

INTERVIEW WITH ROY STEWART
BY JIM BARR

April 30, 2014

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's April 30th,
2 2014. I'm at Roy Stewart's ranch south of Newport. And,
3 Roy, I was wondering if you could just kind of go over a
4 little of your background and how you -- eventually, how you
5 got interested in NRDs and that sort of thing.

6 MR. STEWART: Well, I'm Roy Stewart, and I got
7 involved in, I believe, 1976. We'd had an opening in our
8 local NRD district, and nobody seemed to step up to the
9 plate. And having been involved with Farm Bureau and
10 cattlemen's organizations and so forth, why I was asked to
11 see if I was interested. So, I visited a meeting or two to
12 see what was going on, and I kind of liked what I seen and
13 the way it operated. And I thought maybe I could represent
14 my constituents in a decent manner and get involved with the
15 NRDs. And I also was involved in RC&Ds at that time, and
16 the NRD manager and the RC&D manager were kind of close
17 together. I liked both of them and that's kind of how I got
18 started with that.

19 MR. BARR: Were you from here originally?

20 MR. STEWART: Yes, I'm a fourth-generation
21 rancher, and my granddad come to this -- my great-granddad
22 come to this country from Illinois and homesteaded. And
23 it's been passed on and we've accumulated other parcels of
24 ground. And so, I'm on part of it that we've acquired.

25 MR. BARR: Now, are you the last of it, or do you

1 have other family members that will continue on this?

2 MR. STEWART: Well, right now I'm kind of
3 semi-retired and turned it over to my son and he's doing a
4 great job. And what happens after that, I don't have any
5 control over.

6 MR. BARR: Now, you're located kind of in the
7 upper ends of the Elkhorn. How much -- where does the
8 Elkhorn actually start?

9 MR. STEWART: Okay, the Elkhorn's just right
10 behind my house here, and depends on the time of year that
11 you ask this question. For the most part, it's a pretty
12 small stream here, except during snow melt, and then it
13 probably comes from about 15 miles further west. But, for
14 the most part, it starts about four miles west of where I'm
15 at. But it very seldom ceases to run. But it does flood
16 quite a little about every three years.

17 MR. BARR: You mentioned the RC&D, and since so
18 far you're the only one that I've interviewed that's
19 mentioned that, would you mind just kind of telling a little
20 bit about what an RC&D is. And I can't remember who was
21 your manager and that sort of thing.

22 MR. STEWART: Gene Debolt was the original manager
23 when I was involved with it. I'm no longer involved. In
24 fact, the RC&D here has pretty much disband. RC&D here kind
25 of helped sponsor some projects that nobody else -- or no

1 other entities were involved in at that time. Did -- some
2 of it's mostly volunteer trying to educate the people in
3 some better practices in agriculture. And one of the things
4 that RC&D was instrumental in here is starting the Ranch
5 Expo. And I don't know how many people have heard of -- it
6 was Nebraska Ranch Expo. Now it's Sandhills Ranch Expo. I
7 and Gene Debolt initiated that 24 years ago and I've been
8 involved with that for 24 years also.

9 MR. BARR: And it's still going, isn't it?

10 MR. STEWART: It's still going and many others
11 have started up and ceased to function, but ours just keeps
12 going all by itself.

13 MR. BARR: I've been up here a couple of times.
14 Well, let's see, you started in '76. What sort of projects
15 or programs was the NRD involved in at that point?

16 MR. STEWART: Well, Upper Elkhorn NRD is pretty
17 dependent on their monetary resources from tree sales,
18 probably more so than any other district. So, that's been a
19 big push for our district. Was quality and water quantity
20 has always been -- had our attention, and more so with water
21 quality now, or up to now, and now water quantity is
22 becoming something that we're getting with. We want to
23 maintain status quo. Unlike Texas, they figure if they can
24 go another 50 years, that's their goal, but I don't believe
25 that's my goal or my constituents' goal.

1 I think that one of the main purposes for the NRD
2 is to maybe cost share with some newer-type practices, and
3 when people grasp them and see that it's economically
4 feasible, I think we need to cut the cost share or spread it
5 into another field that looks like it needs some help,
6 but -- in range country, we've done quite a little cost
7 share with the NRCS on grade stabilization dams here on the
8 Elkhorn and on the river south of O'Neill. And Cross-
9 fencing, better water facilities, both in dams and stock
10 wells. I'm not too much involved with the farming, because
11 I don't farm, but there's some farming practices that we
12 cost share on. One of the big ones that we were into just a
13 few years ago was the low pressure nozzles and drop nozzles.
14 And that saved some water.

