIBBY: Right.

RON: Those agencies were pretty conservative leaning and not all that amenable to environmental regs. But they grew to really respect me and trust me. We had a really great working relationship whereas I think if I hadn't, I'm not sure that they would have been so open about transferring the property to us when I told them that this place had an endangered bird. They basically pretty much said, "Ron, we trust you. Whatever you think should be done on all our properties for easements. We know you're not trying to grab more than you should, and we shouldn't put too much cropland [into easements]." I never, I don't think I ever put any cropland into an easement. But I had a good relationship with the Farm Service Agency.

LIBBY: Now, did you work with them, did they have more like countywide offices or were …

RON: They did.

LIBBY: They did. Okay. So, you were working with people that were also field-level people.

RON: Correct. Correct. I worked with – I think Maine has 16 counties, and I worked with representatives from the Farmers Home Administration in all 16 counties. But I made a point of, 'cause their head office was in, the State office was in Bangor which is about a 20-minute drive from Orono, where our office was. I made a point of to spend time at the State office, sitting down with Dave Marshall was his name. He was the head of the farm programs. He was a little leery of the Fish and Wildlife Service and what we

were up to, but over time, I'd say over the course of 6 months, a year, Dave really came around. I invited him out to the field with me to some of these Farm Service sites up in Aroostook County. He was from Aroostook County himself. He, to his credit, he showed up. We did go to quite a few together so he could see what I was up to and what my work was involved. Because we had to work together. I felt like we accomplished quite a bit. I take it as a personal compliment that when I retired, they had a little ceremony for me at the Bangor office and actually gave me a pair of binoculars. (laughter) I don't know if I was supposed to take them or not!

LIBBY: That's okay. You can take them for retirement.

RON: I got binoculars from the Farm Service Agency for being good partners with them.

LIBBY: No ethics violation there, Ron. (laughter)

RON: It's too late now. The statute of limitations expired.

LIBBY: That's right. But you know, I do agree that the personal relationships, I've heard that from almost everybody we've talked with, whether it's with their USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] counterparts or the landowners. [Unintelligible] is really key. Of course, we do call it the Partners program for a reason, so.

RON: Correct.

LIBBY: Yeah, do you …?

RON: I had one story. Can I just tell you one story? It's a …

LIBBY: Absolutely.

RON: It was early August, probably around '19, probably summer of 1990. We hadn't been in the office. I think I arrived at the office in Orono – I guess I was the first one there – February of 1990. So anyway, 6 months later, I had looked at a few Farmers Home Administration properties, easements. I was forewarned by the State office that there was a pretty tough supervisor in Aroostook County, central Aroostook County office. I can't remember his name, and even if I did, I wouldn't mention it. But I was told he was very, very conservative and was not a fan of Fish and Wildlife Service or what we were trying to do. But I had to go up there and look at a property. I met with him. He was not easy to get along with. So, he sends me out to this property in Fort Fairfield. It was called the Smith farm. He said, "We've already foreclosed on it. They're not there." So, I show up in my Fish and Wildlife Service uniform expecting to do an inspection of the property and look for wetlands and things of this sort. I pull up in a Fish and Wildlife Service vehicle and I've got my uniform on, and I walk up to the door, 'cause I could see two or three cars in the driveway. I rapped on the door and the door opens up and he's holding a shotgun. He didn't aim it at me, but the message was really clear. I said, "Okay!". He said, "What are you here for?" So, I told him, and he says, "There aren't any wetlands on this property. There's just cedar swamps." I said, "Okay." So, I just walked back to my car and drove back to Presque Isle and sat down and said, "He's still on the property." They said, "Oh, he's supposed to be out. So, why don't you come back in another month and go do your thing." (laughter) That was the only sort of uncomfortable moment I had but in hindsight, it was actually, it's kind of funny.

LIBBY: It's funny but it does show you that you're dealing with people at a really fragile time in their life.

RON: Yeah. Absolutely.

LIBBY: A really terrible time. So, as far as I know, no one ever was hurt because of this program.

RON: No.

LIBBY: But think about how you worked back in those days. 1990. We didn't have GIS.

RON: No. Correct.

LIBBY: You couldn't look on your computer and see – did we have maps, NWI [National Wetland Inventory] maps?

RON: No. We had maps from the county office of the Farmers Home Administration and a compass. That was basically it.

LIBBY: Kind of like a plot [map]. Was it more a map like a survey map? But you had to find the boundaries?

