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RICHARD ROMINGER  
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00:00:24:26 Q: Today is December 1st of the year 2000, I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington and today we're visiting with Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger. Secretary Rominger before coming to the Department of Agriculture of agriculture in your family and the State of California.

00:00:44:05 Give us a bit of your background that led to your coming to USDA.

00:00:49:24 A: I'm a fourth generation California farmer, had great-grandparents that came over from Germany, well let's see about 140 years ago, something like that now. And we have had a farm... family farm in California where I grew up and where our three sons are now continuing that operation and our daughter is also involved in investing in the farm.

00:01:17:26 And we have four grandchildren out there now, so we have a history of farming in California.

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00:01:25:29 Q: And you served the State of California in a leadership position in agriculture as well.

00:01:31:07 A: That's true, I had the opportunity to be the head of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, Director is the title for almost six years. And that was quite an experience as well because California is the number one ag state in the country.

00:01:49:13 Q: Well you bring a lot of experience to the Department of Agriculture and yet there are a lot of challenges that you saw. How did it come that you were chosen as Deputy Secretary of Agriculture?

00:02:00:19 A: I've been involved in a number of agricultural organizations throughout my farming career as well as having been with the California Department of Food and Agriculture so I knew a lot of people in agriculture all around the country.

00:02:16:29 And when it looked like President Clinton was about to be elected, our local Congressman who's also a good

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friend said, you should come to Washington. And so I thought about it and began to get more and more encouragement from other people all around the country.

So that's how I decided well okay I'll put my hat in the ring.

00:02:37:25 And was then interviewed by Mr. Espey, he had just been nominated to be Secretary of Agriculture and he interviewed me a few days before the inauguration. And from there on, it's all history I guess.

00:02:53:28 Q: And so you actually came to the Department in March of that year, 1993?

00:02:59:14 A: Yes, about two months after the inauguration.

00:03:02:16 Q: And then became fully confirmed in the job a couple of months later?

00:03:06:17 A: Yes, it takes a little while to get through that process, so I was actually sworn in in May of '93 as Deputy Secretary.

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00:03:14:18 Q: But you had some immediate crisis management just almost after you arrived here at the Department of Agriculture, talk about that a little bit.

00:03:22:05 A: Oh in fact before I arrived we had the e-coli outbreak in the Northwestern state, the State of Washington. And four young children had died from eating contaminated meat products. And so yes, we've been in the business of improving food safety and especially the meat and poultry that USDA has responsibilities for ever since the beginning of this administration.

00:03:49:22 Q: And you were very much involved in a major effort to reorganize this Department, it had been quite a long time since this Department had seen a major reorganization and I suspect that took a lot of your time in the early parts of your tenure here?

00:04:05:08 A: That's true it did and in fact the previous secretary, Mr. Madigan (ph.) had left a rudimentary

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reorganization plan on his desk when he left and so Secretary Eskey... Espey picked that up and actually made some changes in the plan and because it was only a partial plan to reorganize and streamline the Department.

00:04:27:01 And then in 1994 Congress passed our reorganization authorization legislation and that led to not only a reorganization of the Department but also a streamlining and downsizing, because also at the same time we had the Vice President leading the re-inventing government effort and that meant not only streamlining and improving the agency but also reducing the size of the organization.

00:04:55:25 And so we have spent a good deal of effort in streamlining the organization, downsizing, we are 22,000 people fewer than we were in 1993 and I believe we're still doing a good job and perh... a better job in satisfying the needs of our clients all around the country.

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00:05:19:08 Q: And as the Deputy Secretary you've really been the chief operating officer for the day-to-day operations, working with the budget and leading this reorganization. It must have been quite a task to get the legislation passed by Congress and then begin the implementation of that.

00:05:35:08 A: Well that's true the Deputy Secretary also carries the title of chief operating officer and that does entail not only the reorganization but the preparation of the budget, working with all of the agencies, resolving differences between agency request, putting it all together and presenting it then to the Office of Management and Budget so that the President can develop his budget.

