



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

Interviewee: Mike McCollum
In Arlington, Texas

Interviewer: Libby Herland
In Pittsfield, Massachusetts

February 2, 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: 25 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Texas Partners for Wildlife State Coordinator (Arlington, TX); Region 2 Regional Coordinator for Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Arlington, TX)

Most Important Projects:

Colleagues and Mentors Mentioned in Interview: Bob Misso, Dan Stinnett, Jontie Aldrich, John Peterson, Tim Taylor, Chuck Mullins, Carl Schwartz, Rick Schultz

Brief Summary of Interview: Mike was a permit biologist in Ecological Services (ES) when Regional Director Mike Spear assigned the new Farm Bill program to ES. Mike describes the early days of the Farm Bill program in Washington under the leadership of Bob Misso, including the Conservation Reserve Program and eventually the Wetland Reserve Program. In Texas, Mike evaluated Farmers Home Administration properties and describes the hesitance of the FWS to protect these properties with easements or fee transfer because the properties were small and supported mainly State trust resources. These properties did have habitat restoration potential though, and some were restored through the Partners for Wildlife habitat restoration program on private lands in Texas. Mike describes working with the National Conservation Resources Service, state agencies and private landowners to implement the program. Mike identifies some of the key FWS staff working on the program and when he added the Regional Coordinator responsibilities to his work at the state level in Texas. He also describes how the restoration program expanded from simple wetland restoration to include invasive species removal, and restoration for desert fishes, the golden-cheeked warbler and the black-capped vireo. He describes how some projects were implemented on the ground, as well as the use of prescribed burning as a restoration tool. This evolution from simple wetland restoration to the restoration of all habitat types for a diverse range of species mirrors the implementation of the program nationwide. Importantly, Mike also contributes to our understanding of how the enabling legislation for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program came to be, and how the program expanded to include Fisheries as part of its program title and emphasis.

The Interview

LIBBY HERLAND: Hi, this is Libby Herland. I'm a member of the Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. This is an oral history that I am conducting with Mike McCollum. Mike worked in the Partners program. We are speaking with him because the Heritage Committee is doing a series of interviews with retired and some current Fish and Wildlife Service employees to learn about the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, how it started and how it was implemented throughout the country by the Fish and Wildlife Service. We're talking to people who worked at the national level, the regional level and at the state level. We're thrilled today to have Mike McCollum with us who worked in Texas and covered some other areas as well. Mike, thank you very much for agreeing to do this Partners for Fish and Wildlife interview with us. We really appreciate it.

MIKE MCCOLLUM: It's my pleasure, Libby. It was my life for most of my career with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I'm anxious to talk about it.

LIBBY: That's one thing I have learned is that many people who worked in the Partners program, they worked in it for twenty, thirty years. That's a long time. When did you start working in the Partners program? Where were you working and what was your job title?

MIKE: In 1987, I believe if memory serves, that was about when the Farm Bill started, we needed somebody in Region 2, and they didn't know who, so it fell on me to start trying to put together a Farm Bill Fish and Wildlife Service response, which was something I really needed to do so I could get out of this blasted permit work – working with the Corps [of Engineers] and EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. I was thrilled to try to do that.

LIBBY: Mike, can I interrupt you? Just say, would you clarify what states were part of Region 2 at that time?

MIKE: Region 2 included Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas; the Southwest Region - which is a rather diverse region in the Fish and Wildlife Service. At least I believe it is. I was a field biologist in [the] Arlington, Texas field station – Ecological Services station. I do not know what the politics were, but Mike Spear at that time, who was our Regional Director, chose not to have anyone in Refuges handle this type of work. I do know that at least in Region 3 and possibly 6, the Refuge folks were the ones that handled most of that kind of work. I'm not sure why, but it made more sense in Region 2 to do it in Ecological Services. I started working with NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service] in the Farm Bill. We would evaluate properties where private landowners had funding through the FSA – Farm Service Agency. At that time, best as I can remember, they had different names. That's what they call it now.

LIBBY: Right. It was the Farmers Home Administration at that time.

MIKE: That's right. Farmers Home Administration and Soil Conservation Service. Excuse me, I have another call coming in. I'm not going to take it. I apologize. Hope you can edit that out. I started working primarily with the Farmers Home Administration to evaluate properties that were up for refinancing. At that point, the Fish and Wildlife Service could take those properties, or portions of those properties, or the State agency could take some of those properties. In Texas, primarily because of the political and

ownership climate, 85 to 90 per cent of the state is in private ownership. Fish and Wildlife Service was not of a mindset to go in and take even pretty good properties into the National Wildlife Refuge System, mainly because we didn't want to take land away from the private landowners, but also because these were not really large holdings. So, we would evaluate those, and found multiple opportunities to do work to restore habitat or improve habitat for federal trust resources. Mostly, the property had better implementation for management of state trust resources than federal trust resources, because they were small holdings, generally.

LIBBY: What was small in Texas? (laughter)

MIKE: Well, there were Farmers Home stuff on old dairies or operating dairies, that were probably not over 100, 200 acres, which makes it difficult for the refuge system to operate as satellite pieces of property. It just didn't make a whole lot of sense. That might have been one of the reasons why our Regional Director at that time, Mike Spear, decided "Well, let's just give it to Ecological Services." Man, I am glad he did. It gave me a new lease on life, and it gave us the opportunity to make contacts. That lasted until actually 1988 or 1989 – fiscal '88, early calendar '89. Bob Misso, who was the – I don't know whether he was given that title or it was just de facto – Partners for Wildlife [Coordinator]– because it wasn't Partners for Fish and Wildlife in the beginning.

