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Oral History Number: 469-002

Interviewee: Henry James “Jim” Cusker

Interviewer: Liam Cody

Date of Interview: November 1, 2019

Project: Henry James Cusker Oral History Project

Liam Cody: Today is November 1, 2019. My name is Liam Cody and I'm continuing a conversation today with farmer, teacher, and conservationist Jim Cusker at his home in the Grass Valley, west of Missoula, Montana. To recap, in a previous conversation two days ago, we discussed your upbringing, your time away from home, and decision to return to your family's land. We talked about raising your family here in the Grass Valley, and we also discussed your teaching career.

In the second part of this conversation, I'd like to ask you about the changes you've seen in the Missoula Valley during your lifetime. I'd also like to talk about your decision to put your family's land into a conservation easement and your work in conservation with organizations including the Five Valleys Land Trust and the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition [CFAC]. Then to conclude our conversation, I'd like to ask what you see as the challenges, as well as hopes, for agricultural land conservation going forward.

So, to begin in our first conversation, you talked a lot about your upbringing and a bit about what the land was like then. But I wonder if you could tell me more about the Grass Valley, how it looked then, and could you talk about some of the natural features and agricultural uses of the land?

Jim Cusker: When the family came here in 1938, the modest-sized farm-ranch that Dad purchased was at the very upper end of what is known as Grass Valley. Grass Valley is characterized by very fertile, excellent soil that stretches all of the distance from where we live, and it goes, oh, a number of miles to the west of town. What are the geological parameters that allow you identify where Grass Valley is? In the central portion of the Missoula Valley, there is a geological deposit from historic Lake Missoula of clay, and these are in hills. Grass Valley extends mostly to the west of the clay hills bounded on the east and on the north by the clay hills.

What agricultural activities were going on at that time? Oh, well, I guess I can answer that by saying, “You name one, it was happening in Grass Valley.” The settlers who came in immediately recognized the productivity of the soil. I'm assuming the name came from the fact that it was very lush grassland. But of course, was also the ideal for cultivation. Consequently, in the late 1930s and into the '40s, the land was used for a large variety of agricultural operations to include several dairy farms, with the milk, of course, going directly to Missoula to be served on tables a day or two after the cows provided their product. It was at about that time also, and perhaps a little before that, that a sugar processing plant—beet sugar processing plant—was established in Missoula, and many of the farmers in Grass Valley grew sugar beets as a cash

crop. In addition, some of the land was used for raising grain of all sorts as well as beef cattle. And this is what everyone did. So, if you took a drive to the west of our place, down the valley, this is what you saw. Of course, as we made those occasional drives, we always checked on the progress that the neighbors were making in their operations.

LC: I'm wondering if you could also talk about what you would see walking around where you lived. What kinds of features? I know there's the river nearby. I just wonder if you could talk a little more about that as well.

JC: The southern boundary of Grass Valley is the Clark Fork River. Along the Clark Fork River, in most cases, there is a fairly extensive riparian zone dominated by cottonwood trees with a sprinkling of aspens, of hawthorns, and occasional elderberries, chokecherries, yes. Yeah, highly desirable habitat for a wide variety of birds, of course. Much of the land by the time I mentioned, if there were flat pieces with trees growing on them, the early settlers logged that and then cultivated it.

LC: I'm curious when you think back to how your family and your neighbors related to the land when you were growing up. What comes to mind for you?

JC: Now, you probably recognize the fact that this was still in the era of the Great Depression. Those of us who lived on the land realized that by our hard work that our family would never go hungry. We prided ourselves in producing essentially everything we ate to include processing of the meat, and it was interesting to observe where the early homestead houses were situated. They were on a rocky portion of the farmland. Why? Hey, that wasn't very good for growing crops, but hey, you could put up a house there. It's always interesting now to go down Mullan Road and take a look at where those old houses were built. Of course, everyone at that time realized and cherished the land as an extremely important resource. It was life itself. If we took care of the land, it took care of us. And everyone, everyone knew that. Everyone was a good steward of the land that somehow got into their possession.

LC: You mentioned just that sort of self-sustaining need during the Great Depression. What were some of the ways that you all practiced that?

JC: [pauses] In those days, everyone had animals of some kind, possibly as a meat source, if not a beef or dairy herd. Those animals produced a lot of manure. And the manure, we recognized what an extremely good fertilizer. So, the excrement of those animals were returned to the soil. That was one of the things that was very obvious. No such thing as chemical fertilizer.

LC: I know in some other interviews and other conversations with you, you've talked about how land use and people's attitudes towards the land has changed during your lifetime. I'm wondering, when do you remember first feeling that this change was happening?

