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INTERVIEW WITH LARRY QUINN

00:00:29:26 Q: Today is October 18th in the year of 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. Today we're speaking with Kathleen Merrigan who is the Administrator of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

00:00:45:29 I'd like to talk to you today about your work here as Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service. When did you join the USDA staff?

00:00:55:11 A: I'm one of the more recent employees here. I joined in June of 1999, the first day of summer. I recall it was the longest day of the year. I've been busy working on a bunch of controversial issues ever since.

00:01:08:29 Q: What would you say is probably the most controversial and probably the most challenging that you've worked on?

00:01:14:13 A: The most closely watched issue certainly that I've been working on is the development of national organic

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standards for farmers and processors across the country who want to sell and label their products as organically produced. It's been a long time coming.

00:01:31:25 Congress passed the law in 1990, the Organic Foods Production Act, mandating that the Department of Agriculture establish a national program that has such standards. I was working in the senate at the time for Pat Leahy who was the sponsor of the legislation. So I had a heavy hand in writing the law and have been watching slowly over time as the administrations have been trying to implement it.

00:01:57:19 So I think at a certain point they decided just to invite me to come in instead of criticizing the process to take over the process and see what I could do.

00:02:07:14 Q: I want to ask you. Was it easier to write the law or (unint.) the law?

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00:02:11:08 A: It's always easier to write the law I believe because the devil's in the details in these sort of things. We're trying to produce a rule here at USDA that covers everything from the seed all the way to what the consumer puts on the table.

00:02:27:08 It's very comprehensive. We're talking about every state, every region within a state, every kind of production whether it's livestock, whether it's crop production, whether it's aquatic seaweed sort of products that people are producing as organic. So it really is the full gamut.

00:02:51:01 Q: So where did you pick up in this process. It had been obviously going for a while when you came, but it's been going much faster since you've been here.

00:02:58:25 A: I actually got involved some years ago. The Clinton administration invited me to join the National Organic Standards Board, NOSB, which is established by the law as

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a citizen advisory board to advise the department in how to implement the law.

00:03:17:17 Secretary at the time, Secretary Romanger. Rich Romanger was acting Secretary at the time of my appointment. I was put on for five years as an environmental representative. I was working for a place called the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture. Of course Henry Wallace being one of our more famous and wonderful secretaries of agriculture in days gone by.

00:03:40:21 I was put on that board, and so I watched the process quite closely. In December of 1997 USDA put out their first proposed rule trying to implement this law. It was a very lengthy rule and very controversial. I was working at the Institute as I said, and was probably one of the leaders across the country in organizing the grassroots campaign opposing the rule.

00:04:07:06 One of the wonderful things the department did--well they

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got a lot of the details wrong in the first try and understandably because this is so comprehensive. But one of the wonderful things they did was they put the rule on the internet. This was revolutionary when it happened.

00:04:23:20 We could access it right away at our computers at our desks. We could read what was going on and we could send our comments by e-mail to the actual docket. We could read in real time other people's comments and respond to their comments.

00:04:40:09 So rule making was turned upside down. Instead of a bunch of well-heeled lobbyists in Washington, D.C. going into the Federal Register room and reading the docket and telling their clients what it contained for a price we actually had people across the country, across the world reading this simultaneous instantaneously.

00:05:03:19 It became a very educational process because we could read what each other was writing about what our concerns

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were about the rule. It was very interactive.

Government rule making became much more transparent than the other laws. So that's all the good news.

00:05:19:13 The bad news for USDA is all that transparency and public interest brought this huge public comment. Normally in rule making you get a few hundred really interested people writing a letter to the government. Maybe a few fancy law firms have been hired dropping in some comments for their client.

00:05:36:16 In this case we got 275,603 comments from the public, the largest public response to a rule making in USDA's history, one of the largest in the history of the federal government. Very few of those were really form letters. Most of those were letters that Joe Brown farmer or Mary Beth farmer, consumers, wrote from the heart at the kitchen table and sent them to the Department of Agriculture.

