

Curtis Akey (CA): Ok, Mr. Ron Becker, right?

Ron Becker (RB): Right.

CA: And your title here is?

RB: Associate Executive Director.

CA: Ok. And how long have you been with the program?

RB: Since, oh, I guess September of 1970.

CA: Ok. And the program began in '68. I think that's what Dr. Van Lopik said.

RB: The first funding was effective July 1 of 1968.

CA: Ok, so then you were pretty much here from the beginning because that was a two year process; to get the funding and everything together.

RB: Yeah. It took time. But, the National Program began in 1966 with Federal authorization through a Congressional act. And then, I guess they must have gotten the first funding in the fiscal year of '67 or '68. That would have been the fiscal year of '68. And that was the first year that I think anybody was funded.

CA: Ok. Well let me ask you some of these questions that I have sent to you. The Louisiana Sea Grant, obviously, got started in 1968, the funding. How did it go about getting started?

RB: Well, I guess like all programs. NOAA issued a call for proposals. The university organized a multidisciplinary team to write a proposal. They inventoried their research strengths in the marine area and those strengths were pretty slim, I might add. We had the Coastal Studies Institute and the food science department had been doing some research related to shrimp. That was pretty much it. And, so, various divisions of the university were represented on the team that developed the proposal. And, it was submitted to NOAA. I think the original proposal asked for, like a million dollars or so. The initial funding was \$198,000. But, apparently the university had some sort of preliminary notification that they would be funded because they hired Dr. Van Lopik to come here and really set up the program. He was working at Texas Instruments at that time, and LSU hired him first because they knew him. He'd been a graduate student here; and secondly because he had experience with administering sponsored projects. They felt that his experience at TI would be useful for managing the new program here. Up to that time, LSU hadn't done very much sponsored research. In fact, they didn't even have a sponsored research administrator until probably 10 years after Sea Grant began.

CA: Well, how did you get your start here, then?

RB: Through Dr. Van Lopik. I worked for him at TI, and he asked me to come and get this thing off the ground. I didn't really intend to stay, but the way things turned out, I'm still here!

CA: That's what he had said too! He said he had left for a two year leave of absence, and 30 some odd years later, he's still here! That's pretty neat. Well, how important was the National Sea Grant program when LSU became a part of the big picture. What was the National Sea Grant Program accomplishing when the Louisiana branch started in 1970.

RB: Not much of anything. You know, they were brand new. Their national funding was insignificant. As granting agencies go, or grants programs, they were tiny. But, to LSU, it was a really big deal. I think that the initial award made a significant splash at LSU. And, I think I figured one time around 1970, or, well, sometime between '70 or '72, by which time we'd seen some increases in our Sea Grant funding, we were a third of LSU's total sponsored research.

Sponsored research really hadn't caught on at LSU at that time. And...well, partly because the university didn't push it. They didn't think of themselves as a research university. Although, every university likes to think that they are, you know, a world class organization. But, frankly, a lot of the faculty at LSU that could have been doing research would go off and consult during the summer time, or work for NASA, or do various things instead of getting research grants. It was only after they really committed to a long term program to become a research university. That of course was reflected in the reward structure for faculty. Then they began to develop. But, I think that Sea Grant, as one of the early programs, gave a lot of researchers an opportunity to try it out and get into the field and really become creative and more aware of grants opportunities.

CA: So, it was pretty influential around LSU?

RB: Yeah.

CA: Well, in your view, what is the purpose of the Louisiana Sea Grant, as a whole?

RB: I think the purpose of Sea Grant, here as in every other state is to develop and....well, conserve and develop the state's marine resources. And of course, those resources include, and in fact, they primarily consist of coastal zones and the fisheries associated with those regions. And you know, we do a lot of work with people who pursue marine related occupations and with coastal communities.

Focus academic interest (research, education, outreach/extension) on issues involving coastal and marine resources, areas, and people. Develop partnerships with other agencies, industries, and individuals to facilitate the application of academic research, education, and outreach in addressing major public issues.

CA: Well, what would make Louisiana's Sea Grant different from, say, Texas' Sea Grant, or Maryland's Sea Grant, or something like that?

RB: Geography, for one thing. I think that would be the main factor. Texas, of course, had a major oceanographic institution long before LSU even thought of doing anything off shore. Consequently, I think Texas A&M was one of the very first four or five institutions to be designated as National Sea Grant Colleges. They probably received that designation around 1970, almost as soon as the program began. I think LSU got their designation in, well, you can check this out on the plaque downstairs, it was either '77 or '79. You know the plaque I'm talking about?

