

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: **Richard Sechrist** (RS)

INTERVIEWERS: David Todd (DT)

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DT: My name is David Todd. I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas. And it's April 19th, year 2002, and we're at the Sechrist Ranch which is west of Fredericksburg, and we have the nice opportunity to interview Richard Sechrist who operates this Ranch i—in conjunction with his—his family and wife, and has been a proponent of, and a practitioner of Sustainable Agriculture both here on the Ranch in producing sus—organic chicken and beef and also in selling it through his business, Homestead Healthy Foods. And I wanted to thank you for taking the time to talk to us and explaining what—what you're—you're up to.

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RS: Well, thanks very much for inviting me.

DT: We usually start these interviews by asking you where you first got exposed and interested in sustainable agriculture, or in the environment a—a—at large.

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RS: Well, I really grew up on this ranch, I guess, although we didn't live here full time. We ranched—ranching it for over fifty years and was very involved in the conventional agricultural program that went on here. I spent all my summers here, and—and wanted to live here, and my dad said, you can't make a living ranching, or farming, you can't make living in agriculture. So, that was always in the back—my background, being told that you couldn't make a living in agriculture, I really believed that you could, and—and wanted to, but didn't know how. And my mother died about ten years ago, chemical poisoning, and they lived here, actually on the ranch for about ten or fifteen

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years before her death, and she always said that she felt like she was being poisoned, especially when they would spray or anything that would go on, on the ranch that involved chemicals, even fertilizers. And 'course, we just blew it off and said, you know, Mom, well, you know, it's in your mind and don't worry about it. And—but she always complained about that, and—and actually did after ten years of a—a very horrible disease, died of, what we now know of as chemical poisoning. The reason we know that is because they never could identify what was wrong. And one of the issues that goes on

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with chemical poisoning is that—is that you think you have it identified in terms of one disease, and it moves to something else, and it becomes something else. So it went from polyomyelitis to muscular dystrophy to on and on and on and on and on. And so, now we

know that, and—and on top of that, she had an incredible number of fillings in her teeth, and—and from mercury toxicity and all of that, we now know that that was just a huge issue for her, which back then, we didn't know anything about. The other issue is, is

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every rancher around our ranch here, has died of cancer. And in Gillespie County, it's one of the largest causes of death in agricultural families around. And Gillespie County has a very, very high occurrence of that. Nobody's asking why. And yet on the other hand, we see them spraying peaches one morning and that afternoon, pick-your-own people are out there picking those peaches and taking them home with them. We decided that after mother's death and dad just recently died of Alzheimer's in a nursing home,

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after eight years in a nursing home, that—that things really need to change. I had been sick a long time, I've been on blood pressure medicine, allergy medicine for fifteen years, and was told I'd be on for the rest of my life. And I was sick all the time. And so, when Peggy and I met, after I'd been married, thirty years and had gone through a divorce, and Peggy and I met, and we started learning about holistic management, because she was an instructor for holistic management, and that's how we met, we began learning about a

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different process, or I did, and was fascinated by it. And went to a Naturopath, and she said well, your glandular system has shut down and you've got to get off the antibiotics that you've been on for the last umpteen months, and we've got to get you healthy again. So we started on a regimen of that. That was eight years ago. I take no b—no blood pressure medicine, I have no allergies at all, I have not been sick in seven and a half years, and—and for me to go back would be impossible because what we've learned is that you have an incredible immune system if you're not compromising that immune system all the time.

And we compromise it with chemicals, primarily, but chemicals are

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everywhere. They're not just things that we eat in meat, or in food, but they're in the environment, we breathe them. They're in soap, one of the largest, damaging chemicals that we have are the chemicals that are in soaps. Read the book, Our Stolen Future. It talks a great deal about that. And so we don't eve—we not even aware of some of that. And so we're beginning to learn about that and the place it plays. The other re—issue is though, is why are we using them in agriculture anyway? We didn't used to. We didn't use to have fertilizers; we didn't use to have antibiotics; we didn't used to have, you

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know, all the various thin—hormones that we injected in animals and all of this kind of thing and we raised incredible products back then, so why is it different? So we decided to set out to learn that different process. And literally, we sold everything off the ranch, completely changed the whole process and went cold-turkey, certified organic, and that—back then, you couldn't get certified, so we went chemical-free. And we use no chemicals, by choice. We've done that now for almost eight years, we have no death loss, we have no disease, we ha—we've never had any problems with disease or death loss,

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and we raise chickens, which you know that normally in a chicken operation, you lose anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five percent of your chickens. We lose, usually less than ten percent, and normally, if we lose anywhere close to that, it's because of something

we've done and not because the chicken is sick, or whatever. And so, we've learned a lot. But we—we really have found that, when you learn what a biological system is, and when you learn that—that everything is connected, and we believe we are; all the people are connected, are the systems are connected, everything impacts

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everybody else. That's really true in the soil. And when we get our soil healthy, then we began seeing some dramatic things happen. You had asked the question David about soil health. One of the things that we're learning right now, and boy we're—you talk about tip of the iceberg, we're really on the tip of the iceberg. It's huge. One of the things we're learning, mainly through a website called the soilfoodweb.com with ela—Dr. Elaine Ingham, is the soil biology and what goes on in that soil system, that—that we've haven't had the knowledge of in the past. And she's done about thirty years of research on this.

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And what we're learning is, is that when you use fertilizers and when you use pesticides and herbicides, all three of those things kill all of the life in the soil. And I bought aerators to aerate our fields and all this stuff, and what I found out was the reason the fields were compacting was because there's no life in it; not because the cattle were walking on it, and not because the cows—the cars or tractors were driving on it. It's because there's no life in the soil. And the earthworms and the microbes and the amoebas and fungi and microrisa, and all of those things that are in the soil, which are billions. If you took a teaspoon of soil, you'd be talking about billions of living organisms, most of

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which we have never even identified and don't have a clue what they are or how they work, but they all work together. They interact with each other. And what happens is, is that when that soil/food web is healthy, the plants are healthy. The—the—the fingers of the root system is literally covered with all kinds of good bacteria, and so when a pathogen bacteria tries to inter—intercept that root system, the good bacteria eat it up, I mean, that's part of that process that goes on. It's the same process that happens on your hand, there's—it's covered with bacteria, and one of the worst things that we do is use anti-bacterial soap all the time, so we kill the good bacteria and then we wonder why we

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get little in—infections and what on our hands, or wherever we get them, and one of the things that we do is we kill the good bacteria. Bacteria are critical to our living, to our existence. And when we try to kill everything, when we use pesticides and herbicides and even hot fertilizers that are too hot for the microbes to live in, we kill all that life. It cannot live in that system. And the pesticides are not selective, so it kills everything. And so what happens is when you have a hugely diverse system and you begin killing parts of it off, the good stuff takes a lot longer to come back than the bad stuff. And then you have a real overlapping and a—and a—and things get out of hand, and then we think,

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well we've got to go do something about it. What we're learning, our pecans trees out here, we haven't sprayed in six or seven years. We have gorgeous pecans, we don't have pecan bores. We—we don't have webworms in our trees. They spray the webworms in the trees, here in town all the time, but we don't kill our wasp, and our wasp are the natural predator of the webworm as I learned from Malcolm Beck, you know? And so, when we're learning how these systems interact, and we get out of the way and quit messing with them, we find

that there is an incredibly healthy process going on if we can understand it and work with it. And that's really kind of what has happened and what has

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brought us to where we are, and I'm absolutely convinced that my mother would literally be alive today, if we'd known that, you know, fifteen years ago. But, when you don't know those things, and when we do everything we can through the conventional medical knowledge that they haven't had, you know; they don't understand well systems, they don't understand whole systems; they don't understand health; they understand if you have a disease, here's what you can do for it, or cut it out, or whatever, but they don't understand how to create that with—by building a healthy immune system. And that's what we do with our animals. That's what we do with the land, with that whole system.