JC: I might use this as a prime example of what occurred, and in describing this, I would suggest that these changes kind of crept up on us. But as you know, although the soil may be highly productive, in fact, may even be classified as prime soil—being the most productive soil as designated by the USDA, but as prime here in the valley, if irrigated. The early settlers soon realized that, yes, this is great land, but we need to get water to it. So, by 1905, essentially all of the land had been homesteaded, etcetera in the Missoula Valley. What the landowners of the Grass Valley, recognizing the need water, formed a private company, which they referred to as the Grass Valley French Ditch Company, and constructed a dam which diverted water from the Clark Fork River. This diversion dam is just a half a mile upstream from where we live. That's where Grass Valley started and then went down from there. Now, when water started flowing through that ditch, this established, of course, early water rights with so many miner's inches of water claimed by the ditch company. As the water flowed around Grass Valley, keeping to the north so that it bordered the clay hills and also so that that elevation would allow for the water to then flow out of the ditch down the hill. Flood irrigation, of course. Flood irrigation, of course. As late as 1960, which may not sound rather modern to you, but as early as 1960—maybe I should say as late as 1960—there were 21 shareholders on the Grass Valley French Ditch. They owned water shares that varied in sizes from 75 to 700 miner inches. Once again, remember this delivered water to a bit over 6,000 acres.

LC: What is that measurement?

JC: I wish I could be very specific, but I'm going to have to leave it to you to look it up. [laughs]

Now also, we're talking about 6,000 acres. There were really only 21 landowners on those 6,000 acres. The average size—well, let's see. Yeah, I don't think that I recall what the average size was, but all you have to do—well it would be divided, about 6,000 divided by 21, so about 300 acres, right?

LC: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: This ditch, of course, was extremely important in increasing the productivity of the land. But your question is, when did you start seeing some changes? In 2016, the Grass Valley French Ditch realized, the company realized—that with the huge efficiency in the distribution of water brought about by modern technology, which included sprinkler systems, either hand carry or wheel lines, or pivots—flood irrigation is extremely inefficient. The efficiency increased to the point where the Ditch Company determined that we probably have greater water right than we really need, and maybe we could sell some of that. At that time, at 2016, then it was noted how many shareholders were on the ditch. How many landowners, etcetera, and although we knew that this was occurring gradually, these figures truly emphasized it. From the original 21 shareholders and 21 landowners, by 2016, there were now 76 shareholders. Water acreage in a range anywhere from 5 acres, oh I believe, 650 acres.

The average size of the agricultural operation was now down to, oh, I think about 56 acres. Yeah. So that was eye-opening. Now in addition to up to 76 shareholders, the number of houses on the property had increased from 21 to 245. Although we had been observing this kind of creeping development of a few acres here, a few acres there, but to see that over this period of time. there was obviously more than a 10-fold increase. That really brings home what was happening. The land was, or more and more of it was being used to build houses on.

LC: You mentioned the ditch and the number of shareholders getting water from it and the certain number of houses. Were there any other changes that you began to notice, in addition to those?

JC: Yes. I mentioned the dairy farms in the 1940s. They were all gone. The sugar beet factory had closed, and the flour mills in Missoula were closed. Meaning, of course, that instead of that perhaps up to 80 percent of the food consumed by Missoulians were raised locally, obviously, it was now being imported. The slaughterhouses that were present in Missoula County were gone. So, there was this tremendous shift from the use of local farm and ranch produce to things being imported. Why? Probably goes back to the bottom line. Perhaps they could get these items cheaper elsewhere through the modern mass transportation system.

LC: How did those changes affect your family and your neighbors?

JC: Well, I think I would have to suggest here, that along with these changes occurring we noticed there had been a distinct change in land ethic. I said a bit earlier that when we moved here, everybody was a land steward, recognized the importance of that resource. As the elderly folks died and as the Depression lifted, those things contributed to the heirs of that land realized, 'hey, I probably don't need to farm or ranch in order to get something out of this. I'll just sell it. Sell the land for housing developments.' So, they started doing that, which broke our hearts. Because we still had this knowledge of the true value of land as a resource, and now it increasingly was looked upon as a commodity. Just a common commodity. If we feel like selling it for the so-called highest and best price, that's our right to do so, and we really don't care about future generations on the land. Besides, that's awfully hard work and a lot of the folks that followed one generation after the other didn't want to do that anymore. So, an unfortunate combination. But I do recall just over the hill where there was a very, very productive, modest- sized farm ranch, where the rancher one morning, he told us this: "I looked out the window and I said to my wife, 'We're looking at our retirement. I'm going to sell this.'" This beautiful, beautiful, highly productive top land was sold for development.