LIBBY: Right.

MIKE: Bob and I were in graduate school together at Texas A&M. I have a long history with Bob. He wanted us to start a Partners for Wildlife program. In its infancy, it hadn't been named that yet, I do not believe. But, from Farmers Home, FSA – I'm going to call it FSA 'cause that's what I remember it better as.

LIBBY: Okay.

MIKE: There was a Conservation Reserve Program at NRCS. At that time, it had what I called a wetland, a wet component to the Conservation Reserve, which was mostly non-hydric soil properties. But we saw opportunities and NRCS recognized opportunities, to do some additional work in hydric soils through the Conservation Reserve Program. Out of that was born, eventually, the Wetland Reserve Program.

LIBBY: Right.

MIKE: Hydric soils means wetlands to biologists. We had an opportunity then to do some work on federal trust resources, primarily waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and associated species. We didn't have any money, or at least in Region 2 we didn't have any money. So, Bob started funneling us a little bit of money out of the Washington office. We started venturing out. Bob said, "Look, you've got to get on private lands in Texas and in Oklahoma." My counterpart in Oklahoma was Danny Stinnett, before he moved up to Region 3. That's what we tried to do. Well, we had a Regional Director – now this is my story and Mike Spear might disavow this information, but it was my understanding that Frank Dunkle, who was our Director in Washington at that time, liked the idea of the program ...

LIBBY: Yes, he did.

MIKE: ... of working in private lands. Well, I might be spreading political dirt here, but it didn't appear that our Regional Director liked our Director, so if it was good enough for our Director in Washington, it wasn't going to be good enough for Region 2. So, Bob started funneling money down to me. At that time, I was the only one who was doing Partners-style work on private lands, and it was all in Texas. I had the entire state, from the panhandle to the Gulf coast to New Mexico to Louisiana. It was a large area, which means that I could have used a lot of money that we didn't have. Bob got me introduced to Amos Emo who was the director, I guess was his title, of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Amos liked the idea of giving us a grant. He gave Region 2 a grant, which tickled me to death because I was ready for Danny to get some money and to expand the program into New Mexico and Arizona on the private lands that were available in those two states. Well, Mike Spear said, "You got the grant, you spend the money." It wasn't difficult to spend \$150,000 and that was with a counterpart from whoever we did business with. There was a 50-50 cost share. So that was \$300,000 worth of work on private lands that we could do if we could find landowners. And we found landowners immediately.

LIBBY: How did you do that? How did you find them?

MIKE: I beat the bushes. I called non-government organizations, NGOs, that I knew were involved in working on their lands, plus private lands. Now, NGOs were working on non-federal lands, and that was what got my foot in the door, were some of those. The Wildlife Conservancy was a big player and The Nature Conservancy – Texas Nature Conservancy. Each state, I guess, has their own organizations. So, we spent the money pretty quickly and showed the Washington Office that we could be a player in that game, which gave us an opportunity to get more money from the Washington Office to do our work. Now, our salaries were not paid by any of that money.

LIBBY: Right.

MIKE: We were still Ecological Services folks which meant that we still had other responsibilities, but it didn't take long to develop this into a full-fledged program in Region 2. So, in 1989, I put together, along with the NRCS – they were major partners in the program in all four of our states, eventually – but [first] in Texas and Oklahoma. It was shortly after that that Danny Stinnett moved up to Region 3. We hired Jontie Aldrich from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to start doing the work in Oklahoma. That was a success from the beginning, just like Texas was.

LIBBY: Jontie has been interviewed for this program, as has Bob Misso. It's really great because we are getting everybody's perspective, and you are starting to see how everybody's weaving together their work and all the efforts that they did on the program, which is great. Tell me a little bit about these projects that you were doing in Texas. Were they habitat restoration projects?

MIKE: Yes.

LIBBY: Were they wetland restorations or were they some other kind of habitat restoration?

MIKE: We started out on wetlands. We sold this thing in Texas as wetlands. Wetlands in Texas means waterfowl, and waterfowl hunting throughout the State of Texas from the prairie potholes in the panhandle to the ephemeral and intermittent wetlands in the east Texas area to the coastal prairies and the bays and estuaries. Waterfowl is big. So, we were able to tweak the interest of a lot of people. The first project I had was a waterfowl restoration and improvement/enhancement program [project]. We had a

landowner over on the Trinity River in Texas, Navarro County, named Barry Austin who was already an avid waterfowl manager. But he needed some technical assistance, or at least he thought he did. Barry's as good a wetland/waterfowl biologist as you can find and he's just a private landowner. I shouldn't say "just" a private landowner because that implies simplicity. The restoration of wetlands and enhancement of wetlands is anything but simplistic. He and his family owned about 3,800 acres on the Trinity River. It had been an old sand and gravel mining operation before his family purchased the property. He recognized an opportunity to really enhance and improve his wetland for waterfowl work. So NRCS contacted me, and I went down there. To be honest, I would have spent money down there, regardless, just to get the program started. But it was much, much more successful than that. He had tried to build a few – hadn't tried, he had done – a few wetlands on his property. Small wetland areas that, a couple were created, but they were created in an area that was perfect for their creation, right along the floodplain of the river. In 1989, we signed an agreement with him. That agreement, although it's since expired, even in retirement I go down there twice a year at least, sometimes, mostly more, to look at his wetlands and make recommendations to him and help him find funding from other locations to expand it even more.