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00:06:04:11 That's great news that there was that much public participation. But then there was a huge amount of work for USDA to do because our responsibility is to read all those letters and to respond to the comments. That's about the time I came in.

00:06:18:16 Q: How in the world did you do that?

00:06:20:19 A: They--we pulled a lot of all nighters. I know people think that the government is all easy work and we're in and out of here like clockwork. But in some cases when the going is tough you have to do what it takes. I have staff that worked with me around the clock, holiday weekends, regular weekends. We really put a small team of people together. We're experts in the field.

00:06:46:09 We made an attempt to answer every one of those letters in our response to the comments. In March of this year 2000 we issued a new proposed rule. Secretary Glickman had at the close of the comment period on the first

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proposal and asked that we would go back to the drawing board and to develop a substantially new proposal based on the public comments.

00:07:09:10 Among other things the proposed standards would not allow for use of genetically engineered organisms, sewage sludge or irradiation of food which were three of the controversial issues that generate a lot of the public comment. So we did go back to the drawing board and we produced a rule that was published this March that was a little over 700 pages of text that was actually very well received by consumer industry groups.

00:07:39:12 Nevertheless, instead of getting letters this time that said just throw the whole thing out we got letters that had various substantive comments--eighty pages, a hundred pages, a hundred and fifty pages single-spaced, typed, of all the different things that people would like to see adjustments made to.

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00:07:58:01 So it's been about a lot of work to respond to those. But our comment period closed June 12th of 2000, and we received about 41,000 comments. Most of them began by saying this is marvelously improved from the last version. Thank you for your efforts to listen to the public but...however...there are a few more things we would like you to do:

00:08:25:00 So as we do this interview right now we're in the very final throws of putting the finishing touches on a final rule, and we anticipate it will be published before the end of this calendar year.

00:08:36:22 Q: So when did you have time to do anything else?

00:08:40:27 A: It has been my number one priority. That is a function of who I am and what my background is in having been an advocate for organic agriculture. The administration knew that when they invited me to take on the job as administrator. There was an article about me

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in January of this year in the Washington Post. They occasionally do articles on how they select people.

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But people in the federal bureaucracy they just do little profiles on. I remember the headline. It was "USDA's Grade A Liberal". And quite a bit of the article is about how, you know, I had been the leader of this grass routes effort on organic agriculture. Now I've been invited in and all the commodity groups and the traditional agriculture groups who are very, very anxious about what I would do.

00:09:30:26

So I had history and people knew about it, but I think that was a really great thing about it that I was given all the support I needed to turn this thing around and I've been basically (unint.) cabinet meeting where Secretary Glickman said it was his top priority to make sure this rulemaking occurred before the end of the year.

So I don't feel lonely in my advocacy for this industry and it's not just about rulemaking either.

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00:09:58:05 The administration this year for the first time proposed new monies for research in organic agriculture. Not every farmer in America is going to be organic. We've never thought that. My dream might get up to 10%. But the point is, a lot of these guys have been out there on a day-to-day basis doing research on their fields to try to go without chemical pesticides and they're pioneer researchers.

00:10:26:06 And a lot of the different techniques that they've developed in their operations have been adopted by other farmers who are not going to go organic. Never want to go organic. But they do want the cost savings that are involved in reducing their pesticide and fertilizer use. So there's a lot of reasons why we should pay more attention to organic agriculture here in the department.

00:10:45:20 We're starting to work on crop insurance programs for organic farmers that reflect the kind of premiums they

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get when they sell their products. In my own agency, we've been looking at marketing orders and the role that organic agriculture has within those programs. So we're really trying to look across the board and invite organic agriculture in as a main player here within the department. It's time.

00:11:09:13 Q: And your organization has programs and regulations and monitoring for all the agricultural commodities?