I think this practice continues to this time, that if you have a residence, you have to have at least an acre of land because you're going to put your private well and your private sewage system on it, and the well and sewer system has to be far apart. Now, what do you think about that? Think about mowing an acre of lawn. You begin to realize most people aren't really going to like to do that. But you also realize that, for residents you don't need that much land, but in turn, it gobbles up extremely productive farmland. So, every day I drive by that subdivision,

there's this big chunk in the middle that, yeah, the land boundaries extend into it, but it's not used for anything except for perhaps lawn, etcetera. Extremely wasteful. I also recall that when this subdivision, which is on the clay hills just off from Cote Lane and you saw it as you drove by. It's referred to as El Mar Estates, and it consists of very, very small lots of small houses and mobile homes. They have their own their water system and sewer system, so that one-acre requirement wasn't put in place, wasn't required. When they put that in, I said to my father, "Dad, those lots are awfully small."

He said, "Yes, but if you want to save farmland, that's what you do." This was a long time ago. His words were words of wisdom. People just weren't thinking about that when they okayed the subdivision. Most of which required the one-acre size, and the good agricultural was being sacrificed.

So, I think your question started out to be how did it affect us? Those of us who retained the land. It really didn't have that much of an effect. We continued to do what we wanted to do to have a productive agricultural operation. What we did notice, however, is that of the items you bought at the store, there wasn't much of a market for local food anymore.

LC: I wonder, I guess it didn't change your activities here, but were there any changes in the community that you felt?

JC: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. The earliest development in the Hell Gate community, which is to the east of Grass Valley, was a very modest size, maybe a two-acre subdivision in which mobile homes were placed, and the owners apologized to the community for doing that. Because the old land ethic was still there. I mean, this is something you don't do because of productivity loss. They were apologetic about it. Well, those apologies stopped coming. You could see the change in land ethic from a valuable resource that must be protected to a commodity you can do anything you want to it. That hurt and was alarming because it is so short sighted in the thinking of those who own the land. They're looking at, 'what can I get out of this.' Rather than, 'how can I protect this resource so that it will still be in place for future generations?'

LC: So, when they apologized, did they go door to door? How did that happen?

JC: No, no, no. I don't know exactly how that came about, but I know that was the consensus in the community that they felt badly about so doing, but felt they needed to.

LC: For your dad, for example, what was it like to see those changes for him?

JC: He was appalled, and he had good friends who were willing to divide the land. Rather than alienating them, he most certainly didn't approve of what they're doing, but he just accepted it. Yeah. That's not necessarily something I can do, is accept it.

LC: I'm curious, so, you mentioned this idea of viewing the land as a commodity and also this ethic about stewardship that was held especially widely when you were growing up. I'm wondering, in that time what did stewardship mean?

JC: It was a practice that you just did. Hey, these weeds are coming in. It's my responsibility to get those buggers out of here. And we just did it. It was just something that was taken for granted.

LC: What kind of practices would that involve I guess?

JC: [laughs] In the days before herbicides, I can recall my father when he was flood irrigating going around with his irrigation shovel, and if there was a weed sticking up, he would go over and dig it out. Just something you did, because you realized that this was going to decrease productivity and not gonna be good for anything.

LC: Are there any practices related to other wildlife or to the riparian area?

JC: I really don't recall conversations concerning the protection of wildlife, but there again, I would suggest that this is just something that you also took for granted. You realized the importance of the den of foxes that always raised their kits around the ranch. They got those [unintelligible] voles; they got the ground squirrels. And we knew it. We didn't kill the bull snakes because they would go after the ground squirrels. It's kind of an incidental thing. We treasured the wildlife, but I don't think it was something that we necessarily thought much about. It was just a part of living.

LC: Thanks for sharing this piece of your story. I want to talk a bit about putting your land in conservation easement, and that means putting this land in perpetuity. Could you explain a bit more about how conservation easements work?

