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Interview with Jefferson McCutcheon

Kristin Kvernland

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Researcher's name: Kristin Kvernland

Event: Interview with Jefferson McCutcheon

Place: Knox County Extension Agency, 1025 Harcourt Road, Mount Vernon, OH, 43050-1268

Co-workers present: Mary Claire Walsh

KK: So today's Wednesday January 31st 2007 and this is Kristin Kvernland and Mary Claire Walsh interviewing Mr. Jeff McCutcheon about the economic and environmental concerns of farming in Knox County. Ok, this first question just really quickly, how many people would you say are engaged in agriculture here or like as a profession versus sort of like a side hobby, money making venture or just sort of like a lifestyle habitat?

JM: Ah, wow. [Sigh] I don't know, I'd say a small percentage of people are involved in some type of farming.

KK: ok

JM: Specifically, I'd probably look at ah, if you need specifics I'd look at days worked off farm by primary out—(inaudible end of word) that's in the statistics that the USDA collects.

KK: ok

JM: That'll give you an indication um I haven't looked at that for a while. [Laughter]

KK: ok, that's fine. But in general like would you say people that come in use the extension agency are they um—

JM: No, it doesn't matter.

KK: It ranges?

JM: It ranges.

KK: Everything, ok.

JM: There was a gentlemen in here earlier today that just bought 25 acres and wanted to get started and this is purely part time and something extra for him to do. And yesterday I talked to somebody who's looking at over 100 beef cows and going to expand that. So, it doesn't, our information is not sorted like that.

KK: Ok. [JM: laughter] Um, ok so going back to sort of what issues were discussed at the local food council meeting—

JM: Oh boy!

KK: Um, and just how you know there's a rising demand for local food and the supply is not necessarily there to catch up with it.

JM: um hm

KK: Um, I know that Pam Leonard was saying that or other people were also saying that some of that was people not willing to risk expansion but is part of that also that there are people that sort of are just doing fine the way that they're doing it and that don't really actually have a desire to be making more money doing that? Or, is it more of an issue of like, well most people that you would want to switch are like huge like corn and beans farmers and that's just not a realistic option for them.

JM: A lot of producers are comfortable with the type of production they currently have. Whether it's working out [paper shuffling noises] for 'em, or not it's quite variable.

KK: um hm

JM: Um, the, the gentlemen who have or the producers, I keep saying gentlemen, the producers who have (inaudible few words) [KK: laughter]. Um the producers who have a lot invested in the, the mechanical corn and in the grain system,

KK: um hm

JM: or if they have a lot invested in the dairy system, probably aren't going to be looking at a side avenue that is outside of that skill set,

KK: um hm

JM: and they look at a different enterprise like ah, raising heifers if they're a dairy farmer, raising heifers for somebody else which is similar to what they're doin' now same types of equipment, same types of facilities um, but they're probably not gonna switch to produce production.

KK: ok

JM: Ah, [KK: throat clearing] there's, there's some of that, but there's always a small percentage that are looking for what's new or next or different.

KK: um hm

JM: There's quite a few that have gotten to the point where, especially they've gotten to the establishment and

KK: yeah

JM: debt's getting repaid and they're making a comfortable living—

KK: It's not really—

JM: why change?

KK: yeah

JM: Why is it worth that effort. They're already gone through that effort to get to this particular point they may not have enough energy to do it again.

KK: yeah. Um, sort of on a related note, I was talking to John Marsh and he was saying,

JM: um hm

KK: like he went to this meeting, it was the same meeting that I guess Pam Leonard was referring to with like 40 growers and um,

JM: I was at the meeting.

KK: ok so you were there, so you know [JM: laughter], and he said that he like told, he said to people that there's X amount of money that could be made in Knox County because of this amount of demand and he, he really thought that people were going to respond and be like, "oh great" like I'm gonna, you know sign up to expand my land, and he was, he said that in other counties that sort of worked, in other places he's seen that work. And he, he seems to believe that there is something about people in Knox County or I mean is that just more of a reflection of the type of farming that people are doing in Knox County? Or do you think that there is sort of like a generation mentality that's going on or is it just purely like scale and logistics and how to organize it?

JM: It's all those things.

KK: ok

JM: Breaking it out would be difficult.

KK: um hm

JM: Um and type of farming in Knox County it tends to be traditional agriculture, livestock and grain.

KK: um hm

JM: And, that's, if you look at the products produced it's a well-balanced county in those, those areas, not one is defiantly dominated which uh, bodes well because diversity is a good thing um but looking for something (inaudible word) may not be what the

producers want to do. The other areas I think that John may be referring to tend to be a little closer to urban areas.