00:11:16:07 A: We do. We have had quite a busy year since I've been administrator these 15, 16 months. Our overall revenue has increased 69%. Can you imagine an agency growing that fast in such a short amount of time? So there's been all kinds of challenges.

00:11:33:09 One of the first things that happened while was administrator, after my fourth month actually, I got an early morning phone call. You always pick up that phone really quickly worried about a family member or what have

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you. And it was actually a call alerting me that we had FBI agents and our Office of Inspector General Agents circling (unint.) Point Market Terminal which is up in New York State where we do a lot of our inspections of fresh fruits and vegetables is our largest inspection terminal in the country.

00:12:04:06 They were arresting our inspectors for bribery. It had been going on for 20 years allegedly. And so that put the agency in crisis as we had to respond to the industry about what we were going to do to put in reform safeguards such that nothing like this would ever happen again and to assure them of the integrity of the service because, you know, a few bad apples don't spoil the whole bunch. But you do have quite a bit of public relations dilemma there to convince people otherwise.

00:12:33:26 It's given us a great opportunity to put in major new reforms and our inspection services-- modern technology that really probably should have happened some years ago.

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And so out of crisis came opportunity and we seized the day.

00:12:50:04 We've also been working on mandatory price reporting. That's a very big issue. We're in a time now where the small and moderate size farmers are really feeling left out, finding it very difficult to market their goods. Not seeing the outlets there, not understanding the price mechanisms. A lot of agriculture's going towards contracting.

00:13:12:28 And one of the things that the congress did a little over a year ago was pass legislation mandating, by agency, to develop a mandatory price reporting program for livestock products so that farmers on a daily basis, several times a day, will understand exactly what the market's paying for certain goods. To help them negotiate in the market place. And that's been a pretty high priority for us.

00:13:37:21 Q: So in addition to the guides that you provide for

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commodities, you're looking for ways to help the farmer eke out a little more profit and success in what he or she does today?

00:13:49:04 A: Yeah. We're very concerned about the existence of small farmers, the survival of small farmers, and at AMS it's a big priority for us. We're about to come out with a brochure explaining sort of the do's and don'ts of contracting since the environment is changing so much. And there are a lot of (unint.). There's a lot of tricky stuff in contracting that we really need to help farmers untangle.

00:14:11:13 We're doing a lot in trying to facilitate more direct marketing situations. We are the home for farmer's markets at USDA. So we have our own farmer's market this administration started at the corner parking lot every Friday at USDA. It's quite popular. We have the local farmers come in from Pennsylvania and Virginia and Maryland to sell their goods.

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00:14:33:18 And it's something the staff here look forward to. But we try to help farmer's markets across the country. (Unint.) sort of direct marketing relationships because the fewer middle man, the farmer pockets more money and that's very important..

00:14:48:27 One of the developing trends that we're trying to facilitate is direct marketing from farmers to schools. One of the rules that AMS has is the procurement arm for the Department of Agriculture for the school lunch program for a great number of the commodities. So if a school is going to receive a donation from the federal government to help in purchasing from the federal government nectarines or hamburger, that comes through AMS.

00:15:18:07 The only things we're trying to do for the small farmers is to work directly with the farmers that go right to the schools and not have a whole lot of other people involved.

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as a survival technique in certain areas. It won't work across the board. It won't work with every commodity. But these are the things that we're trying to do.

00:15:38:27 Q: Obviously, besides the crop commodities, you have the livestock commodities and pork is a referendum that you've spent a lot of time with too.

00:15:47:26 A: Yeah. Pork, the Other White Meat. We have had a lot of controversy in the last couple of years about the overall check off programs. And for people who may not be familiar with those, those are when laws are passed by congress, there are a number of them, that require producers, in some cases handlers as well, to pay a small portion of their sales price into a generic pool that's used for generic research and promotion of the commodity.

00:16:17:28 So the ones people are familiar with are the milk mustache ad. Pork, the Other White Meat and Beef -- What's for Dinner. The Incredible, Edible Egg. I could

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go on. These are quite popular programs and have been around for a number of years.