JC: Yes, a relatively new technique. I forget when conservation easements first came into play. But if you recognize the importance of the land as a resource that should be protected, you can do that. In so doing, you would contact an entity whose practice it was to assist landowners in drafting these easements—land trusts. Land trust. Cities, not Missoula—the county has a few conservation easements. Maybe we'll come back to that. But the land trust would sit down with the landowner. They would take a detailed inventory of the plants, the wildlife, etcetera—the vegetation that was present on the property. That was helpful in identifying an additional natural value aside from the protection of the soil. So that was done, and the land trust person would go over the general phraseology of the easement with the landowner and you could make additional. For example, I had noticed that the cattle—the beef cattle that we had—and I guess, the ranch has approximately two miles of the Clark Fork River frontage with a riparian zone along it. But I had noticed the cattle really love to browse as well as eat grass. So when new seedlings—say cottonwood, aspen, etcetera—would come in, emerge in the riparian zone, the cows would find it and 'bye bye.' I had seen this happen, and I thought, 'Whoa! I don't like

that. This is not offering protection to that riparian zone.' So, I insisted in drafting in the easement that the entire riparian zone be fenced off. You couldn't have cattle or any kind of livestock grazing it with a couple of locations, which were enclosed, for the cattle, livestock, to get water from the river. But in just a few selected spots. That was one of the things that we had included. The conservation easement allows you to continue your agricultural operations, and if you want to try something else, fine. I liked that. I like that and wanted to do that to protect this resource, this land, that I had inherited. So, the conservation easement offered that protection in perpetuity, which to me is a very good thing.

LC: When did you start thinking about doing an easement?

JC: When both my parents passed away, my father went first and then my mother a few years later, and my brother and I inherited the property. I suggested to him that we put it in a conservation easement. He didn't go for it. So, I said, "Well, how about if I buy you out?" Which I did and then proceeded to put it in an easement. In so doing, I didn't talk at all with my children to see, "Hey, think this is a good idea or not?" I thought there might be some resistance to it, but I thought the protection of this resource was of extreme importance. I would suggest that anyone who's contemplating putting property such as this into easement, don't ask your kids. They might be thinking about eventually developing it. If you don't want that done and the resource destroyed, don't talk to them about it, do it. Which we did. All the kids, except one, applauded it. The one who had reservations has since come around big time because they realized from the feedback that they've gotten from the community, "Ooh, what a wonderful thing that you guys did." So, everyone is now behind it.

LC: When you did the easement, were there other farms in the Grass Valley or in the Missoula Valley that had already done that?

JC: There were conservation easements in Missoula County. I'm not sure that there were any on acreage this size. There were a number of really quite small acreages protected with an easement. Yeah, so I can't think of any. There may have been.

LC: But it certainly, I guess, it wasn't the most common thing that was happening?

JC: It wasn't common. It was common for folks with small acreage that they want to protect, but I don't know if there was any...Now I knew that conservation easements on large acreages had been occurring throughout the state, and the Montana Land Reliance at that time was doing a lot of it in eastern Montana. When we were contemplating going the conservation easement route, I contacted them—their representative was in Big Fork—and got a little information from them and then contacted, the Five Valleys Land Trust, a local organization. I really liked the immediate response and decided, 'hey, let's do it,' which is a fact that illustrates the importance of local land trusts rather than depending upon it at a statewide.

LC: You mentioned how some of your family felt reservations at first. What about people in the neighborhood and in the community? Did you have responses—

JC: Well, I most certainly didn't ask them how did they feel about what was done. General approval. However, because there had been this morphing, unfortunate switch in how the land was viewed, and in many, many cases our response was met lukewarm, at best, endorsements from neighbors who had chunks of land that could be protected. Why? Part of it certainly was that they want to do whatever they want to with their land, whatever. Secondly, they really didn't understand that once you agreed to the easement that you still own the land. The land trust didn't, nor based upon the conditions of the easements, which the landowner helped draft, it was all the landowner. The land trust couldn't say, "You've gotta do this." Unfortunately, that misunderstanding continues to exist.

LC: Did anyone in the community see what you were doing and ask, "How could I do this?" Was there interest from other people?

JC: [laughs] Well, as soon as we did it—now, you know this little portion, this upper portion of Grass Valley consists of really only two farm-ranches. So as soon as we did it, I started talking with my neighbor across the fence. I said, "Hey, you guys should look into it. You should look into it." By that time, I was also a board of directors at Five Valleys. I told my neighbor, "I think Five Valleys would really value you as a director, and you gotta put your land in an easement." He became a director. He told me to begin with, "I'll give it a shot for a year." He stayed for eight or nine years, serving as a board chairman and took an extremely active role. Within the last five, or six years, they put their place in a conservation easement, at least the bottom part here. They own some up in the clay hills that they left out. So now we have this relatively large combined chunk of really important agricultural land that's protected forever. Which is cool.

LC: I want to talk about your work in ag land advocacy. But first, I guess I just wanted to ask if you could just to explain for you, what does it mean knowing that the land is in easement?

JC: Oh! It is extremely comforting knowing that as the land is passed on, hopefully it'll stay in the family, but if it doesn't the easement goes with it. It's always going to be protected from development. The resources that it protects will always be there. Very, very comforting.