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And if that's healthy, then we're going to be healthy. And—and it's actually pushed us to the point where we really have a compa—a passion for making healthy food, not only what we grow, but what other people grow also, as organic food, available to the consumer. It is more healthy, there is no question about it. And—and—and there are reasons for that, but primarily because it's allowed to mature as fruit and vegetables and all, on the vine, you know. Fruit doesn't get healthy and have a lot of nutrition in it because it's picked green and stored for a year and hopefully developed something, I

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don't know what they're expecting it to develop. It happens when that soil/food web, that whole system interacts with that plant, and it creates the nutrition and that's what causes healthy food. And we d—we just got to get back to that. We've got to get away from the farming, the—the—the—the get big, get out, you know, type thing; and rapid pushing things through and get back to a system that is healthy and that works for us.

DT: You—you mentioned earlier that some of the practices of trying to promote soil health, can you talk about how you manage to restore some of the diversity and—and vitality in your pasture grasses (inaudible).

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RS: Sure. One of the things that we've done through holistic management is we've gone through a pasture, a rotation of raising system, that—that we're not where we want to be right now. We—we took our ranch from six pastures, we have eleven hundred acres, and for fifty years that we operated, we operated six pastures, ninety-five percent of the time, all the gates were open, cows could go where they wanted to go. We had some places that were radically overgrazed, and some places that were radically under grazed and therefore, we got some mesquite, not a lot, lots of cedar, primarily from areas

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that were under grazed, and the areas around the water systems and all, where the cows kind of hung out, were r—radically overgrazed. So we lost a lot of biodiversity. And the rotational grazing system, we've got now, twenty-two pastures. We would like to have forty-five pastures, but, we have twenty-two pastures that we can move these animals through. You have—what we're trying to do is to get very high animal density and animal impact on the soil to break-up what we call, capping. The soil caps over and—and rain hits it, and it hits it and runs off instead of going into the soil, because it's capped over. It's like—it's like a—a—a sheet of plastic, basically over it. The water can't

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penetrate that. And if you see black areas in soil, for instance, and you—we've all got them on our ranches, if you see that, that's capping. And you can go and pick that off with your knife and sometimes that capping will be half-inch to even an inch thick. So when water hits it, it runs off, just like it would run off my hand, so it can't go down to the s—root system, or it can't go down to the seeds that are there. There are seeds there. You don't have to replant anything, what we got to do is break that capping up. So what we're trying to do is to do this rotational system. So we get high animal density for short periods of time, and then the animals are off of there, until that grass can fully recover. We do transects and p—Peggy probably talked about this, but where we actually look at

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in a one square foot area, how many diverse plants we've found. And when we started this, we had about six or seven different varieties of plants in that one square foot area, and now we have twenty-five and thirty-five varieties of plants in that one square foot area. And that's what we're managing to. So we do the transects to look and see how we're doing in those areas. And some areas, we're doing better than others, because we have smaller paddocks, we call them, smaller areas where we put the cattle. And the smaller the better, the more stirring up of the soil, the better, and the key is, is that animal and impact is—is critical, but overgrazing doesn't have anything to do with how fa—how far you take the grass down, necessarily. It has to do with how long that recovery time is,

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when that plant tries to grow before that's eaten off again. So under continuous grazing, their—their favorite plants will start to grow, and they'll eat it off again; when it does that, that plants sloughs off root system. It tries to grow again, and that cow comes along and eats it off, and it sloughs off more root system, because it's trying to survive. The plant tries to grow again, and the cow eats it off again, and it sloughs off more root system, until, when you get into a drought cycle, like we're in right now, and have been for six years, the—the plant doesn't have any—any storage, it doesn't have any—and resilience. Under the other system, as we move them off, and they may be three, four,

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five, six, seven months before they come back into that pasture depending on how many pastures you have. Can you imagine what happens? That plant can grow. It puts out an enormous root system and it can mature. It can put out it's seeds, do whatever it needs to do, and go through the cycle that it has to go through. So the rotational grazing system, basically simulates what ha—used to happen with buffalos, when the buffalo were here. They had thousands of buffalo come through this country. And they would come through and pulverize the land. You didn't even see anything growing left, when they would come through, but they'd be gone for two years, you know. And then they would come

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back and they would have this lush, lush, lush grass. They used to tell, two hundred years ago, how the grass here was—was stirrup deep. So when the horses rode through here, the—the grass would be hitting their stirrup. You don't see that anymore, because we've lost a lot of those grasses, because we've mismanaged the system. But that's why that system is very important to us, is to try to re-simulate that. One of the questions you'd asked is what about drought? Ou—our system right now, our ranch is eleven hundred acres. We've had as many as a hundred and ninety mother cows, and right now we have thirty-one mother cows. Normally we'll run about fifty at this time. We're in a drought

cycle, have been here for six years. We have rain, you know, we hav—we'll have twenty-

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five, twenty-six inches a year, the problem is we get eleven inches in one week, and then we go for months without basically any measurable rain. We went eighteen months, in one period, with no measurable rain at all. And at that time, we literally hauled our animals off to another place because there was no grass, and that's pretty unusual, but that happened in the last seven years. So what we end up doing is we have stocked our place so that we can get through the drought. And we add to it, as—as we have more rains, but we have the flexibility of being able to move them off through leased property, or whatever we have to do, but we have to have organically certified land to do that.

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DT: Can you talk about whether you use prescribed burning or other techniques to manage your grasses?

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RS: We have not used prescribed burning here, because we haven't had enough fuel in the—in the drought cycle we've been in, but definitely we'd use prescribed burning, they've used it across the road a bunch of times, and—and they use it across the road because they don't have any animals, basically over there. And it's a—it's a wild, it's a game ranch, really, and so they don't have the animals that we have that—that work on the grass like cattle do. But prescribed burning is an incredible tool as long as you don't

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use it very often. It typically, they're finding that it ought to be used every three to five years, and really no more than that. What's interesting is if—if you do a burn, the animals go back on there almost before it gets through smoking. And what it is there in that—in that, they—they love it. And if you look at the deer, and the—the wild stuff, they want to go back on that land immediately. And—and they find little shoots of grass and whatnot to eat. It's amazing.

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DT: What's the benefit of—of burning?

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RS: Well there's several things, it—it helps control things like cedar, or juniper, which we have, ash juniper here; it really does control that. If you do a cool burn, it will take care of all the stuff that's scrubby stuff and kind of open up the—the territory. It won't burn the trees, if you have a cool burn, because it's going, a cool burn doesn't get real hot, it—it burns, and it basically takes all the grass and the, it'll do some mesquites and it'll take cedar and that, or juniper and that kind of thing off. But the purpose of it really is to open it up. And when you see the new grasses come back, you see all kinds of

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different grasses come back, that are the old grasses we used to have here, and the seeds are in the ground, you know, they're there. And if you quit fertilizing and quit doing all the stuff, they actually will c—it will come back, you don't have to replant it. It's an amazing system that can recover after we've abused it like we have.

DT: You—you've talked some about soil management and—and pasture grazing, can you talk about some of the—the new ways that you're working with your livestock? I understand that you're not using antibiotics and parasiticides and other things that are common in conventional raising(?).

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RS: Yeah, under the organic program, you cannot use the antibiotics, parasiticides, any kind of pour-on, spot-on for—for worms, you can't use anything for internal parasites. And so what we have to do—one of the things, one of the best ways of managing internal parasites is through rotation of grazing, because you break the lifecycle of that parasite. Typically what happens with internal parasites is a cow leaves its dung on the ground, a fly lays its egg in the dung, takes about ten to fourteen days for that to mature, that larva climbs out of the dung, and climbs up on a—a leaf of grass in the dew of the morning, and that cow comes and ingests it, and that's how they get those

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internal parasites. Well by the time that larva has matured and—or has come out and is ready to find a host, our cows aren't there. So what happens if—if it doesn't find a host, it dies. And so, by the time we come back, that—those larva are all dead. And so we really don't have a problem with internal parasites, and never really have had. We've had—well, we haven't had a problem. We have had occasion where a cow will get some internal parasites, and—and—and once instance, we actually did fecal samples, we always do fecal samples to tell where we are. We never treat anything, without knowing exactly what we're treating and why we're treating, even in the conventional system we didn't do that. But—but most people, you know, just every—twice a year, whatever, just

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n—n—nuke them all with (?) or whatever they want to nuke them with. And that's really a waste because if you're not sure what you're going after, then it could be a—a—an incredible waste of time. Or, one of my friends gives a penicillin shot every time he castrates his calves, and I said why? And he said, well, 'cause I don't want them to get sick. I said, well penicillin is an antibiotic, and antibiotics deals with bacterial infections. If they don't have a bacterial infection, you're wasting your money, and your compromising that calf's immune system, so it can't even deal with the incision that you made, and it's having to heal that. It's having to deal with this antibiotic that you've put