00:16:32:14 The pork check off program has been the most controversial in my tenure and that problem's been around almost 15 years. And there's been a lot of people in the pork industry in this last couple of years. At one point, about two years ago, prices for pork hit depression era levels. And when you're talking about that kind of devastation in the industry and small farmers are really struggling to survive, every penny counts.

00:17:02:27 Not that it doesn't always, but it especially seems to count in those cases. And so people have really been scrutinizing the check off programs to see if they're really getting what they need for their dollars (unint.) served by the programs.

00:17:17:07 And so one of the things that has occurred in my time

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here is we've received petitions from producers on both the pork and the beef check off programs asking that the department hold a referendum inviting all producers, eligible producers, to vote in those referenda and to ask them, "Yes or no. Should the program continue?".

00:17:41:26 We have had a vote just recently on the pork check off program in September. We'll be counting ballots on November 29th and hopefully soon we will know whether we will have the sufficient number of petitioners accounted for to call for a referendum on the beef check off. But it is a time of great controversy.

00:18:03:00 One of the things that this administration has recommended, it requires some legislative work by congress, is that all of these check off programs be up for renewal every five years so that farmers do feel that these programs are put in place for perpetuity, but every five years they'll have another opportunity to say, "Yes or no. Is this program serving our needs?".

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00:18:26:09 Q: Again, the staff that you have has had considerable energies expended on this particular commodity. How do they get the other commodity work done?

00:18:35:12 A: Well, I'm gonna go down in history here as a slave driver. I will tell you I do think of cookies on the weekends. I've had my livestock staff here on countless weekends as they've been trying to put out a very big rule in a very short period of time-- very controversial.

00:18:55:02 One of the things that's interesting about AMS as opposed to other agencies within the (unint.) within the federal government is we are 2/3's user fee funded. And so I think that we run a very tight ship necessarily because we have to open up our accounts to the industry on a daily basis and have them scrutinize and see whether we're worth our salt.

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00:19:19:15 And so I think that just has us in a mindset all the time of being very, very committed and having to work hard to get these things done. But, you know, if people are challenged, they often rise to the occasion. It's been an extraordinary-- it's been an extraordinary two years for AMS. I think everyone's hoping that we'll get a break one of these days because we are trying to juggle a lot of things.

00:19:42:18 Q: Well, you were not unfamiliar with this organization before you became the head of it. Did you have some expectations, some goals for yourself as you came into the job and how have you done on that?

00:19:53:28 A: One of my goals coming into the job that has put me in the midst of controversy has been to bring greater diversity in a number of ways to the agency. There are 16 administrators at USDA. Two of us are female. One is a political appointee, the other person's a career appointee and it just seems that in the year 2000 we can

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find qualified women, we can find qualified minorities to put in the place.

00:20:22:10 And I know this is something that President Clinton feels very strongly about. Some of the things that when he speaks about civil rights, that I'm particularly moved. I know Secretary Glickman is personally committed too and it was something that I came into the job with personal expectations and goals and that created some controversy.

00:20:43:23 One of the other interesting things that AMS has is we're the largest home for advisory committees. There are not a ton of advisory committees at USDA. I think people think there are more than there are. But we have 53. And that's a lot.

00:20:55:13 Some of them are marketing order committees. Some of them are check off committees like the pork board for the pork check off program. Some of them have to do with plant variety protection certificates. We're also the

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home of the-- we're the agency that does plant variety protection patents. It's a kind of intellectual property protection, not a patent per se, for plants.

00:21:18:27 We have a lot of different kinds of boards. And I was very concerned when I came to the job that most of the people on these boards were older, white men. Not that they weren't committed or doing a great job, but that I felt some opportunities might be missed for lack of diversity.