LC: Was this experience with your own land and putting it in easement, was that the beginning of your involvement in ag land advocacy, or did that start earlier?

JC: It started much earlier than that. When I was a kid growing up and in 4-H and learning how to raise animals in a highly productive way. Important. As a 4-H leader, after my 10 years of being a 4-H member, then I could help coach young people in the same thing. I was also on the county community council, or the 4-H council, yeah, in which we could examine and make adjustments in the ag programs that the members were working on. When the farmer's market started, and I may have mentioned this before that we sold our produce there, and I became

active in the farmer's market and for a time served on the board of directors. This was still when I was teaching, and it was well before we placed the land in the conservation easement.

LC: I'm realizing now I just wanted to go back to your land for just one other question I had, which is you mentioned the river and the riparian area and the soil. I wonder if there are any other particular features of this land that you wanted to protect?

JC: Well, one of the things that I have been doing all my life, I guess, it started out not realizing that this was happening, but then putting everything together. As new experiences arose and I started connecting the dots, these resources, if you're talking about the wildlife, if you're talking about the riparian zone which provides habitat for the animals and also helps shade the water and therefore affects the fisheries. If you're talking about the agricultural fields, not only if you're talking about hay fields in particular, are you harvesting a product that you will use to feed your animals. It's certainly also increases the availability of food for deer, etcetera. So, living on the land, working the land, and protecting the land, and seeing all of the connections that are brought about if one's eyes are open to what these connections are, I think, is of tremendous importance.

LC: Thank you for that. To come back toward your work, branching out from your land, you'd conserve this land that you grew up on, but why was it also important to you to work toward conserving other places in the valley?

JC: [laughs] Well, when you realize that these resources are being severely impacted by willy-nilly approval of development projects, once again, it's all part of the whole. You can't look at this just as 'this chunk of land' and how it will affect future generations. But you look at other similar chunks, and you realize that for the good of the growing population in Missoula County there are resources that we must conserve, must conserve. So, since my retirement, I have had an opportunity to work with organizations and be on committees, etcetera, that help in one way or another to, if not achieve the goal, at least lobby for it.

LC: You mentioned the Five Valleys Land Trust as the organization you worked with on your own easement, and also that you became involved with them working for them. Can you just tell me about that? How did that start?

JC: You're talking about my association with Five Valleys Land Trust?

LC: Yes.

JC: Okay, yeah. In working with the land director back then—this would be 1997, '98, something like that—I realized the other work that they were doing. I was so impressed with their stewardship concept. When I was asked if I would like to volunteer to help, I just jumped on that. It wasn't long before they said, 'well, how about being on the board of directors.' Sure, one good thing about retirement from the classroom is that your schedule becomes much more

open, and so you can do that sort of thing. Being on the board of directors, I've been there for 17 years. Once again, you get to see the big picture. Well, that is, some of the open space priorities that I have may not be as important to other people as they are to me. However, some of the priorities they possess I am now aware of. For example, trails that allow people to climb, say Mt. Sentinel, very important to them. A huge project that Five Valleys is undertaking now is getting many small chunks of land into conservation easement so that trail can be built all the way from the base of the mountain to the top of Mt. Dean Stone. Good grief. People are really excited about that sort of thing.

LC: You mentioned that when you got on the board, you started to see a big picture?

JC: Yeah, the big picture, to which I'm referring, is not only is agricultural land—a resource that is to be protected and is valued by those who live on the land. But I wasn't as aware that access and trails on the North Hills and this sort of thing are of great importance too. So that, once again, that has enlarged my understanding of what the preservation of open space means.

LC: So as a member of the board, what kinds of things do you do?

JC: I am on the conservation committee. This committee reviews all of the proposed conservation projects that members of the land protection team bring forth. We go over those with a fine-tooth comb and ask all kinds of questions to determine if this is a piece of property that coincides with the mission of Five Valleys' protection of different kinds of natural resources. We then forward that to the board, as a whole, for their action. That's one of the committees I serve on. Another committee is the banquet committee. Five Valleys has an annual spring banquet, which is their largest single fundraiser for the year. Being an entity whose mission is to preserve open space, you really have to hire people who are well qualified to do so, and this has gotta be their life. They've got to be professionals. They cost money, and they should be paid good money for it. In order to sustain and enlarge the operation of these folks, you need professionals who are good at raising money. Of course, once again, the dots connect. That's another important function of the land trust, well, the overall mission is the protection space of open space, but it comes in chunks. Identifying people who can analyze it and work with landowners and bring in requests for conservation easements, and you have to have people who are very good at asking donors to back them.