LIBBY: Wow. That's great.

MIKE: We have probably, on that 3,800 acres, there's probably 150, maybe 200 acres of managed, seasonal water in the Trinity River floodplain. Now that's what kicked it off. I became acquainted with Barry through Jimmy Stewart, who was the NRCS man down there in Navarro County. From that relationship with Barry and Jimmy, Barry and Jimmy got me many, many, many more projects. Some projects just weren't what we could do, that we could justify. I still have a wonderful relationship with Barry. Jimmy has retired and is doing other things now. But that's where it kicked off.

LIBBY: That's great. I don't know the counties in Texas. Is Navarro County far from where you worked? Was it a long way to travel or was it fairly close by?

MIKE: Navarro County – Barry's ranch – is probably an hour and 15 minutes from Arlington.

LIBBY: That's not too bad.

MIKE: It was easy to get to. But we also gained an interest in Navarro County because of the wetland component of the Conservation Reserve Program. That's where I met Jimmy and doing work there. So, from there, it just springboarded to bigger and better things.

LIBBY: Who did the design for all the wetland restorations? Did you do that, or did you have help from NRCS to actually figure out the quote "engineering" aspect of it? Were these simple ditch plugs that you were doing or was it a bit more complicated than that?

MIKE: Well, it was from ditch plugs to much more complicated. On the wet portion of the Conservation Reserve, it was mostly plugging some ditches. But when we got onto private lands, there was much more engineering involvement. NRCS dedicated several engineering teams to go out and do the engineering, to design these things, to design the size of the pipe that went into a levee, where we could manage the water, move it up and down, drain it. I was concerned initially that some of these landowners might want to build a deep pond. In reality, a few of them did, and those we walked away from, because we were not interested in building a fishing pond, although we certainly were not against landowners using this water to water their cattle or other livestock. It's kind of interesting from Barry's project, he had two sons at

A&M at that time. One of them was majoring in agriculture engineering, in order to theoretically take over the ranch when Barry turned it over to him. Well, these seasonal shallow water wetlands were perfect for raising wild crawfish. At one point, we even tried to interject and develop a program in Navarro County where we would help them get block grants for crawfish processing. Now, these weren't introduced white crawfish. These were native crawfish. At one point, his oldest son Chris asked me if he could do a study on some of our wetlands on the ranch in Navarro County. I told him that I thought that would be a wonderful selling point if it was successful. Well, it turns out that they could raise – now I'm stretching here to remember – but they could raise almost a thousand pounds per acre of wild crawfish. They could harvest that many more crawfish in those wetlands that we restored or enhanced than they could in commercial crawfish ponds. They were bigger crawfish. That was a pretty interesting sideline. We were not able to pull off the block grant for Navarro County, but it just shows that natural wetlands are extremely productive not only for shorebirds and wading birds but because of the food source in these wetlands, it benefitted a wide variety of critters, many of which were not federal trust resources, but it didn't matter because it was an environmentally sensitive and environmentally sound management option.

LIBBY: These seasonal wetlands are wet mostly in the winter then? Fall, winter, and spring, I assume?

MIKE: Yes. Because we tried to sell these things as waterfowl enhancement, we would start flooding or plugging the pipes up with flashboard risers and try to get the soil moist and possibly saturated so that during the wintertime, when we would hopefully get some moisture, there would be enough water in the wetlands. Of course, you don't need but 6 or 8 inches.

LIBBY: That's right.

MIKE: We would flood these things in the winter, drain them generally, start trying to drain them, after the duck season was over in February [which] would then give them a moist seed bed - sometimes it was a pretty dry seedbed - to start growing the vegetation that was important for wetland-related species. We would even go from one wetland to the other picking up wetland species, plant species, and planting them.

LIBBY: Mike, that sounds like open marsh water management [correction: moist soil management, not open marsh water management].

MIKE: Well, it's all of the above, Libby. Keeping water on the ground in the depressional areas when the waterfowl and the migrating shorebirds and wading birds need it, to sometimes even planting wheat and oats in the base of these things, and let the livestock graze it as well. Wildlife and livestock are not mutually exclusive. In many, many cases, if not most cases, they rely on each other to improve the habitat for each other. Now we wouldn't plant grain crops in all of them, maybe just a very few, and initially just to stabilize the soil, because there was a berm in some of the levee-type things in some of these areas. So, we had to stabilize the soil after we had built something. Now the NRCS provided wonderful and important, valuable engineering and other technical assistance, but over time you kind of develop a knack for it yourself. Our office bought laser levels so that we could lay out and design in the instance where NRCS had other responsibilities and couldn't get to us in time. It really wasn't their work so much as it was our work. So, we were able to design and develop some of these things on our own. They're not difficult to do on the scale that we would do it. In fact, we would loan out our laser levels to landowners and let them do the work, do the engineering. If you are talking about a large landowner, and that's what we concentrated on at first because we'd get a bigger bang for the buck with that, they had the equipment

to do the work. They had belly scrapers. They had bulldozers. They had excavators. They could do the work themselves. So, if we could provide them the technical assistance or the equipment to design it themselves, they could do it. You can get more work done that way, particularly if you have landowners that are so interested and so involved, they are willing to do it and spend much more of their own money and time and energy than I had available to me.