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in it, so you're compromising it's immune system and making it even more difficult for that to heal. And so now my friend who was doing that, whose brother or—or cousin was a Veterinarian, is now not doing that. And he said, you don't have cattle, calves die from? I said, we've never had a calf die from castration. I mean, we just never do that. We've never had that happen. But giving an antibiotic is not helpful, unless it's got a bacterial infection. That's what it's for, not for viral infection and it's not for something you're afraid might happen in the future. But what we've found is that if—if cattle are not stressed, cows are herbivores, they're grass eaters. They're not grain eaters, and one of the things we've learned through Dick Divens' courses on animal nutrition and he teaches all over the country and he's—he's outstanding. But one of the things we've

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learned through him is that, when you put grain in an animal, in a cow, the acid that is created in the rumen which is the fourth stomach, is enormous. And what it does, it kills all the good bacteria that metabolizes the grass into proteins and amino acids and all the things that need to feed the cow. The grass doesn't feed the cow, nor does the—nor does the grain. What feeds the cow are the bacteria in the stomach that convert that into the properties that are necessary. So what happens is, we talk about conditioning cattle before

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they go into the feed lot. Well the reason you are is because you putting them on grain, they're used to eating grass. They don't have the bacteria in their stomach to nu—to—to metabolize the—the grain, so it takes about four to six months for the good bacteria that metabolize the grass to die, and the new bacteria to accumulate in the stomach so that they can eat and feel like they're being satisfied when they eat. The other issue with that is, is that when you go back and forth, so you feed grain one day, and you feed grass one day, and you feed grain one day, and you feed grass one day, I used to—we used to come out in the winter 'cause I used to feed lots of cubes, I loved to feed and liked—I liked

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cattle coming up and walking around us and all that kind of stuff, but we noticed that when the summer—the spring flush came, these b—cows would be belly deep in grass and bawling for us to feed them these cubes, and Dick Divens said well the reason is because they don't have the right bacteria in their stomach to metabolize the grass and to the proteins and amino acids, so they are starving, they are hungry, literally. And as long as you keep feeding them those cubes, you're going to have to keep feeding them those cubes. Well, but what happens in that meat product is that not only does it create a lot of acid, so now because we're feeding grain to our cattle, we have a Super E. coli issue

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because E. coli has always been in meat, but when E. coli gets into our stomach, the acid in our stomach kills it. But when you have an E. coli that's adapted to acid in a cow's stomach, this—the acid in our stomach doesn't kill it. Cornell University's done a study on this, it's out for publication, and you can actually see the study. So we have Super E. coli issue now. If you eat a grain-fed product and you will—can actually get that from meat that is conventionally grown, because it's used to living in an acid environment. Our product is a grass-fed product, and we did that because we found that our cows are a whole lot more satisfied, year-round, even in the wintertime, we go and take grass

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samples and do the rotational grazing system allows us to manage so that we have standing grass all year long, we don't cut hay for our animals. I usually have a few bales of hay, just in case spring doesn't get here early enough and we have calves start hitting the ground and we need to do something to—to boost our mothers, but this year I didn't have any, so we—they had to make it on—on the grasses there. We've found that in the dormant, native grass, we have anywhere from seven to nine percent protein in the native grass, it's not there in coastal, it's not there in kleingrass, all the improved grasses, it's

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there in the native grasses, that are very, very diverse and that's what those cows enjoy and that's what they like to eat. They will eat the other, but when you give them a choice, they love the native grasses. They like the salad bar, what Joel Salatin talks about, they like food variety, just like we like variety, and they do very well on native grasses. So all of our stuff is going back to a native system to feed grass to herbivores, which is what they're n—a—they're—they were meant to eat. And we take them from a very, very minimally stressed environment to the slaughterhouse. They're never in a feed lot, and they're extremely healthy. I mean, we have very few livers condemned, I mean, it just

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almost never happens. And—and that's one of the real tests to see what's going on, because

the hot feed will c—cause the liver to be condemned as well as other things like liver flukes and there are other issues that can cause that, but we find that they are just a lot happier animals. We—we use a very low stress method of handling our animals. Bud Williams has taught animal behavior for a long time, has taught us this, and Peggy can do anything with my cows that I can do. And we can load a truck quicker than anybody with a hotshot and we don't have a h—we do have a hotshot in the house, but we were given the hotshot because we were told that if you ever get a snakebite, and you actually take

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that hotshot and electrify that snakebite, it will stop the venom flow and that's why it's here. We have never, ever since we've started this process used a hotshot on an animal, and won't. A—anybody that does, I'll turn it around and use it one them, so they are sure they know what that feels like, before they go and poke some animal in the rear end with it, and—but we don't do that. So it's a matter of positioning and anticipating what the animal wants to do and is willing to do and we can load a trailer, we can load semi, we can do anything anybody else can do just as quick, if not quicker. And we don't have the stress issue.

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DT: Is it—is it an issue of trying to be just more humane manager of livestock, or is it also—or—a factor in trying to keep the—the stress factors low enough so that the animals don't have toxins in their bodies from adrenaline.

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RS: Yes, both. Absolutely both. It's from both. The—when—when we started facing the consumer that eats our meat, it started being very, very important what happened to those animals. And what happens to that animal just before it's killed is crucial. If they're hot-shotting them in the slaughterhouse, if they're stressing that animal in any way in the slaughterhouse, they can create New York strip steaks that you can't eat. And they can create ribeyes or rib steaks where the outside of it is so tough, you can't eat it, literally, because that's where the adrenaline goes. So, we really worked with a processing plant about that, and—and they—they're very sensitive to that, because if they stress an

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animal, and they—and there are times when you just get an animal that just goes bonkers just because it's in an environment that it's not usually in, or never has been—and—but that's very unusual. If they're gentle and if they're not anxious and not poking and yelling and all this kind of stuff at them, they're usually very, very easy to take in. And of course, they stun the animal immediately so that—a—at—there's no consciousness at all after that, and then they bleed them, so the heart literally plu—pumps the blood out and they die because they literally lose all their blood, but they're totally unconscious when

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that happens. And we like that process. People have asked us about Kosher killing and all that, and I said, well, but, you know, I don't know a lot about it, but what I've seen, it is fairly brutal. And I'm not willing to slit an animal's throat and let it sit there and—and suffer and die and—and be able to sense and feel that. And we feel like with the stun gun, they don't feel anything. There—there is no feeling at all, yet their heart is still pumping, and—and it seems just more humane to me. With our chickens, we do kind of the same

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thing. They put them in a cone, which really constricts them, so they don't flap around or anything, and they just cut that jugular, and it just bleeds them out, so that there's no struggle or anything, and the chicken doesn't even know really what's going on and so...

DT: Speaking of, how's your chicken operation different from the conventional chicken raising?

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RS: Well we raise in a hoophouse and the hoophouse is just a—is like a greenhouse, basically. And they go in there for food and water, and at night, and then we have an electric netting that we put out at—during the day, and so they're outside—the broilers are outside all day long. They eat bugs and seeds and grass and—and they're literally outside, and that's one of the reasons we don't have disease problems is because their n—they're not standing in their own manure like the conventional systems where you have to walk around in hip boots because you're literally walking through layers of manure that have been in these chicken houses. Ours are on fresh grass everyday. We actually move

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the pens so that they—they don't—they soil the grass, but they don't—they're not standing in manure. There's not enough manure on that to burn the grass, even when they—when those are moved. So they're on fresh grass everyday as we go around that hoophouse, and then at the end of the week, we move the hoophouse to new grass. So that process goes on all the time. With our layers, they literally—they're in a fixed barn, but then we open the doors every morning and they can go to town and drink coke if they want to. They're literally free range. They can go anywhere that they want to. And we have a little problem with hawks and, you know, those kind of predators, but—but we never kill the hawks.

That's just part of the—that's part of the food chain, and—and

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we're aware of that. And we try to give them an area where they can get away from the hawks, or get in their house, and they—they do that. They've gotten really smart about that. And they do real well. We lose one every once in a while, but we just buy twenty more chickens, or whatever, and feel that that's just part of what our process is. That's part o—that's part of that biological system.