RON: Yes. Most SCS (Soil Conservation Service), course now it's Natural Resources Conservation Service. You had those old SCS wetland maps that you just... Great big, huge folders. You'd pour through them. Every farm had a wetland map done on it. I would pull that and go out to the farm and make sure that whatever I was looking at lined up with what was on the map. I will never forget. He said, "No, there's no wetlands on this property. Just cedar swamps." (laughter) Yeah, that was quite telling. But you're right, Libby. It was a hard time for them, I'm sure. They were being evicted, basically. But that farm did get sold to another farmer. Actually, I think it got sold to some Amish. I think an Amish, 'cause the Amish population is growing rapidly in Aroostook County. I think an Amish family from New York moved over there and purchased it.

LIBBY: How about that? Do you have any idea how many Farmers Home properties you looked at and how many properties were put under some kind of easement or fee title transfer?

RON: Yeah. I'm going to guess it was probably, I bet it's close to a 100 in the 20 years that I was working. Yeah, easily 10 a year. Easily. Maybe, that might be a little under. I bet it might even be more than that. But Libby, it's been so long now. It's what - I've been retired for 10 years. But I would say at least 100, maybe more. Almost all of them, we recommended conservation easements on them. It was kind of challenging I think for Refuges because they acquired these easements and they were the easement manager and they were responsible for making sure the terms and conditions of the easements were being met. So, I would actually drive up to Aroostook County with some of the new refuge folks that hadn't really been exposed to this and show them where these properties were and walk with them. It was, I think all in all, I think it's a really good deal for the public, that they get something back for all the money that they put into some of these farms.

LIBBY: Right. You know, I, when I left the Partners program, I went into Refuges and I became a refuge manager in New Jersey, and we did not have any Farmers Home Administration easements at, under my, in my area. So, I basically kind of dropped out of the program. I don't really, I didn't keep up with it. I was so busy being a manager. That was a lot. I think I did end up getting a couple, but they were riparian easements. They weren't really, they weren't a classic wetland. They were just areas along a stream that

had been protected. So, important obviously. Riparian areas are very, very important but it wasn't quite the same, so.

RON: I think what is really interesting is that you learned a lot as you worked in this program, and you walk around these farms. There are a couple of properties that we ended up not even getting an easement on because we had to do a hazardous waste review. You may recall. It was a big checklist. I can't remember the whole checklist but one of the things we had to keep an eye open for was hazardous materials, because there were a lot of chemicals used on some of these potato farms. Most of the potato farms in Aroostook County have what are called farm dumps. They're using the areas where there's not, it's not productive land. If it's not productive land, it usually means a wetland. I came across this dump. I think it might have been in the town of Presque Isle but I'm not sure. It looked suspicious to me. I talked with Ken Carr, who was our contaminants specialist in the Concord office. He sent me some material to collect and gave me basically a haz mat suit and some test tubes and stuff to collect. It turned out that this property had, still had some DDT on it. So, I said "Whoa! We're not taking that!" 'Cause then once we get the easement, we're basically responsible for cleaning it up. So, some of those got rejected. Not many but I'd probably say probably two or three of them got rejected because of hazardous, I mean really contaminated sites.

LIBBY: Well, I wonder how Farmers Home handled that?

RON: Good question! (laughter) They probably didn't know about that, I'm guessing. But what are they going to do once they do know about it?

LIBBY: Right. And who wants to buy those properties? If they know about it, then they're on the hook.

RON: Exactly. Open up a can of worms. Yeah.

LIBBY: Wow. Did you get involved much with the other aspects of the Farm Bill? There was Swampbuster and there was the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Were they big in Maine at all?

RON: Yeah. I think probably later came EQIP [Environmental Quality Incentives Program] and WHIP, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, Wetland Reserve Program. I'm glad you brought that up, Libby, because I found out, over the years, and I was a one-man band basically handling the restoration end of the Partners program and also the Farmers Home Administration. I was pretty busy. I had, you know, Maine's a small state relatively and I'd say farming has always sort of been marginal here. I mean, it's not really considered a really big agricultural state although there are some exceptions like Aroostook County where a lot of potatoes are grown. But over the course of my career, the Natural Resources Conservation Service really started getting all these funds for conservation. We just mentioned some. Conservation Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, EQIP. They had all this money, but they didn't have the biological/wildlife/fisheries expertise to deal with it. We had the expertise in my office, but we didn't have the money. So, I helped them spend their money, basically, and they really relied on me quite a bit to give them some advice about, "Okay, how are we going to go about – should this conservation, this CRP land in Aroostook County – how are, what's the value of this to migratory birds, grassland birds?" 'Cause, grassland birds as a group – they're declining across the country greater than any other group. So, it's really important of the, I don't know, 20,000 acres of CRP land in Aroostook County, to make sure that we manage those for grassland birds. Some of the best places to see horned larks and short-eared owls and things of this sort, which are really unusual birds in Maine, is

in Aroostook County on CRP lands. So, I helped NRCS really identify some of these sites in Aroostook County and put some of these lands into CRP that were quite valuable.