LC: In working with Five Valleys, what are some accomplishments that you are most proud of?

JC: As far as Five Valleys is concerned?

LC: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, sure. These vary tremendously, and since I have been on board, the diversity of projects has increased dramatically. Recently, confirmation easements were placed on ranches of 5,000 acres or more, out of the county in the Philipsburg-Drummond area. Wow, wow! I

mean, you've got to be impressed by that. On a different side, a site at Lolo, a historic site. The owners of that historic site wanted put a conservation easement on it so it could be available to the public. That's very different. This is a Lewis and Clark site. But it is very important to the public because it gives one a background, a knowledge of how this land was before the whites came in and spoiled it.

A very unusual project occurred just a few years ago. Where a—I don't recall acreage, but it's a sizeable, it might be up to 100 acres certainly, at the junction of Rock Creek and the Clark Fork. This was, at one time, scheduled for a massive development. But not something that the local residents were excited about, nor anyone else. Five Valleys elected to raise funds to purchase that property. The acquisition thing was new. The organization was an extremely successful in locating funds that essentially paid for the purchase. Some of it came from the state, etcetera. Now, it is used in a myriad of ways. Field trips for school kids, a handicapped access trail has been constructed through it. This is very important to those who are physically impaired so they can get out and see and enjoy the natural world. Partnerships have been made with the University for field studies, et cetera. It's pretty exciting. Five Valleys also worked with the Lincoln community in again using a much smaller acquisition for the establishment of a community park on the river that flows through there. Again, very important. Interestingly enough in that Lincoln area, there are several conservation easements on ranches that are up there. So, there are a lot of things going on in the organization. Of course, I lobby for the protection of the ag lands.

LC: I also understand you're one of the founders of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition.

JC: Yeah, that's correct. How did that start? Well, I forget how many years ago it was that the county commissioner said, "Let's put together a committee which will work to conserve and enhance the availability of local food," because it was recognized that there has been a resurgence of folks growing specifically for the production of their products for use in Missoula, whether it's sales at the markets or etcetera. I was one of the members of that and have been with them forever. One of the things that particularly intrigued me there—and this happened shortly after CFAC was established—CFAC was designated, by the commissioners as the agency responsible for evaluating the impact of projected developments on agriculture. State law, which goes back, in the 1970s, late 1970a, dictates all subdivisions be reviewed for their impact on several things: agriculture being the first and then other natural resources—wildlife, water, etcetera. Interestingly, it was brought forward to the state legislature by a resident of Bozeman who stated on the floor of the legislature that he was alarmed when he drove out into the Gallatin Valley and saw this extremely valuable agricultural land being developed. The bill passed and became state law. Every subdivision is supposed to be evaluated on its impact on these different resources. So, as I mentioned, CFAC was designated as the agency in Missoula County to look at every subdivision to see how it affected agriculture. That's been my chief interest. I certainly agree with the other missions of CFAC as well but play not much of a role there.

LC: Why has working with CFAC been important for you?

JC: As I mentioned, it allows me and the other members of the Land Use and Liability committee to testify. First of all, write up a report on whether or not a subdivision meets the mitigation requirements for its effect on ag. Then to testify at hearings and develop arguments. That's my biggest thing with CFAC. However, CFAC has also been successful at obtaining large grants to fund a beginning farmer program, large grants to focus on how local food can be effectively sold and brought to market here in Missoula County. Instrumental in getting SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] dollars. Used to call them food stamps, right? Yeah. SNAP dollars can be used to purchase food at the farmers markets. Marvelous, absolutely marvelous. And has taken the lead on a statewide basis to get other communities to do the same thing. Although I'm not directly involved with that, I certainly champion those missions as well.

LC: Similar to with Five Valleys, I'm curious what are some of your proudest accomplishments working with CFAC?

JC: An accomplishment. Well, let's see, an attempt at a major accomplishment which failed, at least was instigated, the county within the last three years, was focused on repealing the subdivision review regulations with a focus on impact on agriculture. CFAC worked closely with the county planning services to draft some meaningful mitigation principles which were non-existent at that time. We were excited about it. The county was excited about it. Then ultimately, the commissioners didn't go for it. It was a battle that we lost, but it was well fought and sometimes you can take pleasure in that. The county, then said, "Okay, let's have some more committees." I was on a committee that worked there reexamining the tools which could promote the conservation of ag land, looking at it from a slightly different option, perhaps than those that have resided in the subdivision review regs.

LC: In addition to working with these two organizations, I'm curious if there's any other conservation activities that you've been involved with.