DT: Speaking of that process, can you talk a little bit about how you went about getting your pasture management and your (?) certified as organic and how that's different from the conventional system?

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RS: Well the systems in organic production is that, it's not just a matter of changing from conventional or synthetic chemicals to organic chemicals. I mean, a lot of people think that's all it is. Well if I don't use this fertilizer, I can use this one. But the issue with organic farming and ranching is, you're building and economic—I mean an ecological system, and so the whole focus is on how do you build that system? And it takes a long time. It's taken us a long time to kill it and so it's going to take us a long time to restore the system. In our fields we used, Agrigrow, fish emulsion and molasses, primarily. Agrigrow is a product that is pr—per—is allowed in the organic system. And it actually,

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they claim, puts the microbes back in the soil. So if you're really—have had a lot of chemicals on your soil for a long time, you can use that product and it will actually put

microbes back in the soil. The m—the molasses is used to feed the microbes. It's sugar, and it's used to feed the microbes. And then the fish emulsion is a very, very low—it's like a—a four-one-one fertilizer, that's very low in nitrogen, and microbes can live in a four-one-one. It can't live in an eighteen percent n—nitrogen fertilizer, I mean, it just can't—they—none of them can. So we've got to be real careful if we use a hot fertilizer because we're going to kill a lot of bacteria and microbes that are in the soil, whereas fish

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emulsion, being a natural product anyway, and is certified to be used as an organic product, if you get the ones that are, and there are some out there, then you can use those products and it does—it does not do the same thing that an eighteen percent nitrogen product does, but we're building an ecological system; we're not trying to get huge yields of monocultures. We're trying to get biodiversity to come back. So you really are looking at how you—how you change that system. And—and—and that's really where the focus is, and everything we do with the holistic management way of actually evaluating and always determining whether you're going towards your goal and all, we have a way of

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monitoring so that we can tell whether we're moving toward our goal, which is very, very high diversity, no capping, you know, and that kind of thing. So if you—there are some things that you can use, you can use compost, a good, quality compost. And it can even come out of a feed lot, but if it's properly composted, so that it's brought to one hundred and eighty degrees for seven days and, you know, the process that a real compost has to go through, and it's completely finished, then you can use that. Now they're talking about compost tea, which is really an exciting thing, because a lot of us don't have compost spreaders for fields, so we don't have any way to do that, but we can take a bale of hay

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and soak it in compost tea, and we can inoculate with the bacteria and all that's in that compost tea, you know, acres and acres of land. It's pretty amazing. And all that's on Elaine's website, as to how to do that. And now we're learning a lot about compost tea and what we can do with that, and you can make that in a five gallon bucket in your backyard. You know, take a little manure, and all, and just agitate the water, and what it does is it kicks the—the bacteria and the microbes and all that good stuff off of the—off of the manure and what not, and actually gets it in the water, and then you pour it off, and you've got to use it. You've got to use it fairly quickly and all compost tea that I'm aware

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of, that really is effective, it's not something that's on a shelf in a store somewhere. It's something that you've got to use within a very few minutes because the microbes start dying if you don't use them fairly quickly. But—but...

DT: (inaudible) It's more sort of proactive measures that you have to take, rather than just avoiding synthetic chemicals.

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RS: Sure. Absolutely, it's—it's not that at all. But you've got to be aware of what the synthetics do to you, you know. If you're going to use them, be aware of what it does, because some things last a long, long time. I've been told a picloram, which is in Grazon, lasts for years, and some people say that they really believe that it never goes away, I don't know. But—but the problem is—and—and you can get some synthe—you can get some organic poisons like pyrethrin, which is a poison, and it will kill. The thing is, the lifespan on

that pyrethrin is very short, you know, whereas you can use diazinon or

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something like that, and the killing time on that can be in—incredibly long. So there are some things that are allowed to be used, but there are some things you can use on breeder stock and there are some things you can use slaughter stock, and you cannot use any antibiotics, pesticides, parasiticides, or those kinds of things—hormones on slaughter stock, period. You can't use it. Now, on that mother cow, if you need to worm her, or whatever, then you're—when she's not lactating, so she's not nursing a calf, and she's not three months—in the last third—trimester of her pregnancy, then you could actually treat her with some kind of a parasiticide, if you felt like she had parasites. We had one

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cow one time, just as a side, that we were watching and she didn't look r—really good and so we did a fecal sample, and took it in, and the vet said, well she's—she's really bad, and she—if she doesn't get something done pretty quick, she's going to die in a week or so. Well we didn't do anything, mainly because she didn't look bad to us. Her eyes looked good, she had lots of energy, she was eating well, and she had a calf by her side, and so we didn't do anything but watch her, everyday, to be sure that she didn't start going down. We didn't notice anything in her eyes, or, you know, if she looked like she was really losing ground. That cow came perfectly fine—oh, sh—I'm sorry, she didn't

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have a calf then, she was—she was bread, she didn't have a calf. She had her calf, a real pretty calf, and she still in our herd today, we've never treated her, and now, today, you can take a fecal sample and you won't find any—any parasitic—parasites at all in her. So she has an incredible immune system that allows her to get rid of that, also, if we're not compromising that immune system. And—and we're learning about that. You know, we really aren't sure always what to do, and sometimes the management side of it is more time-consuming because it—it takes more energy and time, but—and more ware—awareness, you know. There's not as much opportunity to be sloppy, you know. I always

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tell the processing plant, if you find anything wrong in those animals, if you find a liver that's condemned, in a chicken or a cow, I want to know it immediately, and let's talk about that, because I don't—I can't run and get antibiotics and solve a problem that's way down the road, you know, if it's been going for a week or so, and all of a sudden it's really generated in our animals. And so we really talk about stuff a lot and—and as long as we're aware of it, and so we can watch what's going on. With the chicken's, the biggest problem is you have toxemia and you have it primarily because the feed's too hot. And they—they get—they get circulation problems, so they start turning blue, and—and

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you have some toxemia problems, but that's not—now the vet told me that he could solve that problem with an antibiotic, I said, well that's not an option. So what we learned was that if we just withhold the feed, not all of it, but we reduce their feed consumption of—of the protein, toxemia goes away.

DT: Could you tell me about the process of—of getting organic standards and certifiers and programs to recognize and—and certify that you are doing things in such a distinct way from conventional ag?

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RS: Well, the standards are pretty clear, USDA now has standards out that are being approved and have been approved actually, and they're going to be fully in place in October of this year. And those standards are real clear. It tells you exactly what you can and cannot do. It tells you exactly what materials are allowed and not allowed and so you basically take this and follow it. And you keep records and ou—our burden is that we've got to keep records to verify everything that we do. We have to show everything that we buy, everything that we put on our land and we've got to have records with tags and everything tha—that go to the certifier to prove that. We're just now getting ready to go

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through the re-certification process here. And what I do is have to fill out all the forms. I have to send in everything that we've done. They can come and look at all of our records and if our records are not in place, they can take certification away from us. So the process of certifi—certifying us is very rigid and it's going to be more and more rigid because there are more people that want to get in it and there are people that want to cut corners. Our expectation at Homestead Healthy Foods is higher than their expectation of the certifier actually because, whereas they allow you to put them in a feed lot for a hundred days, we don't allow that. We think that's an unnatural system. It is not in

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keeping with what a herbivore needs, or should be involved in, and we don't think it's proper and will not allow it in our—in our meats that process; it is allowed under the organic standards. But it's up to us as a grower to be able to prove, they can come in here any time they want to. Texas Department of Agriculture comes here once a year, we don't ever know when. They take soil samples in every single pasture on this land and grass samples in every pasture and they send it in and have it tested. They can go through my barn. They check everything that I've got. They can go through my refrigerator and see if I have antibiotics in there, and you can have antibiotics, you just got to tell them

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why, and you'd better show where it's recorded as to when that animal—I mean you can give an antibiotic to a cow, you know a mother cow, as an example. If you get something that's sick and you don't treat it, you can lose your certification over that. Now one of the things that happens is, if it's slaughter stock, you've got to pull it out of your slaughter herd and send it to the conventional market. If it's breeder stock, you've got to be sure that she's not in the last third of gestation with a calf, or lactating, or that calf also has to be pulled out. And, we had an animal once, a mother cow, that we had literally had to give an antibiotic to, who had a calf by her side. We ear-tagged that, I put a red ear-tag in