CA: The one by the trophy case, when you come down the stairs?

RB: Well, I thought it was when you go out that door when you look towards the new building out there, on the left up on the brick, but they may have moved it.

CA: Oh, I know what you mean, on the outside of the building.

RB: But then, you know, Maryland is different. Their focus is Chesapeake Bay. Our focus is the Louisiana wetlands. Now, in terms of commercial fisheries, well in terms of all kinds of fisheries, Louisiana has the most valuable fisheries of any coastal state in the lower 48. Alaska leads us in value, but we lead in tonnage, primarily because of menhaden, which is an industrial fish. But, we also have a big shrimp fishery. We lead in production of blue crabs. And, we lead in production of oysters. So, we have a lot of people whose livelihoods come from renewable coastal resources, and we have all these other industries that are super-imposed on our coastal ecosystems. Those all contribute problems.

Program differences stem from differences in geography, natural resources, climate, demographics, economic drivers, politics, and anything else that would influence stakeholder interests. To coin a phrase, "All Sea Grant activities are local!"

CA: Well, do you have any names that you'd like to mention who were influential in getting the Louisiana Sea Grant started, other than Dr. Van Lopik?

RB: One other person who was extremely instrumental was...I'll have to think of this...it was the guy who was with Wildlife and Fisheries. It was Lyle St. Amant.

CA: And he was the head of the Wildlife and Fisheries at the time?

RB: The head of Wildlife and Fisheries is always a civilian. He's a political appointee. But, Lyle St. Amant was the top professional fisheries person, and may have been, around that time....well, this isn't quite true but, people with doctorates were very rare in Wildlife and Fisheries. A gentleman named Ted Ford who worked for Lyle also had a doctorate. Ted eventually left Wildlife and Fisheries and came with Sea Grant here in Baton Rouge. It was envisioned in the early days that Louisiana Sea Grant would

function as a research arm of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. That never really came to pass for a variety of reasons. We did do some joint programs, but Wildlife and Fisheries has always been supportive of Sea Grant and, you know, given us good support when we needed it in terms of vessels and use of their refuges and management areas and facilities in the field. But, they haven't really evolved with a research mission, which is hard to do because they are so poorly funded. But, we still work with them, and we always try to have someone from Wildlife and Fisheries in a position to provide advice and professional input to our program.

Another very influential person was Dr. Cecil Taylor, then Chancellor of LSU. Dr. Taylor made sure that the committee formed to develop the original Sea Grant proposal was well balanced and knowledgeable about wetland issues. Another issue of major importance involved securing stable state funding to use for match. (The national program has a fairly stiff matching requirement; proposals for federal sea grant funding must provide a dollar of non-federal funds for two dollars of state funds.) The Louisiana legislature, particularly the Joint Legislative Committee on Natural Resources, headed for many years by Senator Sammy Nunez (Chalmette) was very supportive of Sea Grant. Consequently, we were able to put in place a very strong program with stable funding, that was the envy of many other states. This proved extremely useful when we got into the business of "capacity building."

CA: Well, you said you are now the assistant executive director here...

RB: Associate.

CA: Associate, right.

RB: By the way, we have two associate executive directors. Mike Liffmann is the other associate executive director. He oversees our outreach programs, the Extension Project that we do jointly with Cooperative Extension, and some smaller outreach projects. I tend to focus more on the research side.

CA: How has your role, since you've been here since September of 1970, how has it evolved over time?

RB: Oh, well, you know, there's a lot more of it! The program has grown. We've all taken on additional responsibilities. Since I was here so early, I have worked in just about every role that we have. I started the communications program and hired a woman named Sally Kuzanski to come in and actually take care of the day to day communication tasks. But, I was fairly active with that. And then, when we got the Marine Extension project going with Cooperative Extension Service. I was coordinator for that. And I've been involved to a considerable extent with the fiscal administration. But my main responsibility is coordination of the research effort.

CA: Well, I guess obviously, that having started in 1970, when it started you said the funds weren't as high as they are now. Obviously, it was different, but what was it like

back then? What was the main focus and the main research goals and what not of the Sea Grant back when it was first incepted?