00:05:58:26 And that does take considerable amount of work and every year and in fact it is quite interesting because you're usually working with three budgets at one time. We're working on the current budget in the current year; we're preparing the budget that the President is about to introduce.

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00:06:20:12 And then in fact we're already beginning work on the following year's budget. So you usually have to try to keep separate three budgets all at once.

00:06:28:23 Q: And the size of the Department of Agriculture is the size of a major corporation so there's a lot more business management then meets the eye when you think about managing the Department of Agriculture.

00:06:40:17 A: Well that's true, it is large, it's the fourth largest agency in the federal government with over 100,000 employees and an annual budget that varies from year to year but it's usually around \$65 billion per year.

00:06:56:18 Q: And you brought some management expertise to this job having done that kind of leadership for the State of California.

00:07:03:06 A: I did have some experience though with the State of California and also of course in operating of the

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family farm along with my brother and being involved in a number of farm organizations including cooperatives where I held some leadership positions.

00:07:18:07 Q: Did you mention personal goals as you began to think about coming to Washington, what might have been some of those?

00:07:24:24 A: Well having had the experience as a farmer, so I had that (unint.) and then I had the viewpoint from the State and as the Director of the California Department of Food and Agriculture I'd worked with the federal government on a number of programs including a major Mediterranean fruit fly eradication program.

00:07:44:06 So I had some idea of the operations of the federal government and what I was getting involved in. But I think I did feel that there needed perhaps more emphasis and farm programs on conservation part of what farmers were doing, the commodity programs were certainly the heart and soul of the farm programs.

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00:08:08:24 But I think there was an interest not only among farmers but among the public in general in making sure that we were helping farmers for the conservation responsibilities because the general public was expected farmers not only to produce a bountiful supply of food and fiber but also to protect the water quality, air quality, provide wildlife habitat, all of those things that they weren't getting paid for but were being expected to produce in addition to the commodities.

00:08:41:01 Q: Perhaps the latest farm legislation is evidence of that. It seems that it's a lot more tied to conservation and some of the farm programs than it once was.

00:08:51:14 A: The farm bills have progressively added more conservation programs each time we've had a new farm bill and I think the 2002 farm bill will be no exception, that we'll see additional conservation programs. Secretary Glickman and the Department have proposed for the 2001 appropriations cycle a major new

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program in stewardship payments.

00:09:17:01 They largely did not get funded in this cycle, but we certainly think they're going to be a center piece of the discussion for the 2002 farm bill.

00:09:26:00 Q: The economics of agriculture have certainly been almost bullman (ph.) not bust, but not so good during the tenure you've been here. Would you talk about that a bit?

00:09:35:02 A: Close to bust at the present time for a lot of farmers, that's true. When the '96 farm bill was written, farm prices, commodity prices were high generally and so there was a feeling that our agricultural exports were going to continue to grow that it was going to be all roses from here on out.

00:09:55:05 As we know that didn't turn out to be the case. By 1997 farm prices were started... head down and they have been low for the last three years for most of the major commodities and that's presented a crisis for a

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lot of farms and especially our family farms around the country.

00:10:13:26 As a consequence Congress has had to provide additional emergency assistance for the last three years which I think proves what we said, what President Clinton, Secretary Glickman and others were saying when the '96 farm bill was signed, that it did not have an adequate safety net and we need that safety net right now and I think that'll be a big part of the discussion for the 2002 farm bill as well.

00:10:42:05 Q: What would be some of the things that you would identify as pride items that you feel that you did accomplish during the time that you've been at USDA?

00:10:53:13 A: The reorganization, the streamlining, the fact that we're combining our field agencies into one stop service centers so that the farmers and ranchers out there can go to one place and get the answers to all of their questions, sign up for all of the programs.

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00:11:12:05. We're still in the process of completing though we've come a long ways down that road of getting not only the offices co-located but getting them on one computer system so that there computers can talk to each other so that a farmer doesn't have to fill out a new form with the same information every time he comes in for a different program.

00:11:33:29 So I think that's been one thing where we've made a lot of headway. Now we've talked about the conservation programs and the fact that we've had increasing conservation, increasing participation by farmers in those conservation programs.