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that calf, so we always traced that calf. I could not use her as slaughter stock, but she became one of our best breeder stock animals, and that was allowed. That is allowed. So it's a matter of that, but y—also, we're subject to evaluation and we're subject to review every year and they can come any time they want to and go through all of our process. So not only does the people we buy feed from have to be certified and we be able to prove that, where our ranch is has to be certified and we have to be able to prove that, and that our animals have been here, or everywhere we take them had to be certified and we have

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to be able to prove it. The processing plant has to be certified we to be to handle organic product and they have to go through the same processing or same system that we go

through with the tracking and all that, and they have to be able to show—I mean they—the inspectors come in and they want to see their kill record. And if our animals aren't killed at the first of the day, or behind other animals—I mean they'll take the certification away from them. And they can pick any day they want to pick and go through that

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process. So every step of the process has to be certified and right now, it has to be certified by the same certifier because our label says "Certified Organic By Quality Certification Services" so th—that track has to in there for them. In October, it'll say, "Certified Organic By USDA" and Quality Certification Services will be one of the certifiers for USDA, I'm assuming and they're assuming. So i—i—we could actually ha—you could be certified through QAI, Quality Assurance International. We used to be certified—and I could be certified through QCS, as long as they're both following the same rules, then we could still put a USDA label on there, as I understand it, I mean that may be different from what i...

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DT: ...specific and in some cases (?) these organic standards are, can you talk about the process of developing those standards in the industry and the tensions between the conventional livestock operations and—and some of the more maverick organic and natural folks that—that wanted to go in a different direction.

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RS: Yeah, one of the things we need to be real clear about: organic and natural are not the same thing. Organic is a certified process. Natural is a label that you can use if you minimally process. That's the only regulation the USDA has. You can use antibiotics, parasiticides, growth hormones, whatever. It's up to the grower as to what they use and what they allow. B3R is a good example, they're a real good natural beef producer and good friends of ours and they claim that there stuff is hormone free, so their growers are willing to follow that rule, but they don't say anything about antibiotics and parasiticides and so th—under the natural label, the natural is not an organic product, and it is not

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certified and it is not subject to inspection, except whether they add anything in the—in the processing. On the organic, it's very different, because you—it's—it's because of the restrictions and the certification and the inspections that we have to go through. To talk about that as—wh—when the organic standards were developed, and this has been over a long period and we've been in the middle of a lot of it, I guess, and it's been really difficult. We went to an—a chemical-free product, so we didn't use any or—synthetic chemicals, and so the organic transition for us was very easy, because we had learned that we could do it and we wanted to try it and we did it with fifty ki—chickens to start with,

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and we did it with a small herd to start with, just to see if we could do it. Everybody said, everything's going to die and you're going to be in trouble, and so, of course we wondered if that was really true. And so we started that way, and then really grew that process for us. And we're really on the ground floor with the certification with TDA, we were the first ranch certified in the State of Texas by Texas Department of Agriculture, and so we got to go through that process and realized that in the—in that whole system, there were a lot of things TDA didn't know about. You know, I mean, they weren't growers. When we were certified through Quality Assurance International, we started

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selling to stores, we're the one that raised the question as to whether or not the butcher shop had to be certified. They said, we hadn't even thought about that. So there were a lot of things that people hadn't really thought about that now I think that—and—and I'm not saying we thought about it all, I'm just saying that there pieces that people hadn't really thought about, you know, and so it was a matter of trying to put together a system that would work and that didn't really exclude people that really wanted to do it, but did exclude people that wanted to raised them conventionally and just call it organic, because they were using organic feed and everything else was the same. Well what we've ended

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up with is basically an organic system that is somewhat of a compromise but really way more to the organic side and we feel good about where we are with that. You have to use to one hundred percent organic feed, used to be eighty percent. That's what they started with. You can't use any other—or any feed, except organic on slaughter stock. And—and so they've really tightened it down a lot, the only thing we don't like about it is they do allow you to feed lot. In a feed lot situation, I'm not against feeding grain, or feeding something to enhance protein uptake and that kind of thing, but I think it needs to be in

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conjunction with the grasses that they need to be having all the time. And something that doesn't create to much acid that they can't—you know that they're—that they're—there's frustration there. And we're really wrestling with that. We feed a little bit of cotton seed—organic cotton seed once in a while, it's very very high in protein, but it's not the same thing as an—as a grain. It doesn't create the acid in the stomach. But, and so that's one of the things, we don't do that with our breeder stock—I'm mean with our slaughter stock, but we do that with our cows, and—and we're wor—we're looking at it

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in terms of slaughter stock because it is certified organic, and we just want to be sure that we're not doing anything to move that acid issue in the stomach in the rumen because it changes the complexion of the meat, and so you have from—you go from an omega six to an omega three. If it's grass fed, it's omega three. You want omega threes you know. You have conjugate linoleic acid if it's grass fed, you have linoleic acid if it's not, they're very very different amino acids: one promotes cancer growth, and one doesn't promote cancer growth. You have very high vitamin A, vitamin E and beta carotene in the grass

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finished product that's very low in a gra—grain finished product. You have very low saturated fat in a grass-finished product and very high saturated fat in a grain-finished product. So the complexity of that meat that you eat is very, very, very, very different and we want to be real careful that we're protecting that integrity of that product.

DT: Can you explain wh—why there are producers that—that wanted to keep the grain-fed feed lot option? Why was that so important to them?

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RS: Well, the—the feed lot—the—the consumer is the one that is driving the whole food industry anyway. You know, let's—there isn't any blame to place in the conventional, it's not a conventional versus organic thing, and we—and I hope we really can create some dialogue so that we can move beyond that, because the consumer's the one that demands cheap food. And what has happened is, is we've learned how to do cheap food. We can put them in a feed lot, we can finish them at eighteen months instead of twenty-four months.

We can feed them all kinds of things that you wouldn't believe, if I told you, that will actually cause them to grow: chicken manure is one of the biggest

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things that they feed cattle. And they feed it right out of the chicken yards, and they put it in the cattle feed lots, and that's what they have to eat, and they'll grow two pounds a day on chicken manure. It's high in nitrogen, obviously, you know. One of the things that I'd heard recently was that people are now getting candy, from Mars Candy and they put it out for cattle in these feed lots, wrappers, boxes and all, and let them eat it and they eat the whole thing, 'cause it's—I mean, if that's all you have to eat, that's what you'll eat. But we've learned how to produce cheap food and we can produce it really cheap. It has

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lots of fat in it because that bacteria that does the grain thing, converts that grain into fat. The problem is, is that the toxins are stored in the fat, so when you eat meat that has lots of fat in it, that's been in that environment, the chances are, you're getting a lot of toxins, including lots of antibiotics and paracetamol—pesticides and for a lot of people that is a huge problem. It's getting to be a huge problem, especially for children, it's a huge problem. And look what's going into school lunch programs, it's very, very, very cheap meat. And—and it's very unhealthy.

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DT: (inaudible) also an issue for the Mad Cow disease problem?

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RS: Oh, absolutely.

DT: (inaudible)

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RS: Well the issue is that one of the things that they also do in cattle feed, is they grind up dead animals and put it in cattle feed, including dead cattle. And if there is any of that orion in—that's from the—the brain cell or the nerve cell or the—well the brain or the spinal cord that gets into that meat, that's where that can come from. And because we don't mind putting dead animals in our animal feed because it boosts protein and all that, that's—that's where that comes from. In a grass-fed product, y—it's pretty hard to get that, because they never get any dead animal feed, you know, it just doesn't happen,

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and—and—and so that's another big issue that has surfaced and—and it keeps unsurfacing and it surfaces and unsurfaces because of the belief system about that. But—but I—I mean I can't s—I can't say strongly enough how important consumer is in this game. If the consumer demanded organic meat, organic food, you would get it, and you would get it at a reasonable price. As long as the consumer doesn't care, and as long as we're willing to continue dealing with what we're dealing in term. The Center for Disease Control, I guess it was last year, said by the year 2002, and I think I'm remembering this right, that seventy-five percent of the population would be chronically

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ill. And twenty-five percent of the population would be mentally ill. And—and from what we see and what we see coming into our store, we're—we're—we're way down that road. Now, they don't say why.