RB: At that time, we had a vision of funding large, multidisciplinary field studies. We had something called the Barataria Bay Project. It may have had as many as a dozen different disciplines involved. I was never clear on what they all did. There were people involved that, you know, whose participation wasn't that obvious. But, we learned a lot about the wetlands. The theme had to do with using the coastal wetlands as an extensive shrimp aquaculture operation, which has a natural feature, that's what it does, shrimp and lots of other things. I don't know what we really gained from all that except a good scientific understanding, and we picked up some talented people. Then, we began to diversify and we got more into, well...we had a small aquaculture project going in. We've always had a part of our funding directed into marine aquaculture. Much of the crawfish research was, in the early days, was Sea Grant funded. From about 1972 through 1979, we were the Ag Center's major source of extramural funds for crawfish work. Then they got funded from the state. They established a couple of faculty positions for crawfish, so, then you know, we didn't fund anymore crawfish work. It's really a freshwater species, and we wanted to go more into marine aquaculture. But, we've had aquaculture, we've had food science, seafood related activities. We've been involved in a fairly wide range of engineering topics. We're still involved with a lot of those things. Then we've, of course, had an interest in natural fisheries, and I think the latest major thrust is in coastal communities. And, of course, all that has been really brought into focus with the recent hurricanes.

CA: Alright. Well, other than funding issues or monetary issues, what are some of the obstacles that the Sea Grant has had to hurdle in order to accomplish their objectives.

RB: Well, I'm not sure we've had any real obstacles. We're kind of a unique program in terms of our focus on work that's going to be useful to someone. And, people in the agricultural field, you know, the Land Grant side of the campus accept that as second nature. Virtually all of the research they do is highly applied, and every faculty person understands that it is his responsibility to extend that information to other stakeholder groups. But, on the what you might think of as the Baton Rouge campus side, or other campuses around the state, faculty don't really understand that principle, or if they understand it they don't do anything about it because it's not part of their reward structure. So, you know, getting this point across is difficult, and typically, when we start working with a new researcher, it'll take him several years to really catch on, if he ever catches on. On the other hand, you get people for whom that's second nature. But, the big limitation is funding, naturally.

CA: Yeah, that's what I figured it probably would be. Well, what kind of things are impacts, rather, that the Sea Grant has on the Gulf Coast region, and on life in the Gulf Coast.

RB: Well, Sea Grant has actively promoted a number of niche commodities, such as soft shell crabs, soft shell crawfish, different kinds of harvest technology, recirculating

aquaculture. A fair number of people have gotten into those kinds of businesses and have made a living at it. Sea Grant has, well through the Cooperative Extension Service, through our Marine Extension People, we've become better known in the small, coastal communities. Currently, we are deeply involved with disaster recovery. I think one of the major impacts we've had on this campus has just been capacity building. A lot of the marine programs, well virtually all of the marine programs in the, what do they call it...in the new building over there...SC and E...School of Coast and the Environment. The Coastal Studies Institute was sort of the 'daddy rabbit' over there, but all of the other institutes, like coastal fisheries, coastal ecology, wetland...well they've changed the name...bio-geo chemical institute, and others. Those groups were actually organized as part of the center for wetland resources, which was established by Dr. Van Lopik and, so, you know, that capacity has continued to grow, although, that side of the campus was reorganized I think around, well I can't tell you the year, but the late '70s maybe or the mid '80s. But, none of it would have come to pass if Sea Grant hadn't been here to lead the charge, and of course, Cooperative Extension Service was totally, well, they had no involvement whatsoever with the marine sector, with the people involved with fisheries and so on. They did a little aquaculture, but it was freshwater aquaculture. But, they just hadn't really established much of a presence in those coastal communities where fishing, and oyster farming and that sort of thing was so prevalent because the Ag Center dealt with crops and livestock. Their interest in natural resources was mainly, well peripheral to everything else they did, but they did do a little bit of work with wildlife. They had somebody who was knowledgeable about wildlife and freshwater fisheries. But, they hadn't really ever decided to make a thrust in the marine sector. So, now they're out there, they are well aware of all the issues and going along! They've evolved with coastal restoration and a bunch of other things.

Another thing that I think is noteworthy is if you say, look at state agencies like DNR, or even Wildlife and Fisheries, you will find a high number of people in professional positions who were trained in wetland sciences here at LSU as a result of programs that the Sea Grant program had nurtured. Sea Grant was, well, we created the Department of Marine Sciences, which grew into the DOCS, the Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences. We've turned out just hundreds of graduate students, you know master's and Ph.D. students who were trained in those coastal sciences. Sea Grant really was responsible for a lot of that. I wouldn't say that it wouldn't have happened without Sea Grant, but you know, it had to happen some way, and fortunately we were kind of the precursor that made it happen when it did.