00:21:34:17 For example, one of the interesting dreams I had as the new administrator is I had a team of people come from (unint.) division which is the Spanish Television Network in the country. You're much more familiar with it than I am, but it's-- the Spanish population-- the Spanish speaking population in this country is huge.

00:21:54:05 I lived in Texas for a while. You know, you really feel it having lived in Texas and they were coming to me

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because they thought here are all these advertisements that these commodity boards are spending money on to promote their commodities and why aren't they coming to us (unint.). How do we approach these people? How do we get in contact with these people?

00:22:15:26 And it just seemed to me that was very odd because considering the growth in that population in this country, you'd think we would be chasing (unint.) or we would be chasing those kinds of opportunities and it occurred to me that well, we don't have enough Hispanic representatives on a lot of these boards who are actually turning in nightly and watching these television stations.

00:22:34:18 So I thought opportunities were being missed and I've really pushed a lot of the boards to diversify. I've required all of the boards to submit diversity outreach plans to me for approval and I've turned back a lot of slates of candidates for a lack of diversity. So that's

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a personal thing that I brought to the job that hasn't made me exceedingly popular in (unint.); but something that I felt is really important.

00:22:59:20 Q: And the government's become much more results-oriented from orders from congress and just our own initiatives. What kind of results do you think you'd like your administration to be remembered for?

00:23:12:13 A: Well, that organic rule is gonna get done. Mandatory price recording is gonna get done. This is going to be seen as the time when we re-invented our fruit and vegetable inspection service across the country. That's gonna get done.

00:23:27:06 I think that we have made strides in diversity. That's very-- easily documented. We had some new programs that we're putting together on microbiological testing of food and a (unint.). One of the things AMS does is we do all of the market basket testing for pesticides, meaning we

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have people across the country who go in at a supermarket level and take samples of food and test them for pesticide residues.

00:23:54:02 And we put out reports so that people know what's there and that's a very important help to the Environmental Protection Agency as they decide where in the regulatory queue certain chemicals should go. And then they know what might be problematic, what residues are showing up.

00:24:10:05 We're expanding that program to include water samples and to do microbiological tests and I think that's very, very important. And I guess another controversial issue that's happened in this last year is -- there's no shortage -- is trying to improve the food safety criteria for purchases in the school lunch program.

00:24:30:28 It came to my attention that the standards that we had in our contracts for purchasing of food for school lunch

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recipients were less than what McDonald's or Burger King or Jack-in-the Box have. And that seemed to be unacceptable. If it's good enough for the Big Boy fast food outlets, it certainly should be the standard that we should hold the school lunch program up to.

00:24:55:02 And so we've been in an excruciatingly painful process of trying to upgrade our regulations and, in the short term, it has resulted in us paying higher prices for product and not getting as much product offered to us by the bidders out in the industry. It's a little bit of a poker game right now.

00:25:12:25 But ultimately, I'll think we'll be in a winning situation and we'll be able to give consumers and specialty consumers, when you're talking about children and elderly, they're the most vulnerable populations when it comes to food safety, we'll be able to give greater assurances that the food is safe. And that's very, very important. I'm a mother of a 21-month old and my

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delivery day is in two days for baby number two so, again, another issue that I personally latch on to.

00:25:41:24 Q: So your organizations, though a lot of people don't stop to consider it, has its clientele. School lunch children, parents, consumers, farmers. A wide diversity of folks just doing what you do?

00:25:56:14 A: Yeah.

00:25:57:05 Q: Have you changed that environment in terms of getting consumers more in touch with what farmers do and what farmers won't touch with consumers too as part of your-- I know the farmer's markets and you publicize those through the internet and publications nationwide?

00:26:14:24 A: We do a lot on the internet and I think it's used quite a bit, our web page, by school groups. We do coloring books. We do a lot of different things. But I think that's a real challenge still, to put consumers in

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better touch with farmers. And I don't think we've really solved that problem.