DT: Speaking of your store, can you talk about your effort to find these consumers and educate these consumers about importance of eating organic meat and chicken and other

products?

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RS: Our—for the last six or seven years, we—we’ve done direct marketing, we’ve gone to farmer’s markets’, we’ve done everything. And in the last two years, we’ve started selling through some distributors, and that’s gone very slow to start with. In February of this year, we had probably seven months of inventory in stock, and we went through seven months of inventory from February the fifteenth, through now, in about two and a half months. And the demand is—is mushrooming for some reason, not sure why. New York Times had an article on meats, and that kind of thing recently, but this

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started way before that. But it seems like there’s—there’s really becoming an awareness. People are dealing with lots of illnesses. People that come in our store are people that are dealing with illnesses, mostly cancer. But they’re dealing with all kinds of illnesses, and—and they’re—they’re concerned. Now the medical people are actually beginning to say, you need to—you need to begin looking at food issue. You need to begin looking at, you know, what’s in the food,. You need to begin looking at pesticides in fruits and vegetables for instance. Lettuce is one of the most toxic things you can get because they

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spray it and we demand that there be no insects on that. I tell Peggy when she goes to the store, I say don’t buy anything if it doesn’t have a live insect in it, that’s our yellow canary. I mean, if the insect can live in it, we can live in it, you know, I mean, that’s really the—what it used to be. But now, if we find an insect in it, we’re insulted and we don’t want it. The—but the issue is, is that because we demand lettuce that has no blemishes on it, and fruit that has no blemishes on it, the price we’re paying for that is absolutely enormous with our health. And—and—and that’s what the people that come in our store see. Now we have organic fruit and vegetables in our store. It’s the second

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largest seller of what we sell, and it is the most gorgeous stuff you ever saw. It’s very very tasty, i—and it’s beautiful. It doesn’t last as long, I mean I—it’s not—it doesn’t have preservatives on it, doesn’t have—the banana is an example: they can get solid black on the outside, even the stem of the banana can get solid black, and you can open that up and it will be perfect on the inside. That doesn’t happen in a conventional banana, because they have it so that it’ll ripen from the inside out, not the outside in. In a real banana, it ripens from the outside in, and so if you get a banana that looks like it’s really good and yellow and pretty, it’s going to be green on the inside, in an organic banana.

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And so it’s been a matter of teaching people about that, and, you know, I mean, we have beautiful fruit and vegetables and—and our store is a full s—you can completely eat out of store. We do, we completely eat out of our store, and that’s what we want to eat. But it’s very difficult. It’s very difficult to get our product, in the conventional stores because we’re not set up, and this isn’t a criticism of them, we’re not set up—Whole Foods needs eighty-five thousand pounds a month, you know. Well we’re not set up to do that, nor do we want to do that. That’s not our goal. Our goal is to have a very, very high quality product that is extremely healthy, and we can’t mass-produce that. So, I mean, we’re

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doing more mass-production, but not at the level that they’re used to, and they want every

cut, and we run out of cuts, and we can't go to the auction and buy it, you know, I mean we—we can't and we're running low on meat right now, and we've been all over the United States looking for grass-finish, organic meat, organic animals that are, you know, eight/nine hundred pounds, it's not a—they're not available. It's not there, they're just simply not there. I can find two and three hundred pound calves, but I can't find anything that's been finished. So, you know, it's a—it's a challenge. And—and the conventional

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systems are just not set up to do organic. It's too perishable; they can't hold it long enough, on the terms of fruits and vegetables. Our meat's all frozen, so it doesn't really matter on that, but—but—but their whole deal is shelf life, you know, and the whole system in our food system, is how long does it last on the shelf? And if you can get a piece of meat that'll stay on the shelf without refrigeration for two and a half years, that's what they want to put in there. Well, I guarantee you, it won't be an organic piece of meat, because of the preservatives that they got to put in it. And—and there is a company that has a homestead name, out of Wisconsin, or somewhere, that literally does have a snack meat—meat snack product that has a two and half year shelf life, not organic.

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[End of Reel 2205]

(misc.)

DT: Wh—why don't we just go into this, we're talking about your—your marketing efforts through Homestead Healthy Foods and the effort has sort of developed a educated customer that would be interested in organic food and—and I was curious if you could talk about the—the different ways that you might reach these folks? And o—one way I guess what you talked about before is all the benefits of eating organic food, but maybe you could talk about the sort of the dark side, you know, some of the risks of not eating organic food.

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RS: Well, the issues have come up over and over again about—about mad cow disease. And—and if that is concern for you or anybody, one of the ways to avoid the potential of that being a problem is that you eat food, eat beef, eat cattle that have not been fed any animal by-product ever. And the only way you do that is by eating totally grass-fed animals, I mean, that's the only way to do that. I know that in this country, we've really played-down the mad cow issue. And I think rightly so, I—I mean, we don't have an epidemic here, and we don't have a huge problem of it. The—the concern is, is—

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is there a potential of that? I'm more concerned about the Super E. coli issue, because that is a real issue and that is something that is—is—is detectable and it is something that is possible for us to get a whole lot more than mad cow disease, probably. But, and those are some of the dark sides. The other dark side is that, at Homestead Healthy Foods, we're trying real hard to—to treat our producer right. If you read the book, Fast Food Nation and see how he talks about producers are being treated by the large food companies, it's tragic. And you wonder why people are going out of the ranching and farming business; one of the reasons is, is because they can't make any money being in

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this business, and well, because they have gotten, in the cattle industry, we were talking earlier about being at a—at a course in one of our Universities here, that was actually doing a course on—on meat and—and all of that and so I asked the question, because of the grid

that has been set-up by the food in—by the meat industry, so they can dock your animal, if it's too old, if it's what they call hard-boned, if it's over thirty-six months old, the bone—the feather bones start to calcify so the cartilage turns into bone. Well they can tell how old that is, and they call that a hard-boned animal and they—they dock it. If the cut-ability is not good; if the marbling is not good; or, you know, whatever. There—

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there are about eight or nine different things on the grid that they can dock you for. So I asked the question in this course, I said, I want to know how I can raise an animal, so that eighty-five percent of the time, I can get a premium for my animal. And the instructor in the course said, it can't be done. And so what they've done is they've created a system that is so against the farmer—I—I remember years ago, when I started doing, not the organic part, but started raising cattle to sell to consumers, we used a lot of Brahman, everybody was Brahman, Brahman cattle. And they were they best thing. So you got everybody started using Brahman. Well, by the time everybody got geared up, takes two

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or three or four years to get there, all of a sudden, the industry said, no we don't want Brahman anymore, 'cause they don't do well in the feed lot. Well, they knew what they did in the feed lot, and they've done—done well before then in the feed lot, but if they take them to Kansas or Nebraska or somewhere up in the cold, they have problems with cold. But the—but the issue is they're always changing the system, so you try to do what they say and it takes you three or four years to gear up to get there, and by the time you get there, they've changed the system. And the certified organ—A—Angus i—issue is another issue. One of the growers at this same meeting said, I sell mine a ce—as certified

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Angus and I said, that's great, how many of your animals that you sell every year will qualify as certified Angus so that you'll get the premium? He said sixteen, seventeen percent. I said what about the other eighty-three percent, you know, of your animals? He said, well they don't qualify. I said, that's my point, is that if you can't raise a product, where you get a reasonable—a good price, a good product—if you're raising a quality product, you can't get a premium price for it, eight-five percent of the time or ninety percent of the time, then you can't stay in business, and that is the long and short of it of—of where we are in terms of the food system. So, you know, I mean, we can't

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compete with the people that can—can run it through in eighteen months. You know? I—it costs me, as an example, when I process an animal it costs me four hundred and forty dollars a head to process an animal. I've been told, I don't know if this is true, but I've been told that Iowa Beef Producers that kills five thousand head a day has to pay something like twenty-five dollars a head to process an animal, so I'm paying four hundred and forty and they're paying twenty-five. Now how much do you think that discrepancy costs me? And you as a—as a consumer. It's enormous. You know, it's very, very difficult to compete in the market when the playing field is not level, you

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know? For chicken feed, I pay twelve dollars for a fi—a fifty pound bag of chicken feed, pay four hundred dollars a ton for feed that, you know the big chicken growers like Tyson and those guys can probably get it for less than a hundred dollars a ton. So how do you compete with that?