JC: In 2005, the county solicited two volunteers from each of 13 sections of the county, rural sections of the county. To meet for the better part of a year and examine fully, the tools that were out there that could be used to preserve agricultural land. And that was very interesting. Very interesting. The primary recommendation that the committee made upon the conclusion of our studies for the county commission was that they request and work to pass an open space bond. Gallatin County had already done that. We recommended the Missoula County do that where some of the funds could be used to provide landowners who gave up their development rights with a reimbursement for so doing. We recommended to the commissioners that the county go for a \$20 million bond. The commissioners reduced it to \$10 million, but it passed overwhelmingly with over 70 percent approval, which provided \$10 million then to be used for funding projects in which the landowner would be reimbursed for giving up their development

rights. I then was one of the initial members of the follow-up committee to that one that I previously mentioned. This is the Open Lands Committee. It's made up of, once again, citizens from throughout county, whose major function is to evaluate these projects that come in requesting use of the open space bond funds. That's been rewarding. Let's see. Another committee that I am on is the County Office Committee of the USDA. There, we meet as needed to evaluate claims for obtaining grants from the government for growing particular crops, for okaying money for losses of crops and livestock, etcetera. That's been interesting.

LC: In what way?

JC: Well, you get an inside as to who these people are out there and who is it that are making these claims? How many claims were made on a countywide basis? And also encourage the USDA to reach out to these small farmers and find ways for them perhaps to be, at least partially funded in growing specialty crops. So, that's been interesting. Strangely enough, the only conservation committee that pays you to attend. Everything else is strictly voluntary. Yeah. I guess the last one I can think of is the Grass Valley French Ditch Board of Directors. I've been on that for a number of years now, as was my father in the past. Of course, that's quite interesting as well.

LC: Could you talk about that more?

JC: Yeah. I told you a little while ago that this is a private ditch company, and that there are shares that every ditch owner has, owns. But there are expenses for the maintenance of the ditch—repairs, etcetera, cleaning the ditches. The board of directors goes over the projected expenses for the coming year and then decides, "Okay, if there are 4,200 shares, what's it gonna cost each shareholder per share in order to fund the expenses. That's kind of interesting. It's also interesting in looking at possible options for the use of the excess water that we are now having. For the different options that seem to be available for the repair of the dam, that sort of thing.

LC: I feel like some people would say like, "Oh, it's sad to see land use change or something like that," and "the past is the past," and that kind of response to this urge to protect agricultural land. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about why it's important to protect agricultural land and to continue to do so.

JC: Several factors are involved here. One factor that is almost entirely overlooked, not only in national politics, but discussing the global situation as well, and that is the human population continues to expand exponentially. We are no longer hunters and gatherers. We are essentially farmers. Now, obviously, as any ecological scientist knows there are limiting factors for any population. At some point, some point, the population is going to expand to the place where the resources available are not present and there will be a dramatic decrease then in the population. This is rather doom and gloom outlook. It was first proposed by Malthus a long time ago. I recall in taking an ecology class when the professor turned to a map of the world. 'Okay,

wonder what's this? Yeah, I suspected..." In the early '70s. He turned to a map of the world and pointed to India. He said, "You can cross this country off the map. Their population is expanding so rapidly that it's only a matter of a limited number of years they will no longer produce the food that will sustain that population. There's going to be a massive die-off. Forget about them." Didn't happen. But why didn't it happen? Well, there was new technology in plant science that came up with the rice that was tremendously more productive than [unintelligible]. It was discovered that herbicides and pesticides could again enhance the productivity, and India never went under and it hasn't yet because of all of this new technology. Well, that's wonderful, but ultimately, our resources on this planet are limited. Some time we're not going to be able to come up with these solutions that have extended the deadline.

So, while it's inevitable, but nobody talks about population size. Nobody. I'm amused when talk is, "Hey, we can just colonize other planets." Come on now, what a far-fetched thing that it is when the solution is so obvious. You've got to decrease population growth. Yet our economy is based on perpetual growth. Perpetual growth only occurs if you have increased consumers. It's just maddening, absolutely maddening. We'd better wake up before it's too late and do something. [telephone rings in the background] The outlook for that, in my opinion, is grim. As we speak today, the wildfires in California today are the result of a couple of things, but the main one being climate change, with these severe droughts that occur there. The impact on us here in Montana is dire. People are going to have to leave California, and they're going to come up here. Which, once again, illustrates why it is essential to protect the agricultural land that we have here. It all fits together, but you've got to look at the entire picture.

LC: In addition to the migration and to population, are there any other reasons for you, especially protecting farmland in this in the Missoula Valley, than [unintelligible]?