00:11:46:28 Farmland protection, farmland preservation has been an interest of mine after having served for a number of years on the board of the American Farmland Trust which is an organization that is working to help farmers and local governments preserve farmlands.

00:12:05:27 We have a small program, we've got a small program started at the federal level to provide matching funds

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for states and local governments and land trusts and so I think that's and even though it's small, it has an indication that the federal government is interested in that and certainly in this election we saw in the last two elections in fact two years ago as well, we saw a lot of interest, a lot of local measures that had to do with farmland preservation.

00:12:34:15 So that's another area. One of the things that was laying around when we arrived here in 1993 was the organic regulations, national organic standards. Congress had passed the bill in 1990 authorizing, in fact instructing USDA to develop national standards. Nothing had been done with that legislation before we arrived.

00:12:58:25 And there was no budget to do anything with it when we got here. So it has been a long process and we've been through a lot of effort with an advisory committee and an advisory board making recommendations on national organic standards and we expect to have that regulation published this month, before the end of this month.

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00:13:20:06 Q: One of the things that happens in economic ups and downs is the smaller farmers are unusually pressured and you've taken a personal interest in working with the smaller farmers through a small farms commission and some other activities. Tell me about some of those things.

00:13:35:12 A: Yes, well part of our concern with the down turn in the economics of agriculture is the impact that that has on small farms and on minority farmers, women farmers, those who have had probably not as many advantages as most of us have had in our farming careers. So we have made a special effort not only of out reach but as you mentioned, a small farms commission that Secretary Glickman appointed that went around the country, held hearings, what can the USDA do better?

00:14:11:07 What are we not doing that we should be doing or are there some things in our rules and regulations that are making it harder for small farmers. They came back

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with a lot of recommendations and we have been following through on those recommendations.

00:14:25:29 We established a coordinating counsel here at USDA, we have now an ongoing advisory committee that is advising the Secretary on continuing to implement recommendations and making sure that small farm issues are an integral part of every mission area in USDA so that everybody thinks about the impact of their rules and regulations on all the smallest farmers, the disadvantaged farmers in the country.

00:14:54:16 Q: And I know that you've participated with Secretary Glickman and Secretary Espey in a series of hearings in town home meetings around the nation all through this period and for different reasons. What were some of the reasons why you did those?

00:15:09:06 A: Well we've had series of hearings on farm legislation, we had a series around the country on conservation, private lands conservation because that's our responsibility here. We have the forest service

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that manages the national forests, almost 200 million acres, but we also through the natural resources conservation service work with all the private landowners in this country.

00:15:33:09 So we wanted to get more input on what conservation programs should be and what should be discussed and talked about for the next farm bill. We had hearings as we talked about on small farm problems around the country. And we had the series of hearings on civil rights problems at USDA.

00:15:51:27 There's a long history going back decades of discrimination as alleged by our program participants, farmers around the country, especially black farmers and also problems with discrimination with employees as UDSDA. So we held a series of hearings around the country. We had a civil rights commission at the Secretary appointed and that commission recommended some things to the Secretary.

00:16:27:24 We followed that up then with an action team to put

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those recommendations into action here at USDA, we have settled a major class action lawsuit that the settlements are still ongoing. But Secretary Glickman really faced head on the long history of discrimination here at USDA and we've made a lot of headway. We're certainly not out of the woods on that.

00:16:56:12 I think once the Secretary starts on something like that and in fact Secretary Espey really started recognizing the problems there at USDA and Secretary Glickman certainly picked that up and has really carried it forward. The aim is to live up to Abraham Lincoln's statement when he established USDA calling it the people's department.

00:17:23:16 We want to earn that reputation again by making all of our programs available equally to everyone who is eligible in the country and also treating our... both our program recipients and our employees with dignity and respect. So that has taken a lot of time by the Secretary and others at USDA addressing those issues.

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00:17:49:11 I guess the most recent series of hearings then that we had around the country were on really livability issues. How do we save farmland, how do we help farmers stay in business, how do we make sure that farmers and rural communities and urban areas, the suburban areas that abut our farms, how do we make sure that we can live together and make it both possible for farmers to make a profit and be able to stay on the farm and also provide the amenities that urban and suburban folks like when they drive out in the country to see that beautiful landscape.