LIBBY: That's really great.

MIKE: The life blood of the Partners program at that time, and I assume now, are the private landowners. Without them, we've got nothing. One of the questions on your sheet here was who else should we talk to? Well, I'd urge you to find some landowners and let them tell you how wonderful the program is.

LIBBY: Yeah. We actually – Carl Masden gave us a couple of names for landowners in, I think they were in South Dakota. But if you know any landowners down there, you can send me their names, if you think of anybody. If Barry Austin would be willing to talk to us, that might be a great place to start. Or somebody else.

MIKE: Well, Barry is probably one of the better spokespersons of the landowners. One of my other really, really good landowners just recently passed away with Parkinson's disease. He would have been a great guy to talk to. Barry has promoted this program far and wide in order to get more money from Washington. Barry sponsored a meeting, a field trip, to come down for the folks from Washington. Bob Misso was the guy I brought down. We ended up getting another half a million dollars out of the Washington Office, primarily because Barry fed us fried elk steak. When Bob wanted another one, Barry said, "It will cost you a half a million dollars. Give Mike some money down here so he can do more work." (laughter) Well, we got it. Now, that's getting kind of far afield here, I guess.

LIBBY: No. I love it. That's a great story. That's fabulous.

MIKE: I'll tell you. Mike Spear still didn't like the program, even though we were successful. So, we brought him down to Barry's. Barry had harvested, I don't know, two to three hundred pounds of wild shrimp - wild crawfish - excuse me. Brought Mike down, and let Mike harvest some crawfish out of Barry's traps. Barry boiled them, and at that point, Mike was a believer in the program as well. He originally thought, Mike Spear originally thought, we were funding commercial waterfowl operations.

LIBBY: Ah. Okay.

MIKE: He didn't believe it was appropriate for the federal government – the Fish and Wildlife Service – to fund commercial operations like that. I agree with him in part. He was afraid we were bringing ducks to the gun. So, we came up with Barry. Barry said, "Well, just limit how much we can shoot over these wetlands", 'cause he did lease out some of them to duck hunters. So, we developed some language that we put in our agreements, that they would not hunt these wetlands more than two consecutive days, and only in the mornings. Now, that was a burr in the saddle of Texas Parks and Wildlife because they didn't believe that we should be limiting that. But what we found was that the landowners preferred, even though they were making money off of these lessees, they preferred that they not spend near as much time on their property as they could have. So, we would hunt no more than four days a week, no more than two consecutive days, and only in the mornings. Well, the hunters didn't care at all. They were happy because they were getting quality waterfowl hunting time. But Parks and Wildlife weren't really happy about that,

because we were getting landowners enrolled in our program that they weren't getting. They were unhappy with us about that. But the idea was that if we overshot a wetland, a waterfowl area, ducks would move on, and the hunters and landowners wanted to keep them there as long as possible.

LIBBY: Right. Right.

MIKE: What we did try to do, when we started getting money, we started spreading out. I had projects in the Trans-Pecos area of Texas, which is way out there. I had projects in the panhandle. A lot of pothole country up there; prairie potholes in the Texas panhandle. We would spread these things out. I would sell it to the landowners that it's just like when you are going on a long trip, you've got to be able to find a place to rest, get a glass of tea, get a hamburger, go to the bathroom, whatever you needed to do. But the more of these things that we had available, the more opportunities for the waterfowl to find something that they needed, that they liked, and when they moved on, they could find something else not that far down the road.

LIBBY: That's right.

MIKE: We were very successful with that. I'm looking at your list here. Who came up with the idea of restoring on private lands? I'm going to have to give that credit to Bob Misso. Bob was very, very good at recognizing opportunities for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

LIBBY: Right. He got that – you're absolutely right. Part of that also came from the work that had been done in Region 3 where they had been working on private lands, not as part of the Farm Bill program or anything. They had just been restoring wetlands.

MIKE: Yes. Rick Schultz, I guess – if Bob was the grandfather, Rick was probably the father of the wetland restoration effort with the Fish and Wildlife Service on private lands. It just makes sense because our refuge lands are finite. In areas where there is private land ownership, the opportunities are almost infinite. Obviously, you reach a saturation point but Rick started it, in my view, and was very, very successful at it. I think that's why Danny [Stinnett] moved up to Region 3, 'cause he ended up taking Rick's job when he retired.

LIBBY: Right. So, your program is expanding in Texas.

MIKE: And Oklahoma.

LIBBY: And Oklahoma. At some point, you became the Regional – I don't want to bump you into your Regional Coordinator position just yet if you're not finished with Texas, but I know that you did end up taking on more responsibility in a different way. Is that correct?

MIKE: That's correct. John Peterson was our first Regional Coordinator. He had moved out of the field station – he was a field office coordinator in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is where our Regional Office is located. When Mike Spear finally signed on to the program, accepted it, decided it was a good program, John moved over there for about a year, maybe two, to be the Regional Coordinator. His responsibility was just to try to get us more funding. John was reasonably successful at that. Then he retired and then Tim Taylor moved out of the Washington Office down to Austin and moved the Regional Coordinator position to Austin, 'cause that is where he had relocated. He was there for about a year, then

he retired or resigned and moved to Fredericksburg to operate his father-in-law's art studio down there. That was in fiscal '92, late in calendar '91. Then I took over as the Regional Coordinator. Fortunately for me, they allowed me to stay in Arlington and do the job. I was the only remote - at least out of the Regional Office - Regional Coordinator in the program.

