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William Mansfield: I'm going to make sure that it's running, like it ought to be. And it appears to be working so that's really good. Just set this here. My wife said the helicopter was here and I thought she was referring to the ceiling fans, I didn't think she meant this thing. But anyhow, get started by putting a label on the disc. And this Bill Mansfield from the [Patel] Center for Global Solutions at the University of South Florida, talking to Mr. Mike Lott on June 23, 2006 at his home here in Seffner. We're discussing land use policy in Hillsborough County and the surrounding area. We always start by getting people to state their name and telling us when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

Mike Lott: I'm Mike Lott. I was born in Plant City, [Florida] in 1955. I've lived here my whole life.

WM: Okay. And your occupation?

ML: Farmer.

WM: Farmer? What do you all—?

MK: Primarily strawberries.

WM: Strawberries? Okay, cause Chip Hinton said you'd be the—I talked to him first. How long have you been farming?

ML: Well I've been—its kind of a mixed story. My father had cattle, when I was younger. So I've been in agriculture my whole life. But row crop farming, my father never really did. We grew some sugarcane and stuff for the cows. But we didn't do—in high school I grew some zucchini squash and different crops like that. Probably, I'm fifty we probably went full time farming when I was twenty-five. So probably twenty-five years. And we'd farmed about three years before that and worked a job about twenty-eight years.

WM: Okay. So you started farming right here?

ML: No, no.

WM: Where did you start farming?

ML: Well actually we did start farming on the other side of the property. Then we leased some land from Jim Walden, the first year I quit working and went full time. That was probably 1970—I don't even know what year that was. Seventy-nine [1979] maybe, seventy-nine [1979], eighty [1980].

Before that we had raised eggplants and other crops and actually raised a few strawberries, a couple of acres of strawberries. Then I bought this place, I bought this farm—Let's see, I was twenty-six. I guess it was eighty-one [1981], or eighty-two [1982].

WM: So that was about twenty-four years ago I guess.

ML: Yes.

WM: Doesn't seem like twenty-four years does it? Okay. So you've been here since 1982?

ML: Right.

WM: And when did you first start noticing development creeping out?

ML: When we were actually building this farm here, this subdivision around me was in permitting stage. And it was—one of the older farmers in the area that was helping. And the early eighties [1980s] there wasn't a tremendous—there was some burst in our industry, but it wasn't—so when a new farm went in, it drew a lot of attention. So when this farm went in, Glenn Williamson—close friends, they were older farmers and had been doing it for years they came and we were taking the fences down, and tearing the old barn down. It was pasture.

He was standing here and he looked over at the subdivision and he said that I wouldn't farm it but five years, because I'd have to sell it to the subdivision. Subdivisions would—the price of land would, you know, I'd get 50,000 dollars an acre for it in five years. Well this never happened.

WM: What kinds of comments were there when you put the farm in here. Were people encouraging? Were they disparaging?

ML: There were no subdivisions here. I was here first. The ag was here first.

WM: Okay.

ML: And this subdivision has only been here for three years.

WM: So it's been fairly recent then?

ML: No, this subdivision here—the L shape—

WM: Here I'll get you a piece of paper.

ML: We built the first phase here, where the house is, the first phase of the farm here. In fact there is a pond here, they built the retention pond. This is on their property. This is my property line. This is the entrance to the subdivision. They built this original subdivision in two phases. There's houses around here. They built this Phase I and then Phase II and then they actually came back in here and built Phase III.

So they were moving this dirt here almost within a year of me building this farm. But all

the permitting—when they sold these lots, they sold the lots on this little pond here as water front and they got five grand more an acre, 5,000 dollars a lot more for water front and 5,000 dollars to 7,000 dollars a lot more for farm front. They actually sold as farm front or waterfront. So the developers actually used the farm. And I really think that was more to the fact that they wouldn't have a back door neighbor.

And actually I think that kind of—with the first phase of people that build around the farm, they paid extra to be on the farm. Choose to be on the farm and so—I had no problems.

WM: Okay.

ML: They wanted to be there and when they sold their homes and the things, we really didn't have any. We've been lucky. Most everybody who ever bought there bought with the least with the idea that in the summer, they'd see the cover crop growing and in the winter they'd see strawberries growing.