00:18:34:13 So those are issues that we've addressed and so we've had our plate full.

00:18:40:14 Q: One of the things that's come along during this period too is an increased intensity of measurement of performance by the government and along with that customer service. I know you've had a personal interest in the customer service side and the accountability part too.

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00:18:55:21 A: That's right, Congress passed the GPRA, Government Performance and Results Act and the idea was to run government as a business would run. How do we get results? Make sure that your actions lead to results and that you can measure those results. And of course in this business of USDA, we're in the business of providing services including technical assistance, financial assistance to our clients.

00:19:25:12 And so customer service is a big dragon for us, so we try to instill that in all of our programs. Think about who your customers are, what their feelings are about how you operate your program, how can we improve customer service and we've done a series of surveys to get reactions to that and then try to improve the service that we provide.

00:19:49:26 So again we've made a lot of headway with re-inventing government and providing better customer service.

00:19:57:28 Q: Now you have the benefit of some immediate feedback from your own family farm about how well USDA is doing.

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Have you had some that, some criticism at times that you, that have helped you solve problems on a larger scale?

00:20:11:14 A: Well I do get feed back from family members yes, certainly my three sons and other family members who are also in farming, nephews, cousins, so yes I have a direct pipeline that give me feedback. And they have offered constructive criticism from time-to-time on how the programs are working and perhaps their thoughts on how we could improve those programs.

00:20:39:21 And certainly how we could improve the service that we're delivering. So that, I think that helps to have that connection.

00:20:47:00 Q: One of the things that American farmers depend on a great deal is the international marketplace. There's been some disruption of that in recent years, it's improved a bit but at the same time the U.S. economy's been very strong, the agricultural economy has not done so well. What do you see ahead?

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00:21:04:12 A: We had NAFTA and the Uruguay round of trade agreements in 1994 when we first got here and so those were some big successes, opening up markets around the world. And as we talked, a couple, for the first couple of years things were going great. Our exports were increasing rapidly.

00:21:26:23 And then we had the down turn in economy which really started I think with the crisis in Southeast Asia and the problems in the Russian economy, those were all big customers of US farmers. And so that kind of led to the downfall of the..., or at least the down turn in our exports.

00:21:50:12 Now exports are starting to come back. We expect to be announcing here shortly that exports for 2001 will be up again over the year 2000 exports. But we're still not back to where we were back a few years ago. So we've got more work to do. We have continued to negotiate bi-lateral agreements in the interim while we're beginning to work on a new general round in the

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World Trade Organization.

00:22:18:08 The agricultural talks have started, the negotiations on agriculture in Geneva have been going this year, preliminary work to getting another round started. But it's going to take a little while I think before we get a full blown trade round again, we had you know a little false start in Seattle a year ago with the World Trade Organization meetings.

00:22:43:19 There needs to be additional work done on making sure that developing countries also have benefits out of this globalization that's taking place. But we do need to have open markets for US agriculture, we depend on those exports because between a fourth and a third of our production is sold overseas.

00:23:05:21 And 96 percent of the world's consumers are overseas, so we do need to have those export markets, we need to continue to reduce trade barriers to our exports, that's got to be an ongoing work for the next administration. However in fact just starting

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negotiations with Chile on a free trade agreement with Chile because Chile has already negotiated a free trade agreement with Canada and Mexico, our NAFTA members, so I think it's time that we negotiate a free trade agreement with Chile as well.

00:23:40:19 Q: Let's talk about China for a moment. There was a long debate and discussion about permanent, normal trade relations with China which has now passed. How will that open some new hope for farmers?

00:23:51:25 A: That will add markets to our exports for farmers and it was what, the most significant thing that happened in trade this year, Congress passage of that. And certainly President Clinton and Secretary Glickman made those high priorities for this year to get that done. China has not completed accession to the WTO but they should within the next few months.