DT: ...(inaudible) natural economies and efficiencies as scale, or do you think is monopoly price and power?

7:58 – 2206

RS: B—all of it. Yeah, it's economies of scale, it's pricing power, it's supply and demand, it's all of it. But the other issue is they've got all of that whole infrastructure fixed so that they don't have to make a huge profit on every piece and I have to go to the butcher shop and ask them to do my product for me, and it has to be certified organic, so they have to get certified and pay the fees for that. They have to kill our animals and age it. All of ours is dry-aged, so we dry-age it ten to fourteen days. That takes space, huge amount of space. You can't buy dry-aged meat anywhere on the large-scale, because they

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can't afford to age it. I mean, they wet-age it, which means they cut it up, put it in the bag and just don't freeze it, so it's aging in plastic, is what it's doing, if that makes you happy. The other issue is, is that they've got to process ours at a time when they're clean-down, so they can't come behind anybody and—and process, they have to package and weigh and box and label every package of meat for us. And it's very, very time consuming and expensive. They also portion-cut all of our meat. So every steak is hand-cut, every roast is hand-cut, so they're exactly the same and they weigh it, every single one of them. And it takes an enormous amount of time, and—and energy to do that. But I

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guarantee you, what comes out of Iowa Beef Producers is not done that way. That's not saying Iowa Beef is wrong. Iowa Beef is producing what the consumer has asked for and that's a cheap beef product. So the problem is, is it sits right in the hand of the consumer, and what we're trying to do is to educate the consumer for those to whom organic food is important. And locally-grown food is important if you're talking about a security—a security of your food system, where right now it's—what's scary to us is with WalMart now buying Albertson's. They have become if not the largest, one of the largest wor—

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food retailers in the world now and all of the large food retailers according to the paper that was done for the National Farmer's Union, is going to where all of our food in America will be produced in Third World Countries because it's cheap. There's no regulation on how it's produced, and there's no regulation on getting it back to the United States. So i—i—what will happen is, if we're—if it doesn't frighten us about September the eleventh, where no food went in and out of this country for almost a week, in terms of food security, I mean the food security issue for us is enormous and there is nobody

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talking about food security in this country. Just within the country, we're—we don't have food security because we're totally dependent on the trucking industry, we need to start buying and supporting local, regional, farmers and ranchers and growers.

DT: So it's not just about organic food, but also small-scale and local growers?

11:06 – 2206

RS: And food security. Yeah. (inaudible) I mean, I've got grandkids, I don't want them to not have food. Our—our country is extremely vulnerable in terms of food scarcity and all we got to do if we're going to have it coming from Third World Countries is just lock it up like we did September the eleventh, and lock it up. Now, we can be without food in twenty-four hours. Stop the trucking industry, you know, take that away from us, we're without food

within twenty-four hours, because all our food comes from California and Georgia and all over the country. You know, we don't have food sources local, at all. I mean that—that—that's more terrifying to me than anything.

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DT: Is it that these choices are sort of in the hands of consumers if they probably don't deal directly with Iowa, IBP...

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RS: No they don't.

DT: ...but they do go to the Albertsons, now the WalMarts of the world. They go to McDonald's. H—how can they influence the system from those outlets?

12:06 – 2206

RS: Well one thing you do is you demand locally-grown food. And quit buying it if it's not. And you go find local farmers. I mean, that's a huge problem and—and time consuming problem for the consumer to have to deal with. All of us have, you know, two jobs, you know, we—we've got mortgages more than we can pay with one job, we've got all the stuff, so we, you know, two of us basically work to make the household work and—and we pay for somebody else to raise our kids for us, to educate our kids, to provide for our food, to make our clothes, to—to have everything that we need. And so the problem is, is what we're really saying is, is we're going to have to take some of that responsibility back, we cannot depend on USDA to make our food safe for us, cannot—FDA.

12:54 – 2206

DT: (inaudible)

RS: I'm sorry?

DT: Why is it difficult to rely on USDA, I mean that's their mission, that's their—they have staffing, they have programs?

13:05 – 2206

RS: I understand, I understand. It's just politics. I mean, how many people in USDA and FDA are right out of CONAGRA, ADM, all of those companies, I mean, and they're right in the main primary places of responsibility, I mean, their job is really not to assure total food safety for us. Our job is to be sure that what we're getting is what we think it is, but we've—we've—we've abdicated it, we've abdicated it to somebody else, and—and they don't have the people to police it. There's no way. There's no way USDA can police everything. There's no way Texas Department of Agriculture, you know, they've got three people, four people to do all the organic program, all the weights and measures,

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same people doing the same—the same thing, there's no way they can police all of that. And—and yet (?) c—we don't pay them enough to police it all, and yet we—we've abdicated our responsibility for it. So, you know, my feeling is, is—people need to team up with growers, I mean, you need to. You need to get food co-ops going. You need to get farmer's markets going. You need to get whatever you need to get these local farmers healthy on the farm. And with all the farms that have closed up, I mean, we've got a huge job in front of us, or we're going to experience some tremendous issues. IBT,

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ADM, those guys can't do it. As soon as they're not making money in something, it goes away. And I can tell you another company that was doing a lot in the food industry and was actually raising money, and when they quit making money on their ranches, all the ranches

went up for sale. And it's a huge company, and—but that's the issue, is we've gone around, and we've gone to coun—Countries and we've destroyed their land for them, we've—we've put pesticides and all that stuff down so that what they normally grew there and made their living of, you know, was changed and now we've abused the land and moved out of there, and they can't make a living anymore. And so, what do we

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do? I mean, we can't keep doing that. We cannot keep doing that, and we need to start focusing on home and health and what does this system look like, and, you know, the sustainable food people in Texas and all around are doing enormous jobs trying to get some things going on that, and—and we need some—we need some political help and we don't have it, we don't—we literally don't have any. Government is doing more to dismantle that, than to support it, and have been. And—and it's—it's tragic, because of politics...

15:46 – 2206

DT: Can you give us some examples of, you know, Government not being a partner in—in sustainable ag...

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RS: In Texas—in Texas we used to have a real strong sustainable Ag program, and today it's almost completely been dismantled and there's no money available for it. We used to have one of the largest cotton-producing States, and my understanding right now in talking with the producers in North Texas is that that is dwindling very, very, very rapidly because of no support.

DT: Organic?

16:18 – 2206

RS: Yeah, organic cotton farmers. And it's very, very difficult. I mean, we—we're having to build our own infrastructure, and we can't afford to do it. You know, I mean, we literally can't a—Homestead Healthy Foods can't afford to build that infrastructure by itself. I've been turned down on every Federal or State grant that we've even talked about trying to get, turned down. And one of them was actually written by one of the PhD's at one of the Universities here, that is on the committee that—that reviews the SARE [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education] Grants,

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and we were turned down for it. And so we can't get any help, and, you know, I mean, it's—it's a matter of where do you go and what do you do? Peggy and I have put every dime we ever thought of having into this and, you know, and—and we will ride it 'til—'til there isn't anything else to ride. But—but—but the consumer has got to make it work. The—they're the only hope. The only hope is the consumer. And they have enormous power to do that, and, I mean, McDonald's now is buying all Argentine beef. Quit buying McDonald's hamburgers. I mean for goodness sakes, pay attention to what's going on. When we're one of the largest beef producers in the world, and we're buying meat from

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Argentina? Now come on, you know, don't give me that, and—and—and then to be producing all of our food in Third World Countries, you know, I mean it's sad. And I—and—and we're—we will wake up to it. I mean it's not—it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when, and—and—but the opportunity is to turn it around. The farmer will respond to it. IBP, CONA—all these will respond to it, but as long as we keep pulling the product through like we're doing right now, they won't. They don't need to.

DT: When you look to the future, do you—do you feel like this—this food security and quality issue, and I guess the Sustainable Agriculture concerns that revolve around those, are those maybe the central environmental issues you see, or are there others that...