KK: um hm

JM: Um, I, closer than we are to Columbus, where it's not such a travel distance to get to, to reach a market.

KK: Yeah, ok.

JM: We have producers that are delivering, that are selling to north market or Westerville market in Cleveland there's some that have gone that, that step,

KK: um hm.

JM: but, but it's not a huge amount 'cause others will look at it and say oh, is it worth my time?

KK: yeah

JM: And honestly some of your producers do not have the skill sets to be marketing,

KK: yeah

JM: they're better off by themselves on the tractor, and honestly some producers do not have the skill sets to be marketing.

KK: yeah

JM: They're better off by themselves on the tractor, everybody's happier. They, they understand how things are going on in the land, the harvesting, the animals, and they do that well, it's what they enjoy.

KK: um hm

JM: But the people interaction is not something they feel that they need.

KK: yeah

JM: So, um, a lot of, now the change may be generational,

KK: um hm

JM: but you'll have the other generation wanting to know how they can get started.

KK: yeah

JM: Farming, and if they look at the, the commodity grains that's too big of a commitment in capital and expenditures realistically to start, combines are 300,000 and that's without the grain heads those are,

KK: Right

JM: 100,000 each, so about 500,000 just for a machine you use for two months in a year. Plus the land, plus you have to plant it, and care for it. I've worked with many people who want to get started in commodity farming they come to the realization that they can't, they've got to do something else to get to that market, build up the capital. Ah, what they have is labor they need they could do some marketing skills.

KK: um hm

JM: So ah, some of the alternative methods may be the way to get them started.

KK: yeah

JM: So I guess my last sort of question along those lines is, is based on people that you have talked to or seen and helped out um in those positions, how far do you think that the local food can be stretched and um I mean can it, are there certain like economic barriers almost to not going mainstream because I mean you don't, you have to be a total entrepreneur and do things on your own? Or, um is that—

JM: You mean...

KK: basically,

JM: You mean the local food production sort of thing?

KK: Yeah, just sort of like doing something that's maybe small scale or more specified.

JM: There's not, I think there's economic barriers to getting into traditional agriculture.

KK: uh huh, inputs

JM: Inputs and the capital outlet.

KK: ok

JM: I mean you talk about the size and the scale a farmer needs to produce to make a living if you want to make a full time living from the farm, you know how many acres of corn and beans you need to run if you want to do that type of production?

KK: yeah

JM: How many cows do you need to milk if you want to do that type of production? How many beef cows do you need to rent um if you penciled it out through the businesses meeting its debt payments, and there aren't enough profits to be filled for family living expenses.

KK: um hm

JM: Ah, that scale scares most people.

KK: yeah

JM: You're talking over 2,000 acres of crops. You're talking over 250 beef cattle, you're talking um 600 dairy cows. It's—

KK: yeah, so would you see that more as like phasing out a little bit then? Like more people are less um like I guess,

JM: We do

KK: less people will try to go up and just try and start doing it?

JM: What we're, what we're seeing if you look at the, the, if you look at some of the statistics the change in agriculture ah, we have more bigger farms, and we have more smaller farms. The traditional 150, the I don't know if you wanna call traditional 500 acre uh mixed use farms,

KK: um hm

JM: people used to make a living off of, are the ones that are getting either swallowed up or split up.

KK: Yeah, do you see that like in the past 10 years, 20 years or how recent would you say?

JM: It's probably been the past ten years.

KK: ten years

JM: The last two, the last three um censuses of ag. You can probably see that trend they come out every five years, they're done every five years published just about 10, there's about 10 years between publishing dates. [Laughter] That's how the USDA works. You know the, when you asked me about scale I pulled out a few things there's the crop values, they're about the same, here this is for corn, for 500 acres, 1000 or 2000.

KK: um hm

JM: The thing that makes increasing your acres way better is one that you can get, a, typically a price adjustment on your inputs, so your variable costs per bushel go down and you can spread your labor, and you machinery and um management charges on more acres,

KK: um hm

JM: so your fixed costs go down. Um, and if there's profit to be made, the cheaper you make your costs, the better your chance I know this sheet doesn't show it, the price at the time, but it decreases here are some more numbers... if your working 100, 600 or 2400 and your selling a hundred weight of milk, that's the unit that they sell, your cost for a hundred weight is 1539 versus about 6500 and your more likely to make a profit here no matter what the markets done here versus here.

KK; yeah

JM: And they usually can't control the market [shuffle of papers], and the commodity prices.

KK: Well, thanks, I'll pass my questions along (now it goes to Mary Claire).