00:24:18:25 But already we've seen some increased exports to China because we did reach a bi-lateral agreement with them in preparation for the accession to the WTO and that

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opened up some markets for some of our wheat, markets for our citrus, more markets for meat. So we've seen our exports increase to China.

00:24:39:05 But we expect that when they become full WTO members that within five years we should see an additional \$2 billion worth of agriculture exports to China.

00:24:50:22 Q: Let's talk about domestic farm markets. . I know that one of the other things that's special interest to you is the farmer's market development in this country and that's changed quite a bit hasn't it?

00:25:00:09 A: It has, we've had really an explosion in the number of farmer's markets around the country. Consumers like them, farmers like them, it gets a chance for the consumer to talk directly to the farmer that's produced the crop and it offers a way for, especially our smaller farmers, to gain a bigger share of the communiters... the consumer's dollar.

00:25:23:10 They don't have the middle man that... or several

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middle men that are in-between the farmer and the consumer. So that's really been popular and it's been one of those niches where makes possible for many small farmers to be able to get a reasonable price and to stay in business.

00:25:40:28 So yes, we're proud of the fact that those farmer's markets have been growing, we're also proud of the fact that we've had been able to use farmer's market coupons so that people who are in the Witt Program or on food stamps are able to redeem those at farmer's markets so that they get a better nutrition in their diets, more fruits and vegetables.

00:26:05:01 Q: And they've even coupled that with some food gleaning efforts as some of the farmer's markets close, some of the left over produce is then donated to people who need food?

00:26:13:05 A: That's true, that's certainly been one of Secretary Glickman's big issues, is getting more food that is being thrown away to people who can use it and need it.

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So our farmer's markets working with restaurants, hotels, institutional feeding that when there is food left over at the end of the day that is perfectly good, to make sure that gets to the soup kitchens and the food banks so it can be distribu..., distributed to people who need it.

00:26:45:29      And Secretary Glickman has put a big effort into that and we've had... seen some good response from people, industries, companies around the country.

00:26:55:15      Q: Let's go back to the safety net for a moment and talk about some of the big changes that have happened in risk management for farmers, during this period that you've been here, some significant enhancements have been made in that area.

00:27:09:16      Crop insurance, the major mainstay of risk management has been improved greatly, crop insurance when we got here was most for the major, the six major commodities really, it was, were all that covered under crop insurance. We've broadened the number of crops that

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are covered, provided new types of insurance policies and we're continuing to do that.

00:27:35:02 And there's still more work to be done in that area, but Congress has helped by rewriting the crop insurance laws, by adding additional federal support for the crop insurance so that they are more affordable, the policies are more affordable to farmers.

00:27:53:05 So we've had a good increase, a big increase in use of crop insurance by farmers. But there still needs to be more work done there because traditionally live stock is not covered by crop insurance nor were all the specialty crops, fruits, vegetables, nuts, so those are being added. But it takes a little time to figure out the rate structure for new policies.

00:28:14:10 And so we've been adding them as fast as we could but there's more to be done yet, but that is an important part of risk management for producers. One of the new types of policies that we're adding is revenue insurance and we've got a few of those policies out

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there, that needs to be expanded because farmers need to be covered not only for the natural disaster, a flood or a hurricane or hale, but also for reductions in, drastic reductions in price.

00:28:48:05 So we can cover both of those by a revenue type of policy.

00:28:51:28 Q: If you were to give some words of wisdom to those writing the next farm bill in relationship to the farm safety net, what advice would you give them?

00:29:02:22 A: I guess three components that we've talked about. One is that the payments should be counter-cyclical in some way. In other words when farm commodity prices are low, the government payments are higher. There should be a bigger emphasis than there has been on conservation, on paying farmers for good stewardship.

00:29:28:14 And then the third part is crop insurance, making sure that we have a good crop insurance program. I think those are probably the three basic parts of a new farm

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bill.

00:29:41:21 Q: I don't think the American public often realizes that food is a little different than other commodities we produce, we can't afford for it not to be produced in the quantity we need and also we have a real responsibility in feeding the world.