JC: Yes. Yes. Obviously, all of this is great soil if irrigated. We are very fortunate here to have an abundant water source. That's not something that's occurring in California. Where there in the highly productive Sacramento Valley where they depend upon wells for their water, they're continually going deeper and deeper. They're going to run out of water. So not only do we have some productive soil up here, we also have water.

LC: I'm curious, even though your outlook is dark in some ways, I wonder what you would hope the Missoula Valley looks like in, say, 50 years.

JC: Well, I would certainly hope that it looks very much as it does now. Will there be additional people living here? Yes. However, during this next 50 years, we have been very, very careful about where houses are built, and you don't build them on the productive soil. You build them on the clay hills. Because the clay hills and [unintelligible] area up there, it's really not very productive from the agricultural point of view. I would hope that the remainder of essentially all the productive ag lands—small acreage, large acreage, etcetera—has been preserved. There are already little clusters of development throughout the county. Hopefully, that will have stabilized, and that's not going to happen any longer. They're still there. But if you looked at, if

you look at Missoula County in 50 years, you're going to see what I refer to as a pleasing mosaic of houses clustered here. But over here, there are gardens, there are crops being grown, etcetera. That the housing, the new houses have been constructed, as I mentioned, on the clay hills, but also on the surrounding mountains. There's been a large backing for preserving the North Hills. They're barren. Why not put houses up there? But we need to be careful about how we do this. Hopefully, that's the way it will look.

LC: I'm wondering just from your experience both, in teaching and in working with people on some of these projects, if there are any patterns to how you work well with people, and how you succeed in getting things done?

JC: One of one of the most important characteristics that you must follow if you're interested, if you're dedicated to the conservation of these natural resources is patience. You make the initial contacts now, and you talk about the importance of the resources that you see that might be under private ownership but could be placed in conservation easement to conserve the resources and you tell them about that. You do it in the most congenial way possible. You often get a "well, I'll think about it," attitude. That's good. That's the first step. Maybe they'll contact you later. But if they don't, then you go to see them again and say, "Hey, have you thought about this? Have you thought about that? Now, notice that these folks over here went that direction. What do you think about that?" But you maintain this positive relationship with those people. You'd never go in and say, "Dodo birds. if you don't do this..." etcetera. Five Valleys has done a very good job of doing that, building the relationship, just letting it sit there and letting it ferment but keeping in contact. Then maybe five, ten years later, it bears fruit. It involves having people make those contacts and establish that relationship. To, of course, be deeply invested in the goals and the mission and the importance. But they also have to be able to relate to the individuals with whom they're speaking. Don't be in too big of a hurry to get them to commit. But just establish the trust, absolutely essential.

LC: Wanted to end our conversation today by asking, you've talked a bit in this conversation and in others, about this idea of the land giving back to us and this idea the land as sustaining us, and I was wondering if you could share a story, maybe even from the last couple weeks, when you felt this particularly?

JC: Well yes, in fact Tuesday of this week, as a member of the Open Lands Committee, other members of the committee, plus two of the county commissioners attended a site visit of a project, which is being promoted by Five Valleys for reimbursing a land owner, who would like to put a conservation easement on, I want to say at least 100 acres, right there in the middle of the Potomac Valley floor. During that site visit and hearing the landowner, he and his wife, talk of they only had the property for eight years, what they have done is absolutely amazing. The property had been owned for years by one of the largest private landowners in Missoula County who would bring in a big herd of cattle in the spring and plop them down on the property. The cattle would eat the grass all the way down. Then he would transport them to a Forest Service lease for the summertime, and let the grass grow back up again and then bring

them back up again in the fall. The land, as a result of that treatment, tremendously over-grazed. The irrigation system, which had been flood irrigation, was definitely not only preventing the productivity to be far from realized, it was also resulting in the decreasing ability of the soil itself to grow vegetation. What they had done in putting in wells, which tapped their water rights to the property from springs and creeks that went through there, and pivot lines. During this relatively brief period of time, productivity just mushroomed. Why did they do it? Well, I asked them that. They said, "Well, we just want to take care of the land. We just want to get it back to where it should be." That is encouraging. Tremendously encouraging. If people can observe that and listen to the reasons for why these conservation efforts—preservation—are coming to fruition, there's hope. Great to know that three people out there that are doing that.

LC: Thank you. It's been a pleasure speaking with you, Jim. Thank you so much.

JC: Well, it's been my pleasure. I do hope that this assists you in completing what you want to do. I know that I have certainly enjoyed talking about these things that are near and dear to my heart.

[End of Interview]