LIBBY: I know that the CRP program was, that was not a permanent program. That was a 10 or 15-year agreement.

RON: Right.

LIBBY: Then, just every five or six years or so, the Farm Bill is re-authorized and it changes, and CRP kind of comes and goes, to some degree anyway. Do you think that those lands that were in CRP in the 1990's are still in pretty much grasslands?

RON: Well, I think so. I think they may not be part of the CRP anymore, but they may be shrubland and grassland because, as you may recall, mostly CRP lands were what was called HEL – highly erodible land. So, the whole goal was to take this highly erodible land out of production because it had all kinds of issues with erosion into streams. So, I think the government got wise and said, "Well, wait a minute. We shouldn't be subsidizing this." 'Course, right after World War II, there was a big boom in the population, a big boom in agriculture and production, and it turns out that some of this land that was put into production, especially in Maine, should never have gone into production. That's the sloped lands right next to ponds and brooks. So, the whole idea was to take that out of production and put it into grasslands, and actually pay – I don't know what is was, 30, 40, 50 bucks an acre per year – to let it revert back to grasses. But, you know, I don't know the answer to your question, Libby, but I don't think that those lands are being cultivated now for crops. I'm pretty sure they're not.

LIBBY: Right. Another cool – when I think of Maine, I also think about American woodcock. Did you have any projects that were really focused on American woodcock?

RON: We did. We had quite a few, actually. One I can remember in Bodfish Valley, near the town of Monson – it's a gorgeous property. Big, big alder swales. I actually took Dan McCauley, he is sort of Mr. Woodcock biologist of the, well he was with us, Fish and Wildlife Service, and then of course he went to U.S. Geological Survey. That might have happened under I think the Reagan administration, but I'm not sure. Our research division was split up.

LIBBY: Oh, that was when Bruce Babbitt was the Secretary of the Interior.

RON: Is that when it was? I can't, I don't remember.

LIBBY: Probably under the Clinton administration, I think.

RON: The Clinton administration. Okay. Well, anyway, we had Jerry Longcore, used to be with Patuxent National Wildlife Research Center in Orono. They all got switched over to U.S. Geological Survey. Anyway, Dan McCauley – I don't know if you remember that name – but Dan McCauley was Jerry's assistant. He was a woodcock expert. He prided himself. That was what he did. I can remember taking Dan up to Bodfish Valley on a Partners project. I said, "Dan, you gotta see this property. It's a beautiful valley with fields and then there's alders." I said, "This guy is really interested in woodcock management." We spent probably, I'm going to guess, a week or so up there, laying designs. Then I went to NRCS and got them to chip in some money. Dan actually laid out the cuts in the alders, 'cause you don't want the alders to get too overgrown. You really have to cut some swaths through there to create feeding and courtship flights for woodcock. It turned out to be a really great project. We went

back years later and did some woodcock surveys. The population was boosted by three-fold in there. It was a really good project. But that was one that I remember. But there were lots of others that we worked on, because it is a priority bird, especially in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

LIBBY: Right. That's right. So, let's talk a little bit about how you started working on private land habitat restoration projects. What was that like at the beginning? Was it, what kind of projects did you do and was it hard to find projects?

RON: I'm glad you brought that up, because at first, yes. I can remember going over to New York, the St. Lawrence Valley working with Carl and looking at what they were doing there. I said, "Oh, okay." A light went off in my head. I go back to Maine and tried to find some of these projects. Really, at first, it was basically driving around through central Maine, which I'm familiar with – it's my home base, where I was born and raised. I can remember seeing these ditches in these farm fields. What it was, was knocking on doors and handing them brochures and letting them know who I was. I found that the people that were most receptive to the Partners program were people, fairly young people, that were maybe in their '30's, '40's, with families that had a real conservation-minded background. They bought up this farmland because they wanted to get back to nature, so to speak. They were craving help, and what can we do with this old farm? My biggest clients, if you will, were I think those folks, that said, "Yeah. Oh, I never heard about, never knew about this. So, you're saying to me that you will come on the property and put a ditch plug in this ditch and flood it? So, can we skate on it?" The kids would skate on it in the wintertime. "Oh, yeah!" I would say it was really word of mouth and really knocking on doors. Then I got a backlog built up, and I went to Doug Mullen. I said, "Doug, I've got these projects, restoration projects." I said, "I don't think they're going to be too big." In Maine, the topography is such, unlike the St. Lawrence Valley, you put up a 4-foot earthen ditch plug, you're not going to get more than an acre or two, at most, because of the topography, sloping topography. You put one up in Carl's district, up in northern New York, yeah, you could flood considerably more acreage than that. But we couldn't. But still, nonetheless, it was good work. We got a lot of good projects done. And then people would drive by, and they'd see it and they'd talk to their neighbor and then the neighbors would call me. So, I called Doug. I said, "Doug, I need some help. I've got basically 15,000, 20,000 dollars." I said, "That's not going to go very far if I have to hire a contractor to run an excavator and a backhoe." He says, "Well, I'll tell you what. I've got a guy right here (laughter). I've got the equipment on the refuge, and I've got the equipment manager. I'll send them down." So, I spent a week with him. I think his name was Merton Richards. Oh, a real Downeast character. I don't know if he'd ever been out of Washington County! We were out all summer, he and I, and did a lot of projects that summer. Got caught up on the backlog. I still drive by those sites, Libby, just to look at them, and say, "Yeah, that's one of my projects. Yeah, that's one of my projects." The lands changed hands, but people haven't pulled the plugs out, so I'm very pleased about that.