LIBBY: That's really unusual. That's good for you.

MIKE: It was wonderful for me. I would not have taken it if I had to move, because I had a son in high school and a daughter about to start junior high school. I wasn't going to uproot [them] and my wife was a teacher. So, we weren't going to relocate just to get another grade increase. It wasn't going to be worth it. So, I took over there. Now, during the interim, before I became the Regional Coordinator, we didn't hire any new employees, but we designated Chuck Mullins in Albuquerque as the State Coordinator for New Mexico, and - his name slips me, I apologize for that, who was in Arizona - he was at the Phoenix Field Station. So, we had one person in New Mexico, one person in Arizona, one person in Oklahoma who was Jontie Aldrich, and I was the State Coordinator for Texas and the Regional Coordinator - dual jobs.

LIBBY: You've got to be kidding.

MIKE: And, also, the Farm Bill Coordinator. So, I was juggling several balls in the air at one time, but we had also hired some folks in Texas, or at least converted some folks in Texas who were doing other things, to be Partners biologists. Now most of them also had dual responsibilities. They were permit biologists or they worked with other programs, maybe in conjunction with a refuge - at least down on the coast, the Texas coast. We were beginning to grow, and it was about that time that we were beginning to grow, I went to a meeting in Minneapolis, I believe, and [FWS Director] Mollie Beattie was there. She showed up and she called all the Partners - this was a Farm Bill Fish and Wildlife Service/NRCS joint meeting - on how we were going to do the Farm Bill stuff. So, Mollie called us together. Bill Clinton was the President. She said, "Your program is a 12-million-dollar program nationwide. Congress needs 12 million dollars for other things." We weren't funded by legislation. We were just funded. So, she said, "If you want your program to survive, you've got to do something, and that something is to possibly have your landowners contact their elected officials." Well, that was a success. I'm [not] sure other regions did it the same way, but at least in Oklahoma and Texas, we brought landowners into - this is probably going to be looked at by the Inspector General - but we brought landowners into our offices, gave them an office with a phone, and said, "Call your elected officials, but first call other landowners." (laughter) We gave them a list of the landowners. Get them to talk to your elected officials. And they did! We had offers from many landowners to come in and do that. We just had a couple come in, and then they in turn contacted other landowners and those landowners contacted their elected officials. The light bulb came on, and Carl Schwartz [FWS NY State Coordinator] and I, at that time, started conniving. Carl said, "We've got to get some enabling legislation." I said, "How do we do that, Carl?" He said, "Let's you and I write it. We'll write the legislation." Looking at other pieces of legislation, for programs that were much more complicated than ours, we started writing this enabling legislation, at the same time, looking for someone in the Congress of the United States to drop this bill.

LIBBY: Right. Someone's got to sponsor it and introduce it.

MIKE: That's correct. Introduce this legislation. See how it shakes out. Well, we wrote this 10-page enabling legislation. It looked good. One of our landowners, an attorney, has a daughter, had a daughter -

he's passed away – a daughter that had consulted with legislators in the State of Texas to develop legislation for various sundry programs. She looked this over. She said, “It’s awfully good, but it’s awfully detailed, and it’s awfully thick.” She said, “So rethink this, and pare it down a little bit.” Well, Carl and I tried to, and then we, at least I got frustrated. So, it sat there. He had a copy, and I had a copy. And then, Oklahoma - Senator Jim Inhofe - had some staff members who were avid outdoor persons. It took a while, but in 2004 or 2005, Gale Norton was the Secretary of the Interior. Lynn Scarlet was her deputy. Well, Lynn loved the program. She would come down at least to Texas and Oklahoma and look at all of our projects and try to figure out a way to help us get more money. Well, she championed this bill and in 2006, as we know, George W. Bush signed enabling legislation. It’s still on the books. It took a while but in the interim, from the time all that started, the Fisheries folks decided that they liked what we were doing, so they wanted to do a “Partners for Fisheries” program. Well, the Secretary of the Interior and the Director, John Turner I believe, didn’t see the efficacy of two programs like that, when we could have one program and have both fisheries and upland biologists do the work. So, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife – the Partners program – got a new name. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife. It just took off from there.

LIBBY: This is all about the same time, about 2005? 2006?

MIKE: No, the Fisheries part of it, and I don’t remember exactly the year, but it was in the late 1990’s.

LIBBY: Okay. Great. Super. So, it’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife. I think it might have been, oh geez, I was the Regional Coordinator in the northeast region, until January 1995. I don’t remember it being called – yeah, it was still Partners for Wildlife then, so it was obviously after 1995.

MIKE: I think it was, it could have been as late as 2000, but I don’t believe it was.

LIBBY: I don’t think we’ve actually pinned down the date, but I have, other folks have talked about how Fisheries came in, although I like your story. You’ve given us a little bit more information about that. That’s awesome.