CA: It had something there to push it along.

RB: Right, and one of the reasons why this thing has worked is because we're part of a national network. I cannot imagine that LSU or the state of Louisiana would have ever done this on their own. But, you know, when there was a national program that could pick up much of the cost, then they wanted to get on board and, you know, 'run with the big boys!' As they should have, because we are such a marine state.

CA: Oh absolutely. I think you said before that Alaska is the only state that has more coast than Louisiana?

RB: Well, no, more fishery landings. They lead us in value, but I think because of our menhaden, we lead in tonnage. But, of course, menhaden is an undervalued fishery. The companies that harvest menhaden here value the resource at four cents a pound. But, when you've got, oh, I don't know, thousands of tons of the stuff, it adds up to a fairly large amount of funding.

CA: What, to you, in your opinion is the most important aspect of the Louisiana Sea Grant?

RB: Well, I think the institutional focus on marine research and outreach that it provides. I would also say that part of the outreach mission is marine education. We do quite a bit of work in the K-12 sector.

CA: Like Ocean Commotion.

RB: Right, Ocean Commotion.

CA: It's coming up! But yeah, that's always a very important aspect. You can involve everybody, not just the higher ups. As long as you can get the younger kids involved and interested, then that's always a good thing. Well, since you've answered these next two pretty much in your previous answers, I guess the last question I have to ask you is what do you think is the single most important goal of the Louisiana Sea Grant?

RB: Survival! That's only said partly in jest. People who have studied system theories always point out that one of the primary functions of any system is to protect its boundaries. What makes a system a system is boundaries, along with inputs and outputs, and if you can't define the boundary, you're not a system. But, survival really is a concern, something we live with continually, partly because of how Congress operates, well, not just Congress, but the entire Federal Government. The administration will cut the budget in one particular area and then the program being cut has to go in and make their case with Congress and get the budget restored. They call this the Washington Monument Syndrome. They talk about in tight years that they're going to have to close the Washington Monument, and of course the Park Service runs the Washington Monument. Whenever the Park Service budget gets cut by the Department of Interior, the first thing they do is threaten to close the Washington Monument, which is Washington, D.C.'s top tourism destination. And of course, everybody gets concerned, you know, 'oh my God, we can't close the Washington Monument now, it would just devastate our tourism industry!' So then, people go to Congress and carry on and get the budget restored for the Washington Monument. You know, this game goes on all the time with Sea Grant and other programs that have a large constituency and are popular with members of Congress. But, some administrations have been able to cut our budget, and we were very nearly eliminated, oh, I can't tell you the year, but I'm going to say back around the early '90s. Things looked pretty bleak. But then I think a new

administration came in and kind of got back on the track. But, they keep nibbling away at us, and we haven't been able to keep up with inflation. There's no question about that.

CA: Well, where do you see the program, or, do you see it lasting for awhile, if the right people are in office? Well, I guess that's the answer, if the right people are in office.

RB: Yeah, right.

CA: Do you think they are there right now?

RB: It's hard to say. I think probably. Of course, we might be extremely popular with our own delegation. You know, we are more concerned with Congressional support, naturally, with the administration. I don't think George Bush or any other president really cares about the Sea Grant program. Now, they may care about NOAA, but NOAA doesn't necessarily care about Sea Grant. They tolerate Sea Grant because it's popular with Congress. Congress, over the years, well certainly, the ones who introduced legislation to create Sea Grant, and those included Senator Clayborne Pell from Rhode Island and, oh there was a North Carolina Senator in there too. Anyway, those people will staunch supporters of Sea Grant, and there have been many others who have liked the program. But, you know, Congress changes and you get new people in who have other projects they want to push, and you just never know where you'll end up.

You know, there are changes in how we, well, how our economy functions, how we relate to government, changes in such things as retirement. You know, they're trying to phase out Social Security, which isn't a big deal for people who work for the state of Louisiana because we don't have Social Security. But, that's a meaningful program for a lot of people. A lot of companies are trying to move to less costly retirement programs for their employees, and, what do they call them, guaranteed benefit programs? Well, like the airlines. The pilots, for instance, thought they had it made. They were making big bucks and had very lucrative retirement programs. But, when the airline goes bankrupt, that's the first thing they want to do is get out from under that liability so it all gets negotiated down the tubes. So, I think we are, just as a nation, moving towards a less certain kind of future.