LIBBY: That's really great. You know, those little 2-acre wetlands scattered all around are really important. Think about the prairie potholes.

RON: Yeah. I like them! Then we had the idea of putting some signs up, which we did. And then, the State of Maine, which was – the relationship between some states and feds aren't the best, and I think there was some of that initial reaction here when we opened up the Partners program. But overtime, I had worked for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife for 3 years, before I went to the Fish and Wildlife Service, so they knew me and they trusted me, and finally they brought me in and said,

“Hey, look. We’ve got some ideas for some Partners projects. Would you be interested?” I said, “Absolutely!” So, we did some cooperative projects together and accomplished quite a bit. I was very happy about that too.

LIBBY: I remember that there wasn’t a whole lot of money to help pay for these projects. You got some money, but a lot of the Partners money was used - that we got from Washington - was used to help pay salaries. To help pay your salary!

RON: Correct.

LIBBY: There wasn’t a whole lot of money for these projects.

RON: That’s why, Libby, it seemed to make sense to me to go help NRCS spend their money on their projects. One of the things that really, like you mentioned at the outset, is that these Partners restoration projects, they vary from region to region and state to state. One of the thing, niches, that we found here, and you were very supportive and I thank you for that, and that is if we are really interested in wetlands and wetland restoration, which we were focused on – the State of Maine approached me, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and said, “Ron, you know where we really could use some help on? I’m not saying forget plugging up drainage ditches, but we’ve got all these beavers that are creating all these wonderful wetlands and they’re flooding roads out. The Maine Department of Transportation is yanking out their dams and draining all these wetlands and destroying all this habitat for black ducks and bitterns and all these wetland dependent birds. What if you helped us fund a program where we could put in some beaver deceivers to keep the water level at a certain level so that it doesn’t flood a public road or somebody’s basement. It’s a win-win. A win-win for the wetland and a win-win for the birds and then a win-win for DOT.” I said, “I’m on it.” That was kind of a niche that we found in Maine, Libby, that worked very well. In fact, I was contacted by the Wildlife Management Institute in D.C., ‘cause they had heard about it. I ended up writing a chapter for one of their manuals on beaver deceivers. Then, some of the other states across the country that were dealing with some of these beaver issues contacted me and talked with me about, “Okay, how did you handle some of this, these issues. Who are your partners?” I thought that was a pretty good way to maximize what money we had and maintaining and creating some wetlands.

LIBBY: For sure. You definitely want to maintain the wetlands and certainly beavers – people have a love/hate relationship with beavers, don’t they?

RON: Oh, yeah.

LIBBY: And it is true that almost every state has a different niche, has a niche. So, you did a lot of beaver work with beaver deceivers. Did you end up doing – and you had that big woodcock project. I mean, I remember that takes a lot of time and particular skill to go in and identify what trees should be cut down and how often there should be some brush hogging in an area or tree removal and stuff like that.

RON: Right. See, I didn’t have that expertise. That’s why I got Dan McCauley, who was right there on campus at the University of Maine. He was eager to do these projects. It just made perfect sense to get Dan out there with me and give me advice in laying out these cuts. It was good. A good way to use our Partners influence and money.

LIBBY: But you knew, though, that that would be a good site for that kind of work to be done.

RON: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LIBBY: Did you end up doing other types of projects? Riparian restoration projects through the Partners program?

RON: Nothing other than fencing, I think, Libby. I think we did some fencing in Aroostook County in a stream that cattle were accessing. We wanted to try to keep the cattle out, the livestock out. We had a, maybe we put some money – yeah, we put some money into a crossing. In fact, NRCS paid for that.

LIBBY: Right.

RON: But some Partners money went into the fencing to keep the livestock out of the riparian zone. But not a lot of that. I'm trying to think of some other unusual [projects]. Some of the – we did mostly, I'd say the bread-and-butter projects were primarily core plugs and ditch plugs in drained wetlands. That was the bulk of our work, and the beaver deceiver work, and then some, quite a bit of woodcock habitat work. But not a lot of riparian work, I would say.