18:44 – 2206

RS: They're big—they're big, big issues mainly because we can't live without food, you know. We can't live without food and water. We can live without everything else, e—every—I mean, we didn't used to have cars, and we didn't used to have, you know, nice suits and all this kind of stuff. I mean, we—there are a lot of things that we can live without, but we can't live without food and water; and they're basic; they're very basic. But—but part of it is, David, is that, you know, we'll pay a hundred dollars to go to a

19:17 – 2206

football game, you know, but we won't think of paying, three dollars or four dollars per pound of ground beef, you know. We think that's awful. We'll pay forty-thousand dollars—I bought a used pick-up the other day, it cost me thirty-thousand dollars for a used pick-up, and we don't—we don't think anything about that. But, you know, and we'll go buy a McDonald's hamburger, and McDonald's hamburger, you can buy organic meat for the same price that you're paying for that ground beef patty at McDonald's. And we don't n—we don't seem to understand that, you know? I mean, if we took a fourth of

20:04 – 2206

a pound, a fourth of a pound of our meat's only a dollar, you know, what are you paying for that hamburger? I mean, you know, it's amazing to me. It is absolutely amazing to me, and—and but we don't even think about that. We had—had a guy come in the store the other day, and he said, you know, we went to a restaurant, I—recently, and w—and we bought a tenderloin steak. And he said it was okay and it was seventy-five dollars for my wife and I. And we had one split desert and she had one glass of wine. And it was seventy-five—and not expensive wine, but one glass, and it was seventy-five dollars. And I said, well you can buy one of our tenderloin steaks. They're twenty-one, ninety-nine a pound, so two of those is about twelve dollars, so they're about a fourth or third of a pound or whatever each, two—two little steaks and you can buy organic vegetables, you can have an incredible desert, you can have an organic bottle of wine, and it'll cost you less than twenty dollars. And he said, doggone it, he said, you know, I—I can do that. I said, the only difference is, you got to cook it, but are you willing to cook it for fifty bucks? I said, I will, I'll cook it for fifty bucks, you know, you just sit back and watch. And so he's been coming in the store every week and buying a package of tenderloin steak. That's the most expensive steak we've got. And you can go to any store

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and buy tenderloins and you'll pay almost that price for tenderloins. So, you know, it's relative, it's relative, and—and the issue is, is where is our value system? And you were asking me earlier, you know, is there any connection between the spirituality and the environment issue. It's hu—it's all connected. It is all connected, and it has to do with values. And—and what we have done is, is that food has not become a value to us. Food is a social thing for us. And, yet when you look at it from the standpoint of sustaining life, it is a value. It is a huge value if you care about sustaining life. If we care about why our kids are on Ridilin, read Food & Behavior, Barbara Stitt's book on food behavior,

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and get rid of the sugar in their diet. I mean try to get rid of the sugar in our kid's diet, and

you'll see them climbing off the walls. And get—I mean, it's incredible. But we don't do that, and the school system here, actually serves sugar to them, Twinkies? We've got a contract now with Pepsi or whoever it is for twenty-five years, or whatever they've got into. It's the most criminal thing I've ever seen, to feed kids sugar. And that's what is going on in our diets, and then we wonder why our kids have behavior problems, and they have no attention spans. I mean, they don't have any healthy, they. Their brain is not fed. And we wonder why kids can kill each other, and—and Barbara Stitt will tell

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you, that a child whose brain is deficient of nutrition can literally kill somebody and never know that they were doing that. It can happen, and what they've found out, in her book, is that she's taken twenty-five years of working with criminal behavior and every time they've changed their diet, those people, as long as they stayed on a healthy diet, never went back to criminal behavior. So there are—there are some huge issues there, and they are spiritual, and they are ethical and they are moral and—and they're—and

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they're all connected; and it's connected to how we treat each other, and abuses in the family and, I mean it's—oh, we blame it all on alcohol and drugs. That's not where the blame needs to be, you know. Alcohol and drugs are not bad things, the abuse of them is bad things, no different than sugar. Sugar, you know because of it's refinement and all, is part of the problem with it, but—but the other problem is—and sugar is in fruits and vegetables, I mean, all that's carbohydrate. And we have a real, real high carbohydrate diet in this country, and very, very low protein diet, and—and it's—it's not balanced, and

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we—we see lots of evidence now with, Schwarzbein's book called The Schwarzbein Principle and books like that that are talking about that and how we've got to balance proteins and carbs when we eat—even s—snack foods, and if we do that we won't have those insulin spikes and all that. We won't be insulin resistant, like most of us are because we have that tub around our middle, and—and it will really change a lot of issues. But food is an incredible important part of our existence, and always has been—been, for human beings, and always will be.

DT: ...younger people aware of these things that are obviously critical to them, I mean, what they eat every day, or—or the environment that surrounds them?

25:12 – 2206

RS: You know, Dana, who works in our store has two children who are in high school and—and they are—are real good examples and, these two kids, Maggie actually worked in our store for a while and got to know a lot about our healthy food and started eating it. And it's been amazing because Maggie will—will talk even about eating organic food and how she feels when she does. But now, Dana said that they really prefer, they notice, when they're not eating good food. They know—I mean they—and they still eat the trash. They still eat the, you know the snacks and all that, and everybody needs snacks,

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and I—I'm not saying you can't—have to do c—totally away with it, but we got to be very aware what we're doing when we eat that, and—and Peggy and I go out to eat once in a while, very, very seldom, but we do once in a while, and—and the difference in how we feel when we eat conventional food at a restaurant is enormous. I mean there th—it's like night and day. It takes us almost two days to get over it. And we're very careful about what we

eat, and it's stuff that we've eaten all the time before and never ever had any awareness. But since we've di—done the detox that we've done, and we've gotten the fillings out of our teeth and we've gotten a lot of the issues corrected and feel, I mean, we—our—we go seven days a week, you know, I mean, the way we work is

26:41 – 2206

unbelievable, it's crazy and we only do it because, you know, because of the mission actually. But—but we have incredible energy and we're never sick, and—and it's just been amazing. Peggy got sick the other day because she actually got a—took a sauna that had an ozone treatment with it and the ozone burned her—her bronchial tubes, and so but, I mean, we just don't get sick and—where everybody else is down with the flu for two weeks; i—if we get something, it lasts twenty-four hours and then we're done with it. And, so it's just been an incredible change, you know, for us, and—and—and why would you want to go back to the other, I mean that—there's no way for me, there's just no way.

27:28 – 2206

DT: Considering how busy you are and Peggy as well, when you do get some time off, or—or if you imagine you had time off, is there a place that you'd—you enjoy going, that gives you solace and sort of an ability to reconnect with nature and some of the things that you enjoy?

27:51 – 2206

RS: Yeah, we like to go to the mountains, a lot. And we've always dreamed of someday having a ranch in—in the mountains. A very secluded place and—and we—we really like to do that, and we don't get to do it very often, but we—we have kids—I have a daughter in Colorado, in Denver, and so we get to go up there, periodically, but we would—we would really like to do that, someday, and we will, someday, you know—it. But what we can do here is we can go back on the ranch here and do the same thing. It's—it's—the problem here is we've got lots to do, and so it's hard to get away from it.

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But—but typically that's where we find ourselves, you know, it's—it's not on a cruise and it's not, you know, where a lot of people are, typically, because that just isn't where we choose to be. I mean, we're with people all the time anyway and so we—and we enjoy it, a lot, but—but to be able to reconnect with ourselves and where we're going and where we're headed, what our values are, and—and what's important to us in life is—that's typically where we like to—like to do that.

DT: Would you like to add anything?

29:07 – 2206

RS: I don't know what to add actually, you know, we're—we're—we're really excited about what we do. We really believe in it. We don't have a problem sleeping at night. And, you know, but—but we'd really like to get to a point where it's not such a critical struggle all—every day. And—and we feel like that's—that's on the horizon, you know. That we're beginning to get some growers coming on board, and that's really helpful, and we're—we're having a tremendous demand. You know, it—it's really a good feeling when people call and say, man, we've eaten your meat and it's just the most incredible

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stuff, I mean from fr—all the way from Delaware and Connecticut to California to Washington to, you know, I mean it's all over the country, so it's been pretty gratifying and—and, you know, the—the issue is, is to be able to keep up with the demand of the

infrastructure, that's the problem. The easy part is raising the product, the hard part is getting it to the consumer.

DT: (inaudible)

[End of Reel 2206]

[End of interview with Richard Sechrist]