15 MR. BARR: How much difference -- or what are kind
16 of the differences between the upper end of the Elkhorn and
17 the lower, which is down in Antelope County, is that about
18 the --

19 MR. STEWART: Yes.

20 MR. BARR: -- end of it?

21 MR. STEWART: Yeah, I'm only about ten miles from
22 the west end of our district. There is -- this is pretty
23 well split between farming and ranching. When you get into
24 the eastern end, there's more density of farming. And north
25 of Highway 20, we have a water quality problem with high

1 nitrates. Where I live, here and pretty much south of
2 Highway 20, it's a pretty low number, not a great concern as
3 yet. We don't want it to be.

4 MR. BARR: Have you had other -- what kind of
5 specific water quality programs or activities do the natural
6 resource district get involved in here in this district?

7 MR. STEWART: We will cost share on the nitrate, I
8 guess, you call a filtering for people that have high
9 nitrates will cost share on a new well, because some of
10 these older wells were just shallow wells and probably
11 needed to be in a better vein of water. We're over the top
12 of 1,000 feet of saturated sands where I live here. And
13 most of the Elkhorn -- Upper Elkhorn Basin has a deep depth
14 of aquifer. It's a little weaker on the northern end, but
15 I'm in the Sandhills area and we absorb the water and feed
16 it on out underground on east of here, because the water
17 runs from northwest to southeast underground.

18 MR. BARR: Have you had any direct conflict
19 between domestic wells and irrigation wells or stock wells
20 or anything like that?

21 MR. STEWART: You say "conflict."

22 MR. BARR: I mean --

23 MR. STEWART: Yeah, I understand what you're
24 saying. The only ones that -- the only thing that I know
25 about in our district, unlike the Lower Elkhorn, which had

1 some problems, is in the fall when the pumping is at its
2 height in gallons per minute, sometimes it will take the
3 pressure down. And we're in artesian well country right
4 here where we sit. And we've noticed -- we don't have much
5 irrigation close by, but one instance, we had an irrigation
6 well, oh, less than a quarter of a mile from an artesian
7 well and six hours after it was turned on, our flowing well
8 ceased to flow. Six hours after he shut it off, it was back
9 flowing again. And a lot of people tell me that the fish
10 ponds get pretty low if they're close to a density of
11 irrigation, so it does impact a little, but generally, it
12 pops right back when they shut them off. I don't know of
13 any wells -- domestic wells what've had to be replaced in
14 this district because of drawdown.

15 MR. BARR: When you were on the Commission, what
16 kind of issues were you dealing with on the Commission?

17 MR. STEWART: Well, the ones that I'm familiar
18 with right now is we had a project in Lincoln on the -- what
19 do they call it, Salt Creek?

20 MR. BARR: Yeah.

21 MR. STEWART: Funded quite a little money into
22 that project. Also, southern Grand Island was having some
23 flooding problems, so we worked a long time on a project
24 there. I think it's finally completed now. And we helped
25 some districts put in some smaller dams, which sure eats up

1 a lot of money fast.

2 MR. BARR: You represented kind of the Sandhills
3 area when you were on the Commission and there's quite a
4 variety of issues facing the various districts as you go
5 clear throughout the state. And I don't quite know how to
6 phrase this, but is there a way to -- what kind of
7 impressions did you have on the variability or the
8 differences between the districts and the sorts of issues
9 that some faced and others faced different issues and that
10 sort of thing?

11 MR. STEWART: Well, I think when they set up the
12 NRDs with the watersheds, each watershed is unique. Each
13 one has their own problems. And until I got on the
14 Commission, I wasn't really involved with the other
15 districts' problems, and it's shed a lot of light that one
16 has to learn what goes on and understand their problems,
17 too.

18 MR. BARR: Now, as I recall, the Upper and the
19 Lower Elkhorn share kind of a commission member, is that
20 correct?

21 MR. STEWART: That's right.

22 MR. BARR: I don't know -- I don't even know who
23 the current one is.

24 MR. STEWART: Gary Anderson from Dakota City, took
25 over after I did, and I think he's been on there about eight

1 years.

2 MR. BARR: Is that something that kind of shifts
3 from time to time or what --

4 MR. STEWART: Yes, it used to. And we
5 caucus -- the two districts caucus every time there's
6 a -- well, once a year, but when the terms are up, why,
7 we'll caucus and elect one.

8 MR. BARR: Dennis and some others have indicated
9 (Telephone ringing.)

10 We can stop this.

11 MR. BARR: Back again with Roy Stewart. You
12 probably remember some of the early arguments for or against
13 natural resource districts. Was that a contentious issue in
14 this district or was it not?