MIKE: When I left the region, when I left the Service, in 2012, we had biologists working out of Fisheries offices - dedicated Fisheries offices – who did that kind of work. It wasn’t fisheries work. We were able to do that primarily because field supervisors recognized the value of their, one or more of their biologists, doing wetland work. We had a biologist at Pinetop, Arizona who worked with desert fishes. He would work with the Arizona Game and Fish Commission, I believe is their name, on desert fishes that were threatened or endangered, either on the state or the federal list. He was designated Biologist of the Year in Arizona because of his work. We’ve been able to work with the State agencies very closely. New Mexico less so. I’m still not satisfied [that] I know why that was the situation, because our biologist was very good and worked very hard. Now, we were able to, in New Mexico, spread out a little bit with their State agency when the “Archery for School” program came about. We were able to fund those, help them fund that type of program because it was certainly beneficial for high school students to be involved in outdoor sports and at the same time, be exposed to education and the benefit of managing Federal resources and State trust resources in their states, in their counties, or on their properties. There’s some large ranches in New Mexico that are only partly on Federal lease lands. A lot of them are privately owned. In the arid part of the Southwest, it’s very difficult to find restorable wetlands. The water’s just not there. But we were also able to expand the program from not just wetlands but to ecosystem management, native ecosystem management. When you can manage native ecosystems with or without a

lot of water, then you are doing a great service to the environment and to the species, Federal and State trust species, that rely on those environments. The program went from wetlands to “all of the above.”

LIBBY: It’s very interesting, Mike, because this is a pattern that is emerging with these interviews, that the restoration program started with wetlands and that it just kept growing, and is basically now, wherever we can restore habitat in ...

MIKE: That’s correct. In the arid Southwest, salt cedar ...

LIBBY: Yes, that’s invasive.

MIKE: It’s a pervasive and insidious invasive species ...

LIBBY: I’ve heard of that.

MIKE: ... that sucks the water out of the ground. It often times replaces native habitat. In Arizona, New Mexico, parts of the Texas panhandle and western Oklahoma, where salt cedar had overtaken native trust species along these drainages and arroyos, they were species that required far more water to survive than the native species and would, in fact, crowd everything out. In New Mexico, Russian olive was planted, just like salt cedar, for windbreaks and erosion control. Took the place of the native New Mexico olive or the desert willow. That was something that we did not want to see take place. To the limited extent that we could do some work, we would go in, work with the landowners, NRCS or other conservation organizations in those areas to eradicate the pervasive invasive species and replace it with the native species that was much more beneficial to the native wildlife, be it Federal trust or State trust resources. The program, like you said, expanded from wetlands to anything that we could use to get our foot in the door. It wasn’t a complete success, but I’m going to say it was a 95 percent success, until the emphasis of the Fish and Wildlife Service changed, and we were forced to – had to, in order to survive - change the way we did business.

LIBBY: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

MIKE: Yes. There was an emphasis in the Fish and Wildlife Service on endangered species. Ultimately, that’s what we had to spend our money on. In fact, in Region 2, that’s one of the reasons I was ready to retire, because the program was getting away from our roots, our private land roots. We were spending more money on grants to States or grants to non-governmental organizations who would spend or then fund endangered species. Now, there’s nothing wrong with doing endangered species work. We did our share of endangered species work in Region 2 when I was Regional Coordinator. But, to change the emphasis from working on private lands in Texas and Oklahoma - that greatly limited our opportunities. The parts of our region where we had more Federal lands that were owned outright and managed or not managed or leased to private landowners, private ranchers - they had a bigger opportunity. Of course, in the arid Southwest, desert fishes are the species that need the more emphasis, at least perceived to need the more emphasis. We’ve gotten away from working on private lands. In fact, I’m told now that wetlands are not anything that would even be considered. Now, endangered species absolutely are important. In fact, I’ll go on record saying that other than the National Wildlife Refuge [System] Administration Act, the Endangered Species Act may be the most important legislation that the Fish and Wildlife has the authority to work under. It’s just that “endangered species”, particularly in private landowner states, are dirty words. They perceive, and I think in many cases it’s reality, that the Fish and Wildlife Service has

been heavy-handed and trying to shove endangered species down their throats. And they don't like it. As a private landowner myself, I wouldn't like it either. But that's the direction that the Fish and Wildlife Service has chosen. It is an admirable direction. We need to do something to recover these endangered species to the extent that we can. In the case of the golden-cheeked warbler, for example, in Texas, the overwintering habitat is the much more critical habitat. That's in Central America. So, we can do all the work up here that we can do, and likely not advance the species' survival very much because the overwintering habitat is critical, and we don't have any control over that.

LIBBY: That's right. (unintelligible)

MIKE: That's just one example.

LIBBY: This is when you don't have enough money to really properly fund the work that we do. So, you take money either from one program or you change the emphasis in that program so that it can go towards other things.

MIKE: Or you leverage money with other funding opportunities. We were able to do that successfully in Region 2 on waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, desert fishes, invasive species control. Whatever the opportunity that presented itself to us, we were able to leverage money. Now, it also makes good sense, however, that if we can give a grant to an NGO or a State agency for whatever it might be, then that's leveraging not only money but people. The more people you get in the field doing the work, the more successful you're going to be.

LIBBY: That's right. Awesome.

MIKE: Some more important restoration projects - desert fishes in Arizona, invasive upland species in Arizona - were very, very, very successful restoration projects. The same thing for New Mexico. At the same time, we were able to find some opportunities for wetland development in New Mexico and in Oklahoma and Texas - large projects and small projects. Wetland restoration was (coughing), pardon me, the lifeblood of the program in Oklahoma and New Mexico, or Texas - excuse me. Now it also says, you ask to talk about prescribed burning.

LIBBY: Oh, yes. Tell me about that.