LIBBY: Did you, the program – well, when I think about my career, everything just seemed to get more bureaucratic, more difficult as time went on. Did you find that to be the case also?

RON: Yes. Yes. I did. In fact, that was sort of one of the reasons that I retired when I could, because it seemed to me that all these reporting systems on-line. I didn't grow up in the computer era. I'm very technical challenged when it comes to computers. Basically, I was the illiterate in the office. So, I can't remember these terms, these names. ECOS, I think was one of them. We had to report, all our work had to be, accomplishments had to be entered into these systems. I can remember one day saying to Wendy Mahaney in the office, I said, "Wendy, it's taking me as long to fill out the damn stuff in the computer than it did to accomplish the task!" There's something wrong with that when I can do a project in a couple of hours, and it takes me four hours just to report it! (laughter) That was very frustrating, I've got to say that. Then it was like duplicates. One of the things that really, really bothered me a little bit, and I did bring it up, and that is, you know, everyone wants to count beans. And I get it, beans is what drives the budgets. I get that. But there was some double counting going on. Maybe you don't want to hear this, but I'd work on a project. For example, one with the State, I can picture the project. It was a marsh down in Bowdoinham. But Stu Fefer's office was working on it too. He didn't know I was working on it. I didn't know he was working on it. So, I think they ended up counting the wetland restoration and I did too. Aargh, I don't know!

LIBBY: I know when it comes to doing habitat restoration, it can take a lot of effort for a 2 or 3-acre project. Then you look at it and it doesn't look like you did as much, as much as was accomplished in an area compared to another state where it was a lot easier to do something or the projects were closer together so you could knock out a bunch of them at one time. I know I have heard, obviously every project is a challenge. Just finding people as you said, even though you ended up having a backlog which was great. It's, it can be hard to find these projects. You put a lot of time into them from start to finish.

RON: Yes, you do.

LIBBY: It may not be reflected so much in the accomplishment, that little bean that you have to report.

RON: Correct. No, it's very true. You make a really good point. And that's why I thought, well, I've got to – if beans is what's going to get counted – I've got to find another way to make it look like I'm earning

my keep, so to speak. I would help NRCS spend their WHIP money and EQIP money and then the beaver work with the State. There is one project I did work on, and I think it would have been a really good project, but we just didn't have the local buy-in. By that I mean, we didn't have local support. That was down in the town of Addison which is on the coast. Now most of the coastal wetlands have undergone so much change. Here was one that we really could have worked on. It was a tide gate. I don't know if you are familiar with - for those who are familiar with them - these [are] called flapper gates. They're designed to when the tide goes out, it drains but when the tide comes in, the flapper gate shuts. There was a tide gate in the town of Addison. It really should come out because it had turned this saltwater marsh into a stagnant freshwater wetland. There was a local there, one woman. Her name was Marilee Lovett. She's still an environmental advocate. She really wanted to get these tide gates removed. I worked on that probably for about 5 years, holding meetings at the town office. People were adamantly either for it or really strongly against it. Just didn't trust the government. We had the Corps of Engineers do flood projections – if the tide come in, where the water would go. It looked like it was going to be a great project. Then I can remember the Regional Office. I won't mention names, but he said, "Well, just get it done!" But I said, "You can't just get it done", because there's so many people that are opposed to it in the town. They already told me that if we proceed with this, they're going to go to Olympia Snowe who was the senator from Maine at the time, and Susan Collins [the other U.S. senator]. That would not bode well for the Fish and Wildlife Service, if we shoved this down their throat. So, it ended up not, unfortunately, it was – we had done all our work and had all our ducks lined up. We had the Corps do all these surveys. Would have gotten it permitted, but the town – it came down to it - the town was against it. They had votes. They held votes at the town meeting, and it got turned down, twice.

LIBBY: That's a shame. Were they concerned about mosquitoes, saltmarsh mosquitoes or was it flooding?

RON: I don't think it was so much saltmarsh mosquitoes. It was change. A lot of people are just frightened of change. 'Cause they already had enough saltmarsh around the town that mosquitoes, if they used the argument of saltmarsh mosquitoes, it would have been – let's just say the town had, I don't know, a thousand acres of saltmarsh. We might have been trying to restore 100 acres. It wouldn't have added appreciably to the amount of saltmarsh mosquitoes. But I think what is was, was the fear of the unknown and change. People just don't like change.

LIBBY: Yeah, yeah. Well.

RON: I mean, there weren't even any houses up there. There was one house that could potentially be flooded out. We even found out that there was a fund or grant that we could use to tap into, to actually buy the person out. The person was willing to sell out, but the town just wouldn't go along with it.