15 MR. STEWART: I guess I don't remember back that
16 far. Like I said, I didn't get involved with the very first
17 and I know Walt Ficke was and some of the other older timers
18 from our district.

19 MR. BARR: Is there any other of the early guys
20 that were still around?

21 MR. STEWART: No. I think more of them have went
22 to the happy grounds.

23 MR. BARR: Okay.

24 MR. STEWART: Walt was one of the last ones. And
25 Dvorak has gone, too. Larry Kalkowski was -- had the the

1 job I have before I got it. And he's gone. So, I've seen a
2 lot of people come and go.

3 MR. BARR: Then starting at the time you came
4 along, how have you seen the NRDs overall, not just this
5 district, has there been change? Has there been different
6 emphasis on something as opposed to what was started and
7 what happening at the time you started up 'til now or --

8 MR. STEWART: Oh, absolutely. When I started, we
9 didn't know what endangered species were. We didn't know
10 what EPA was. And we didn't have feedlot runoff known
11 problems. It was probably there. And, oh, yeah, things are
12 getting a lot more detailed and more concerns show up all
13 the time. And more so we have mandates handed to us that we
14 didn't when we started in, legislative mandates.

15 MR. BARR: You want to give a few examples of
16 those?

17 MR. STEWART: Well, the groundwater management
18 and, gosh, I don't know. There's a ton of them. I can't
19 think of them off the top of my head. The pallid sturgeon
20 thing is -- and the in stream flows for Game and Parks has
21 created some problems, the piping plover, the least tern,
22 and the prairie orchid, and blowout penstemon and so forth,
23 has made us change the way we do things.

24 MR. BARR: How about with the district itself.
25 Have you had changes in staffing or breadth of the programs

1 that you've dealt with over the years?

2 MR. STEWART: Well, the cost share, we have 17 --
3 I think there's 18 available, but only cost share on 17.
4 But we prioritized them. And changes in staff, yes, we've
5 had -- just had two managers. Paul Mann was our manager
6 when I started and then Dennis come on board. We had to let
7 Paul go. But some of our office help has changed, but
8 that's normal. Actually, Dennis has kept our staff pretty
9 consistent. We've had a few different water technicians,
10 but most of the staff is pretty stable.

11 MR. BARR: But it's grown a little bit, in that --

12 MR. STEWART: Well, Dennis likes that. I guess
13 all of them do. I have my reservations about that, but I
14 guess that's -- I don't know whether that's called progress,
15 but --

16 MR. BARR: You're in one of the -- I don't know if
17 it's unique, but a little different situation in that you
18 got involved with a combination of three other NRDs in
19 trying to deal with a problem over in, I guess it would be
20 the northeast corner of your district?

21 MR. STEWART: Bazile Triangle.

22 MR. BARR: Bazile Triangle, yeah.

23 MR. STEWART: I'm not on the committees that are
24 working with that, so I'm not that knowledgeable about
25 what's going on. However, we're also in a four-district

1 issue with the Niobrara River. And we're -- we have a
2 little of our district in the Niobrara River Watershed. And
3 right now, we're just -- it's just in the infancy and
4 we're --

5 MR. BARR: Could you describe the issue that's
6 involved in that?

7 MR. STEWART: Well, the Spencer Dam and NPPD has
8 about a 2,000 cubic-foot call on the water, which it only
9 runs about 1,200 on the average, so it's very seldom they
10 get all that. Well, then there's some irrigators up west
11 that would like to pump more water. And then Game and Parks
12 is certainly interested in the water and the scenic river
13 issues are involved in it. So, we're starting to sort
14 through and make everybody happy.

15 MR. BARR: How has just the general idea of
16 conservation and that sort of thing changed over the period
17 you've been on the natural resource district board?

18 MR. STEWART: Well, I'll go back a little further
19 than that. When my grandmother was a little girl, she could
20 walk for 30 miles from here and never step on a blade of
21 grass. Now that's not that there wasn't grass here, but she
22 could step between the bunches of grass. Even in my short
23 lifetime, I've seen through proper management and so forth,
24 an increased rainfall due to irrigation. Our rainfall's
25 probably increased about three to four inches a year since

1 the '60s, since irrigation went in. But people have
2 recognized that -- what good management practices are and
3 used them. And through the tree-planting program that they
4 offer here, why, there's been a lot of livestock
5 shelterbelts put up. When you put up livestock
6 shelterbelts, you can condense the cattle into a feeding
7 area. And in our instance, we've planted 37,000 trees here
8 since I moved here in 1980. And we've been able to put up
9 the shelterbelts, so we can scatter the cattle around and
10 keep them a lot healthier, keep the disease down.