MIKE: Burning of wetlands, burning of invasive species, burning on properties that had invasive species, was very, very, very important. In Texas and in Oklahoma, most of the invasive species where we had burn projects were for salt cedar and juniper in the Texas hill country. Creating desirable habitat for golden-cheeked warbler, black-capped vireo, was very, very important. So, we had a cooperative agreement with the Edwards Plateau Prescribed Burn Association. They did a lot of patch burning. Patch burning is burn a little bit here, wait a year, burn a different piece of property and over about a 5 to 10-year period of time, you can burn an awful lot of country. The golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo really required old growth Ashe juniper or blueberry juniper. Same thing. So, we would have a cooperative agreement with this burn association which included the entire Edwards Plateau in the Texas hill country. Several million acres that it involved. Of course, we didn't burn that much. But we would have a cooperative agreement with those folks to burn everything but the old growth Ashe juniper, which is what those two species nested in. Then, on top of that, as soon as the burn was completed, and we would get some rains, then turn livestock in on it to keep that second, third, fourth growth Ashe juniper

retarded. That helped the endangered species, but it also helped the livestock operations. When you can benefit the livestock operations even if it's an endangered species that the landowner's not happy with, they're on board with it. Like we said, wildlife and livestock are not mutually exclusive.

LIBBY: Right. So, let me see if I understand this correctly. The juniper is native, but they needed it to be old growth. So, they didn't burn the old growth areas, but they – I'm a little, now I feel like I'm getting confused.

MIKE: Ashe juniper is a native species, but it wasn't as pervasive as it is now because fire was taken out of the ecosystem.

LIBBY: It needs fire to be part of, for it to grow.

MIKE: It needs fire to control it. It doesn't need fire to grow, but it needs fire to control it, or to keep it to - on a range condition site, Ashe juniper is an invasive species. It doesn't contribute to the quality of the habitat. So, when fire was taken out of the ecosystem, these species were not controlled and made less than 10 percent of the range class condition. We would utilize prescribed fire to maintain as closely as possible the native mix of species on a given piece of ground. It would certainly not be detrimental to the nesting birds if they needed old growth juniper. Now, the more juniper you have on a piece of property, the less water you have available through capillary action to the native grasses and other native shrubs that are beneficial to livestock as well as native wildlife – white-tailed deer, turkey. So, we would participate in those kinds of things in order to try to reach a balance in the native ecosystem.

LIBBY: Right. So, all your projects had some kind of a cost share or some kind of component with the landowner and a landowner agreement?

MIKE: Absolutely. Initially we didn't have enough money not to require cost share. As the program grew, it was beneficial to work with as large a landowner as we could work with, because they had a better opportunity to provide a larger cost share. We never paid more than, we tried not to pay more than 50 percent of the cost of the work. Most of the time, it was less than that, particularly when you filter in the landowner's time, the landowner's equipment costs, the temporary loss of production to his livestock operation – “temporary” meaning that during [while] the work was going on, their livestock didn't necessarily have access to grasses or forbs that they were accustomed to grazing or foraging on. So, we had to have a cost share, not only because we didn't have enough money, but if the landowner doesn't have a dollar involved, there's less likelihood that the landowner will continue the operation. If he has a dog in that fight, he'll maintain that project. That was our initial thought. However, when you find a landowner that is interested enough to spend his own money, they're going to be in it for the long haul. I mentioned Barry Austin for example. We started his project in 1999. That's over 30 years ago and he's still managing the same projects and expanding. This year, he's going to put in, at no cost to anybody else but him and his family, he's going to put in three more wetlands.

LIBBY: That's great.

MIKE: This is a program that stands the test of time. Landowners are extremely happy about the projects. In fact, I get calls all the time. “Can you tell me who I need to get in touch with”, they would ask? “I'd like some more wetland work on my property.” So, I pass them on to Don Wilhelm, who succeeded me as the Regional Coordinator. You asked about the challenges in getting work done.

LIBBY: Right. Actually, the challenge of not having enough money, in the first place, ended up being a positive as we were just talking about, because it gained commitment from the landowner that the properties would end up being managed and protected.

MIKE: Yes. Later in the program, as I was the Regional Coordinator, a second challenge or another challenge was – if you are going to design a wetland restoration project, for example, or if you're going to work over in east Texas in concert with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department on Louisiana black bear habitat, you got to get some technical assistance. Most of the biologists, often none of the biologists initially, that I had working for me, were black bear specialists. So, we had to work in concert with someone else. A critter like the black bear - while people look at it and think, "Oh my goodness, there's a beautiful black bear" - finding landowners who were willing to do their habitat for black bear [was] not quite so easy. Having a wetland restoration project go in and not have an engineer from NRCS or Ducks Unlimited or whomever it might be to help design a wetland project that takes into consideration the size of the watershed and the amount of water that's coming through that watershed, is pretty important. So, you need an engineer. There are challenges in finding the right folks with the right knowledge and technical ability to help us get done what needed to get done. Some of them, you can't overcome. But many of them, because of the ingenuity of the landowner and the biologist, you can get it done. It just takes time.

LIBBY: Right. Did you get more administrative as time went on? More permitting? Did you have cultural resource issues to deal with?