LIBBY: Well, you never know. That project might come to life at some point, especially with climate change.

RON: I asked Marilee about it, just the other day. Funny that you bring that up, because I hadn't talked to her probably since I retired. I said, "Marilee, is that going anywhere? Maybe we just need a change of players. Maybe I just need to get out of the picture." She said, "No, no. People have just dug in their heels, and it's just, they're…" She's actually pretty discouraged. They actually turned on her, which is really unfortunate because, you know, she was a very beloved person in town. She just could see the value in doing this, but. No.

LIBBY: That's frustrating.

RON: Tough to turn opinions.

LIBBY: Well maybe a storm will come through one day and pull out the existing gate.

RON: Yeah, exactly. Take it out. Yeah.

LIBBY: And then it'll be protected, and they won't be able to go back in and change it.

RON: Yeah. Rip it right out.

LIBBY: Ron, did you ever work with any of the native, federally-recognized tribes?

RON: Oh, I'm glad you brought that up. Yeah, I worked a lot. In fact, I was the – I forgot all about that. I'm glad you brought that up. I was the official liaison between the Houlton Band of Maliseets and the Micmacs in Aroostook County. I was their designated contact person for fish and wildlife matters. I actually did quite a bit of work with both those tribes. Habitat restoration projects. They didn't have a whole lot of property, but they had some streams that we ended up doing some riparian work on. Plantings and some restoration, especially drainage ditches that we plugged on property that they acquired. Like I said, they didn't have a whole lot of land to work with, but it was good just to reach out to them.

LIBBY: Right. Carl Schwartz was telling me that – well I think it was Carl – I also talked to Eric Derleth. It might have been Eric, but I think it was Carl – talking about a dam removal project. I know that they had some big dam removal projects in Maine that were primarily driven, I think, through FERC [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission] maybe more than anything.

RON: Correct.

LIBBY: Did you ever get involved with any dam removal projects?

RON: The only one I got involved with was in Winterport. But there was a lot of Partners in that one, and mostly like you said, mostly was FERC. I can think of the Winterport one. That dam came out. But that was mostly, I want to say, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], and Stu's office – the Gulf of Maine project office. Then the other one was, of course, the Edwards Dam. That was really, that was the big one. 1999. It came out on the Kennebec [River]. But, no, I didn't really get involved in that one. That was a lot of other monies. I mean that was big, big, huge project to take out.

LIBBY: One of the things that I often thought about the Partners program, and I think it's still true, is that it's like the "white hat" program of the Fish and Wildlife Service. We're the good guys. We're working with private landowners and we're not trying to regulate them or fine them or anything.

RON: Correct.

LIBBY: Did you have, in your office, you had good relationships with landowners for the most part?

RON: Yeah, I did. I think that's why I said, at the outset, that this was probably the best program I ever worked in the Fish and Wildlife Service. But before that, I was in the endangered species program. Talk about, out West, no doubt. But talk about controversy. Geez, I'd go home and couldn't sleep, because section (7) biological opinions that I wrote that was contrary to what BLM [Bureau of Land

Management] wanted to hear or the Bureau of Reclamation or the state. It was very controversial and high stress. This was not. This was proactive. We're going out with landowners because they want us to be on their land. They want us to help them. They're asking for advice. It was such a breath of fresh air to work in a program where you really felt valued rather than just…I'm not saying that the endangered species program isn't valued. It is! You have to have that. But it just didn't fit my personality. It was high stress. And this program was not. It was, I loved it! I had a great career. Absolutely. If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't change anything. I just really loved the Partners program.

LIBBY: I do think you have to be a people person to be in the Partners program.

RON: Yeah. I think so too.

LIBBY: Right. So, did other conservation organizations get involved with, like Ducks Unlimited (DU) or Wild Turkey Federation? Any other groups get involved with any of your projects?