00:26:31:19 I know for myself, personally, it's really important for me to bring my daughter to farmer's markets because now I live in an urban setting. Like a lot of USDA employees, I came from a rural community. Had, you know, had contact with a farm, but no longer do I really have that in my life. And so going to the farmer's market and seeing the farmers is very important. Bringing her to a pumpkin patch at a nearby farm where they're trying to do a little tourism to keep the cash flow going on the farm.

00:26:56:22 It's very important because we read all these books, the Farmer Brown, the pig goes "oink, oink" and the cow goes "moo moo", but if you live in the city, that's completely outside of your day-to-day existence. So I think that a lot of us have deep seeded-- a need to connect with the farm and with the rural population in this country. But it's not always clear how to do it. And I think that

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remains one of our challenges in agricultural policy.

00:27:24:27 Q: As the time comes where you hand the baton of the administrator's job to a new person in AMS, what would you tell them about what's there to be done and what would be your priority list of the future?

00:27:39:11 A: Well, I guess I would tell them not to be disheartened by the bureaucracy. That was very difficult for me. I came from an organization where, through a long period of time, I supervised myself. I was a very good employee, by the way. I supervised myself and now I have nearly 10,000 people that I'm supposedly responsible for and over a billion dollars.

00:28:02:06 And there's a whole lot of things that have to be done in the bureaucracy in these memos and I'm sure a lot of this will be in the clip library, all this sort of paper flow.

It actually stands for a reason. There's a reason to do it all. But you can't let it bog you down. I've spent a

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lot of time where I just get up from my desk, tell my secretary "I'll see ya later. I'm not exactly sure when I'll come back," and I roam the halls. And I talk to people directly and really deal with people on a one-to-one basis.

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And that really makes a big difference because I think sometimes we can also hide behind the bureaucracy and the paper flow. In terms of priorities, I think every administrative brings their own. I would hope that in the new administration they would continue to see the value of organic agriculture which we estimate now to be a 6.6 billion dollar industry here in this country.

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I'd hope that they would be looking for export opportunities for organic farmers. I was able to go to Japan this August to try to negotiate a little bit of a trade agreement there on organic agriculture. And right now, we export about a hundred million dollars worth of organic food products to Japan, but the potential is for

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it to be much, much greater.

00:29:17:15 That's a very interested constituency group there. But it requires the foreign agricultural service, not just AMS, to be involved and make it a priority. So, of course, that would be one of the things that not only will I ask of the new administrator, but I will be lurking outside of the department hoping to keep the pressure on because I do think it's an important industry.

00:29:41:02 Q: Memories are a part of any career. What kind of memories will you leave this position with?

00:29:47:17 A: Memories of a lot of hard workers. The (unint.) memories of a lot of-- a lot of rules that were put in the place for very good reason, protection of employees, but that also make it very difficult to shift among employees for the people who are really doing the work and the people who aren't and the difficulties that that

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places on a manager.

00:30:14:22 When you have time issues and something has to be done by Friday, close of business, and you really need certain people to do certain things, sometimes the rules that we've put into protect employees have backfired, I think.

Memories of really great things. The whole agency-- the whole agency, Agricultural Marketing Service, threw me a baby shower. Can you imagine?

00:30:42:04 Hundreds and hundreds of people keeping it quiet. It was a surprise. I had no idea. And it was all joke gifts and, you know, like a little baby thing that says, "Got Milk" from the milk check off campaign. And everyone did something from their division. I got a lot of chickens-- stuffed chickens and that sort of thing. But it was really, really, really fun and so it's been really nice to try to connect with people.

00:31:05:11 I think a lot of people become very intimidated because

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you're the administrator and they don't want to walk in your office. And I've tried to be accessible-- have an open door policy and interact with people and just making friends has been the most memorable part.

00:31:24:05

Q: Kathleen Merrigan, the Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service, thank you for being with us to talk about your career at USDA. Today is October 18th of the year 2000 and I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications, US Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C.

END OF INTERVIEW