MIKE: We had cultural resource issues. We had administrative issues. Contractual issues. How's the money filter down to the landowner? How long do they have to wait for the money? We could not pay for something that wasn't done. So, the landowner would foot the bill, or have an arrangement with the contractor doing the work, if the landowner wasn't, to get that stuff done. You have to develop a relationship with an awful lot of different people, from the landowner to the contracting specialist in the Regional Office. That means you are going through administrative folks in the field stations to get these contracts signed, to get the finances worked out, and then get the contracting folks to approve what you are doing, or what you want to do. So, you develop relationships. You have to develop relationships and that's generally the responsibility of the Regional Coordinator to get all those boxes checked and to get everything done. The last 15 years – let me back up. A regional biologist who starts out as a field biologist never wants to walk away from doing the things that bring him the greatest joy, him or her, the greatest joy – and that's working with the landowners and that's working on the ground and that's getting that habitat manipulated or put in place. So as a Regional Coordinator, you can't do all of the things, so you've got to hire or have trust in the field biologist to get that work done. Then you have to have trust in the administrative folks to get all the paperwork accomplished. Then you have to have trust with the contracting folks to get the contracts done. Excuse me (coughing). So, you hope you have helped develop the right relationships with all of the players. I'll have to tell you that in Region 2, that was a no brainer.

LIBBY: You had good people.

MIKE: One of the landowners that I met told me, and I've heard this from a thousand different people. You get the best person for the job, and you get him or her the resources to do that job, and you just sit back and watch them do their job. That's exactly the way it worked in Region 2. I had the best set of biologists, administrative folks, and contracting folks that I could have ever hoped for. I'll tell you that I

received a couple of awards for the success of the Partners program, and in every instance, I would accept that award on behalf of the field biologists, administrative staff and the contracting folks that actually did the work.

LIBBY: Right. I understand. That's great.

MIKE: They did it as well if not better than anybody else could have done it. So, I was blessed to be associated with the greatest Fish and Wildlife folks that I could ever have hoped to be associated with.

LIBBY: Well, there's so many good people working in the Fish and Wildlife Service who worked there, and who still work there. So many great people. We're very fortunate, I think, to have had the opportunity, all of us, to work in the Fish and Wildlife Service, because it's people are great and its mission is great.

MIKE: Well, I will tell you, however, that I was happy as a pig in a puddle when I got away from working on permits for the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was tedious. It was important. It was necessary. But it was tedious, and nothing ever changed except the piece of ground you set your foot on to evaluate a federal permit.

LIBBY: It takes a certain kind of person to be able to fight, 'cause you are constantly fighting. I never liked being a regulator. I loved being in the Partners program. We were the white hat program of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

MIKE: I couldn't have said that better myself. It was just the most rewarding, almost 30 years, I ever spent.

LIBBY: Well, that's an awesome way to end this interview. I know you've got to get going 'cause you've got an appointment. Is there any last words you want to say about the program and the work that you did?

MIKE: Well, I think I've said it all about the program and the work that I did. But I would like to say that this interview, Libby, helped me to re-engage with my past. Many times, you think about, in the Partners program, "What could I have done better? Is there another landowner that I could have reached? Is there some way we could have done a better job of doing what we do?" In reflecting on my period from 1987 to 2012, it was a lot of fun. This interview has helped remind me that maybe I had a little bit to do with some of the good things that the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program accomplished.

LIBBY: You had a lot to do with it, 'cause I tell you what, Mike, I've talked to so many people and they say, "Have you talked to Mike McCollum? Have you talked to Mike McCollum?" (laughter) So obviously you had a lot to do with it. I think it is so rewarding being involved with a program from the beginning. You were involved for 25 years. You really are, you along with a number of other people like you mentioned several people – Carl Schwartz, the people I've interviewed - worked in the program for a long time. Jontie Aldrich. There's other folks that we haven't gotten to yet, but we will. There was a lot of longevity with the program, and everybody was critical in doing their part to make this one of the best federal programs that has ever existed. That is one of the reasons why we wanted to do this special topic, because we recognize that the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is a very important and consequential program.

MIKE: It is. I would like to leave you by saying, if you have an opportunity, talk to some landowners.

LIBBY: I will. You are going to send me some – contact Barry and see if he is willing to talk to me, and then you can either send me his contact information or you can give him my contact information and he can reach out to me.

MIKE: I will. In fact, I talk to him almost every day, at least either on the phone or texting, for crying out loud.

LIBBY: These people become your friends. (laughter)

MIKE: Well, you don't ever lose those kind of friendships. The only way you lose them is when you or they pass away.

LIBBY: That's right.

MIKE: I'm still working with a landowner. I'll tell you one quick story and then I'll leave because I've got to go in about 15 minutes. There was a landowner that one of my biologists sent me a project. It was down in south Texas. I said, "You've got to be joking. This is right in the middle of the south Texas brush country, and you want to put a wetland in down there? That doesn't make any sense at all." He says, "You've got to come down and look at it." So, I went down and looked at it. It's a good project. It's still a good project today, even though he sold his ranch. But I still work with him developing wetland opportunities on another ranch he bought in south Texas. So, you don't ever lose those kinds of friendships. Those are the best kinds of friendships to have. I haven't lost friendships with the biologists that I worked with. So, it's a family.

LIBBY: It is.

MIKE: The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is a family of Fish and Wildlife biologists and private landowners. It doesn't get any better than that.

LIBBY: That's a great way to end it. Thank you, Mike. Hold on. Stay on the line. I'm going to turn off the recorder but thank you so much.

MIKE: You are quite welcome. It's been my pleasure.

LIBBY: All righty!

Key Words: conservation, endangered species, habitat restoration, invasive species, legislation, partnerships, prescribed burning, riparian environments, species of concern, tribal lands, wetland restoration