RON: I got involved with DU just on one project. That was with the State of Maine. That was the project down in Bowdoinham. A really big – I forget the landowners name, but he donated a big chunk of land to the State, and they wanted to restore it. They said, "Let's get this restoration done beforehand", 'cause I said, "We really should enter into an agreement with the landowner." So, we ended up working with the landowner. His name – I forget his name. But that was with DU and the State helped facilitate that. Then afterward he gave the land and the wetland to the State. The other project that I worked on with a conservation group was The Nature Conservancy down at the Morse Mountain Conservation area. I don't know if you've been – Sprague River Marsh – I couldn't remember the name of it. We did a project there. Again, these are ditched salt marshes. It was experimental. We said, "Well, let's try some of these marine plywood plugs to put in, to try to restore some of the marsh." I would say three-quarters of them worked really well, and then one of them didn't. Then I retired, but I think I have since been told that one of the ditch marine plugs The Nature Conservancy had actually contracted with the fellow who put it in to take it out, 'cause it actually was not working, functioning the way it was intended. But that was the other big group, conservation group that I worked with, was The Nature Conservancy, specifically on that project. The other one too was up at Crystal Bog. This was an interesting one. It's owned by The Nature Conservancy [for the] prairie fringed orchid, which is a very rare plant. It was getting inundated. It likes to get its feet wet – that's what I've been told about this plant – but not too much water. It was in Aroostook County, near a railroad bed. I worked with a woman named Nancy Sferra from The Nature Conservancy in Topsham. She had me come up and scope it out as a potential Partners project. And it was. What happened was the beaver, again the beaver, were building up against the abandoned railroad trestle, or railroad tracks, and flooding this small habitat of this prairie fringed orchid. Well, The Nature Conservancy doesn't want to kill the beaver, and they don't want to [lose the orchid]. What do we do to get the beaver removed? So, I ended up building - or hiring this guy, Skip Lisle from Vermont - he's in Vermont now but he was with the Penobscot Indian Nation at the time – to put in a state-of-the-art beaver deceiver. It worked beautifully. The guy's really, really good. He is outstanding. He takes a lot of pride in what he does. So, yeah, getting back to your question. I had forgotten about that. I worked a lot with the Penobscot Indian Nation too. Mostly on wetland restoration and some beaver deceiver work on their property. Now the Penobscots, they have quite a bit of land. They got some in the Indian Settlement Act, I think in 1979 or 80. But, yeah, that was the other project I worked on up north with The Nature Conservancy, on Crystal Bog, for the prairie fringed orchid.

LIBBY: Fascinating. What I think about the program as a whole, of course, the variety of the work, of the projects that we did, is just kind of astonishing. To know that you helped save, even in this one project with the prairie fringed orchid – that's significant. So, what are your thoughts about the work you did and its long-term benefits for people and wildlife? And like I asked you; you have revisited some of the sites that you restored. They're still there!

RON: I'm almost amazed that they are still standing. I guess it speaks pretty well to what Doug Mullen's crew did, 'cause I'm not an engineer. As much as I could absorb from Carl over in New York State, I'm still not an engineer. But I understood the basics of core trenching and getting the plug below ground level and then building up, so that you don't get a washout during a freshet. I explained all of this to Merton Richards, the equipment operator at Moosehorn, and he said, "Oh yeah, we do core trenching up here too. We'll get you set up." And then knowing what the slopes are – 3:1, 4:1 slopes - depending on the size of the restored wetland. You've got to make sure that the slopes are sufficient. That you don't get a blowout or a washout. This was, I'm a wildlife biologist and here I am doing engineering work! But I had plenty of help. That was the thing. I had plenty of people to turn to for help. Not just Carl, but also NRCS. They had – Natural Resources Conservation – they had a lot of engineers. They were really willing to help me. So, I was lucky. I could turn to anybody in the State of Maine with a question that I didn't know the answer to, and they were more than willing – well that speaks to the thing, the need to really knock on the door, making connections, getting yourself out there, and forming these relationships with people. 'Cause if you don't have a relationship with people, you're not going to achieve anything on the ground. That, I have to say, that was very rewarding for me to work with these groups. The other one was the Damariscotta River Association. They changed their name. That was really, I got a brochure from a friend of mine the other day who sent me this brochure from the Damariscotta River Association. Their name has changed. I can't remember what it is. Great Bay Land Conservation Land Trust – I think that's what it's called now. But anyway, she sends me this brochure and on the front of it there's this photograph. Beautiful photograph taken on a hill, looking down across this field, and there's a restored wetland there. She said, "You know anything about this restored wetland?" I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact! It was my project!" (laughter) So that was gratifying to see it. I haven't been there in probably 20 years, and to see it in the picture and to see these families – it was a really great photograph of this young couple with their children walking down to the field. I could see the berm in the background. It is a really – it turned out to be a lovely project. Just a beautiful project right next to this spectacular bay.

LIBBY: That's funny.

RON: You know they have challenges. We put this beautiful wetland, restored this beautiful wetland. It was an old farm field that the Damariscotta River Association purchased. There was a historic farmhouse with it. I don't know 1780's. It now serves as their home office. It's a lovely property, and I got to restore the wetland there. They asked, remember years ago, they asked me to come down and look. "Yeah, we can do this." So, we did. And lo and behold, Libby, no sooner that we – did I lose you?

LIBBY: No, I'm here. That was just my computer making a noise.