00:29:56:09 A: That's true, we provide, because we have such an abundant... an abundance of crops here and the ability to produce more than we consume, we have taken on the role of providing help for countries and populations that are less fortunate. And our food aid these last few years has been larger because of problems around the world.

00:30:20:00 When there are 800 million people in the world who are going to bed with not enough nutritional intake, not enough food, there is a responsibility and the FAO, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United States has been working to try and get everyone to help with that.

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00:30:40:13 The World Food Summit was held a few years. Secretary Glickman attended and we've been working to improve food security around the war. And that's been a big part of our efforts here, food security is important. It's important not only for feeding people around the world from a humanitarian point of view, but I think it's important to the national security of the United States because you have people who are not getting enough to eat you're going to have unrest in those countries.

00:31:10:20 And in the long term that's a problem for us here in the United States.

00:31:14:27 Q: In the recent history of USDA there's not been very many Deputy Secretaries who have held the position for the length of time that you have and getting change within a federal sector does take time. Has that been an advantage to you in accomplishing some of the changes that you wanted as the Chief Operating Officer?

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00:31:34:29 A: I think it does have an advantage if you're here long enough to see some of these things through to fruition. If you have changes every couple of years, it's hard to continue the continuity. We certainly have a lot of career folks here who are really hard workers and do keep things running.

00:31:54:10 So those of us who are here as political appointees we know we're here for a short period of time, but I think we can have some effect on changing the direction of this huge battleship as it's moving forward. But being here almost eight years does have an advantage in being able to follow these programs a little longer.

00:32:17:19 Q: Any special memories of your time here and working with the President and the Vice President or people in the Department or the public?

00:32:27:17 A: Oh yes I have a few I guess. I can remember how the first year when we come to the end of the year and through the budget process just before the President gets ready to present his budget to Congress, if there

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are any disagreements between the agency and the Office of Management and Budget, OMB, then we end up making our case before the President, the Vice President, the Director of OMB.

00:32:56:17 And Secretary Espey and I were there that first year in the fall of '93 and OMB wanted to cut some money out of our agricultural research budget, what we were proposing, in fact I think it was about \$200 million and we made the case of why we thought agricultural research was important and we certainly believe that and continue to believe that and we made our pitch and President Clinton turned to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and said, find the money some place else, I do not want to cut agricultural research.

00:33:35:27 So those are the kind of things that make you feel good.

00:33:40:18 Q: Well as you go back to your land and your farm will you feel more comfortable with your relationship with the government having spent the time here in Washington

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and working with the policies of agriculture?

00:33:53:10 A: Well it certainly gives you a different perspective yes, and having been now all three places, on the farm and state government and now in federal government, yes I think I do have an appreciation for the difficulties of trying to regulate if you can use that word, regulate the agricultural economy of the United States.

00:34:16:20 Certainly it's most driven by the private sector, but when you have this many people living this close together, they're bound to be some conflicts and that's what government is for, we have to have some rules on how we live.

00:34:29:07 And that, recognizing that fact and the fact that we can't please everybody, don't really have to think of the best for the most people, the common good and try and come up with policies that reflect that, allowing for some flexibility, for local conditions. And that's part of the process and I think that's the hard part is trying to develop national policies that can work in

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this diverse country.

00:35:03:17 Q: On your own scorecard for goals you had for yourself when you came, how have you done?

00:35:08:29 A: I certainly haven't accomplished every thing. I think I probably had goals that you can't reach in eight years with an organization as large as the US Department of Agriculture, the federal government. Things simply move slower here than they do in state government or in probably in private business.

00:35:33:02 But I do feel good that we have accomplished most of the things that we had on the plate when we came here, we've still got more to do in reorganization, in continuing to improve food safety and making sure we have that adequate research budgets right on down the line, adding more conservation programs. But we've made a big dent in what we were trying to accomplish.

00:35:59:23 Q: Thank you Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger for sharing your thoughts today about your

**ORAL HISTORY  
RICHARD ROMINGER  
DEPUTY SECRETARY  
USDA**

time at the Department of Agriculture. I'm Larry Quinn  
with the Office of Communications at the U.S.  
Department of Agriculture in Washington.

**END OF TAPE**