11 MR. BARR: And you've done cross-fencing?

12 MR. STEWART: Yes, we've done quite a little
13 cross-fencing. And we have a -- just completing a grade
14 stabilization project on a couple of miles of the Elkhorn
15 River. About 1960, we put in one grade stabilization dam
16 out here just on the west side of the road. And the people
17 from Cache Creek come up and looked at it and they put in
18 several of them on Cache Creek, which is south of O'Neill.
19 And then, we've had a degradation of the stream bed here on
20 the Elkhorn, and the base flow was down about 12-13 feet
21 below ground level, and that took all of the water out of
22 our sub irrigated meadows for quite a ways back from the
23 creek. So, we put in four more grid stabilization
24 structures to bring the water up to the surface. And I'm
25 just completing that.

1 MR. BARR: What's been the highlight of your time
2 on the board for you or highlights?

3 MR. STEWART: Well, I've certainly met a lot of
4 good people. I guess that's probably the highlight. You
5 never know enough good people. And I've learned by going on
6 related tours with it, picked up some good ideas, tried to
7 pass them on. I guess that's the best thing.

8 MR. BARR: At this point, we just have a general
9 question of people if -- anything they'd like to comment on
10 or reflect upon or wish that it happened or anything like
11 that. Do you have anything along those lines?

12 MR. STEWART: Well, I think water is going to be
13 probably become a greater issue as the population grows.
14 And I can see where Omaha and Lincoln are going to need more
15 water. And Lincoln is wanting some. There's been an issue
16 or two the last year or two. And I don't know what the
17 future holds, but I know where it's going to have to come
18 from. It's going to have to come from the Elkhorn and the
19 Platte tributaries. And that concerns me and -- if they're
20 going to shut us off of using the water, they better find a
21 way to economize and not use as much as they are or want to.
22 And also, this Kansas conflict down here in the Republican
23 Basin is certainly something that I share sympathy with.
24 Colorado and Wyoming are involved in it also, and I think we
25 need to build more saving structures, but due to regulations

1 and so forth, I don't know if it's going to be possible to
2 build more. They're talking about building a couple more on
3 the Papio, north of Omaha there. I hope they can get it
4 done. I don't know -- we tried putting one in on the
5 Elkhorn in Antelope County, but the people weren't very
6 cooperative towards wanting it, and I think -- on Cedar
7 Creek, and I think it probably is going to continue to be
8 looked at, but I don't know how it's going to all work out.

9 MR. BARR: Well, unless you have something else, I
10 don't have any real specific questions. But we're trying to
11 get a good sense of regional differences and history of the
12 natural resource system, so if there's anything along those
13 you'd like to comment on. I'm not very good at coming up
14 with specific questions.

15 MR. STEWART: Well, when I got on the board, the
16 Norden Dam was a hot topic. And I guess I wasn't really in
17 favor of it at that time, but today maybe I might have a
18 change of mind. At that time, we were concerned that should
19 it go in, and I know that the project to be watered was
20 north of O'Neill, but what I was afraid of was, if we got it
21 put in somehow Texas might get a call on putting a pipeline
22 down there. Today, I share about the same concerns with the
23 Keystone XL Pipeline. China has about 80 percent of their
24 water polluted, and they're shipping many, many containers
25 to the United States and emptying them, and they're going

1 back empty. They could put a bladder in there and ship
2 water back, which may or may not happen someday. But that
3 Keystone XL Pipeline, if it would have went through the
4 heart of the aquifer here, which they had planned, water
5 becomes more precious than oil, I think I know what would be
6 flowing in that, and I really hate to see that. I guess I'm
7 a little bit conceited. I want to keep my water.

8 MR. BARR: Where is it -- in this district, where
9 is the current plan for that pipeline?

10 MR. STEWART: Well, it was to be about six miles
11 east of me, and now they've routed it on further east and
12 still be through the edge of the Sandhills, as I understand
13 it, but I don't know exactly. But it's not definite yet.
14 There's still litigation going on and it could change again.

15 MR. BARR: You've had some other controversy up
16 here. There was a proposal for a nuclear waste even north
17 of you a little bit. Was that anything that affected your
18 district or --

19 MR. STEWART: Well, not as bad as the district
20 north of here. It pitted family members against family
21 members. And it's just something that our district didn't
22 talk about because we didn't -- we weren't involved in it
23 and we didn't want to make any more enemies. And there was
24 plenty of enemies being made in that district, in the Lower
25 Niobrara. That was a hot topic.