RON: Oh, I thought I lost you. So, anyway, we put in this earthen dike and seeded it down, so it looks really good. Then wouldn't you know, the muskrats move in (laughter) and start burrowing through it. Aargh! You can't have that happen, because once you get leakage through there, gee whiz, you can blow a whole in it. So, we did have to put some chain link fence. Bury it. We did have to do some work on the

earthen dam and then bury the chain link fence in it to prevent the muskrats from burrowing through this earthen dam. Oh, it's always one thing or another. But that's a beautiful spot. If you ever get up there, check that out. That's great. It's right off Route 1 in Damariscotta.

LIBBY: Yeah. Sometimes our challenges aren't people or weather.

RON: Yeah, I know.

LIBBY: They can be animals.

RON: One of the things, as you know, one of the things that we had on our checklist, when we did the restoration projects, was archeological sites. We had to run all these projects past the State archeologist. I would send these to the State archeologist. His name was Art Spiess. I think he's retired now. Art would write back, "No problem. No problem." Well, this one in Damariscotta, he writes back, and says, "Why don't you meet me down there on such and such a date." I'm thinking, "Oh, okay!" So, I drive down to Damariscotta, and lo and behold, they've got an active dig but it's up on the hill. It's a long way from our wetland project. It's up on this knoll, this beautiful field. It was right next; they discovered this 1,500-year old woman. They had a tent up and they had it dug out. You could see, he wanted me to see the skull and bones.

LIBBY: Oh, my goodness.

RON: It was incredible. I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "We're going to document it. We're going to cover it back up and honor it, and then we're going to leave." He said, "We just need to document it." But, he said, "I wanted you to see this, so you don't think I'm just writing these off as not even, letting your projects off without giving them a second thought." He said, "I wanted you to see this one." But he said, "You're not anywhere, the water level that the wetland that you're going to restore isn't even going to come close to this. So, I have no problems with this." So, then he takes me down to the river. There is this giant shell midden. It's the size of a house, where native Americans would sit and clean these mussels and oysters. It's the biggest shell midden I have ever seen. It's a reminder that there are human civilizations that were long, long before us. Fifteen hundred, two thousand years ago. Now, that's a really remarkable site right there on the Damariscotta River.

LIBBY: Yeah, it is. I remember, again, it's history. If you couldn't do a project or you had to modify a project because of something like that, that's the way it goes.

RON: Correct. Absolutely.

LIBBY: That was a challenge and sometimes you couldn't do a project. But that's just as important in many ways as the habitat benefits that we would have provided.

RON: Oh, absolutely. I was blown away by how stunning it was. I was, I never in my life imagined standing there looking down into a site that had the skull of a 1,500-year-old woman. They even carbon dated her age. I think they said she was only in her early 40's when she died. Well, I guess that might have been old for then.

LIBBY: That might have been old in those days.

RON: It just shows you how rewarding this job is that you can be exposed to some of these disciplines that you don't normally think of when you think of restoration, wetland restoration or habitat restoration. An archeological site.

LIBBY: Well, that's great. We should be wrapping up pretty soon. Can you think of any other projects that you want to share with me, either the good or the bad?

RON: No, I don't think. The only issue that I thought was a little uncomfortable was counting beans. I think that was – I hope that got straightened out, but I can remember there was some discussions about that. I'm not sure how it got resolved. But we worked it out. Stu and I, we eventually did work out who could work on what. I get it. He was trying to survive and trying to get his program up and going, and I don't hold any ill feelings towards anybody.

LIBBY: I would say that's probably the least of the things to think about now, in terms of problems.

RON: Yes. Absolutely. But I can't think of anything else, Libby. If I do, you want me to send you a note or something? I think we've covered it.

LIBBY: No, I think we've got a good idea of what the Partners program was like in the State of Maine and your relationships with folks. Now, somebody was hired to work after you left, so there's still a Partners person in Maine?

RON: There is. Fred Seavey took my spot.

LIBBY: Oh, Fred Seavey, right.

RON: I think he is still there, but I'm not sure of that.

LIBBY: Yes, I actually met him once. His daughter was an intern at Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge.

RON: Is that right?

LIBBY: Yeah, several years ago. Emily. I think her name was Emily Seavey.

RON: Yeah, that sounds right.

LIBBY: Yeah, right. So presumably it goes on, and he's still working on projects.

RON: I'm pretty sure. I checked the website the other day and I think I saw his name. I haven't really, I haven't visited the office in forever, but I think he's still running the Partners program.

LIBBY: Okay. Well, I'm going to stop the recording and you just hang on and I'll be right back, but thank you, thank you so much, Ron.

RON: You're welcome.

Key words: Agriculture, contaminants, cultural resources, endangered species, farms and farming, habitat restoration, partnerships, riparian environments, tribal lands conservation, wetland restoration, wildlife refuges