I haven't had much trouble. We've a little bit of trouble. There is a guy up there that's bad about letting his pool overflow. He'll pump it in the field and we get red-headed about that. We've had kids steal berries and adults steal berries, (WM laughs) adults steal berries, and adult's send their kids to steal berries. We've had issues like that. We've been very fortunate from; you know I haven't had any real complaints from pesticide use, or odors or smells. But I go beyond the limit to try and not do anything to aggravate the neighbors.

WM: Tell me about that. You say you go beyond the limit, what's that?

ML: Well if I see them swimming in their backyard, I'm not going to go out there and spray anywhere near them. Even though I can, I don't. If it's between the cover crop and I see sand blowing, I'll run turn the water on and settle the sand down. We don't use chicken for fertilizer or anything. We can, but we don't. We have the [Florida] Right to Farm Act in Florida.

You cannot do this interview without digging up the Right to Farm Act and having that law in there. I used to have the signs posted everywhere. When they built the subdivision, I put a big sign right out here, so when people bought in there they could read the signs.

WM: What did the signs say?

ML: The Right to Farm? It basically says that this is an ongoing commercial agricultural and there will be odors, sprays, noise from equipment running at night, noise, pollution and just kind of gives a—it's a whole paragraph. The Farm Bureau publishes a sign that it's on. If you call Judy, if you know Judy, or Chip can get it for you.

WM: Okay.

ML: But you can go on the web site to see it. I mean it's a legal law. And says, it's Florida law and—

WM: I think it's great that you put a disclaimer up so they know what they are getting into.

ML: We put that around the edges when everybody moved in. I should have kept signs up, but it gets to be a pain. And the—it's just things that we—you know we open “You-Pick” once a year. We do it to make a little money, but we really do it. Actually we didn't do it this year. The market was strong enough we never opened “You-Pick.” (laughs) And we almost got hate mail. We got all kinds of people mad at us. They were really upset with us because we didn't let them on the farm.

As far as the people, so far, we haven't had a real issue. Now we had an issue when they built this subdivision across the road. They wanted to re-route the wetlands water. And actually that's kind of an interesting story. The neighborhood—it's kind of funny, this subdivision did not want subdivision. It was like: “We live in a subdivision, but we don't want any more subdivisions.” To me there is a humor in that somewhere. And on the other hand, farming needs development. It keeps the value of our property up. Keeps our lending value higher. If the land's worth 2 million dollars then your net worth is two million dollars better. If it's not it's not.

WM: You can use that for loans?

ML: You can use it for loans, or capital or you know when you finally—we're not out here working for a company that's going to hand us a pension in twenty years. We're not working for the post office or the military where there is a pension or something. So a lot of us, the gold watch at the end of your career is selling the real estate—sell your farm. Whether you do or not, the capability is there. When you reach sixty or sixty-five years old and your way out, you look at the property, and it's paid for and there is a developer

with a checkbook, there is a chance to retire.

So when this guy—it was pastureland and he was an older guy, he'd owned it his whole life. I felt like he had the right to develop it. But the neighborhood hired lawyers to fight it. They took on the opinion that they were going to save the farm. That was their justification for the subdivision. They originally stated it would change the style of the community. It would be different housing, or what ever. But when they finally settled down to what most people were using as the niche, that it would run the farm out and that was ruining the community.

And, you know, there is some truth to that, I guess. But when I testified, I testified that I believed that owners have property rights. You are a property owner, you've worked your whole life to buy this place and you have the right to sell it to the highest bidder. All I wanted them to do was to guarantee me that— they didn't for water, or the way they changed the drainage, that they didn't change my capability of farming, if they didn't make it worse. If they improved it fine, but don't make it worse. Actually is the only standing case in Hillsborough County where they are legally bound and responsible not to sub-terran or above ground, affect my drainage situation.

WM: How did you—had there not been this—what's the name of the first subdivision?

ML: Hillsborough Estates.

WM: If Hillsborough Estates hadn't contested—

ML: It's Hickory Hills. Hickory Hills, actually.

WM: So Hickory Hills is the first one and—

ML: And Hillsborough Estates is on the other side, and this is Lake Weeks Estate.

WM: Okay. So if Hickory Hills Estate had not contested Lake Weeks, would you have paid attention to the water issues?

ML: Yeah, oh yeah! We have an enclosed capture right here. The county built the road through this wetlands, forever ago. Today, they would never have do it. And they didn't

make any means for that water to go anywhere. They just divided the bay head and trapped the water. I was very concerned about they were doing over there. And we had a lot of issues with them actually. I made my one and only call, ever, to the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. They had sand piles over there that was blowing sand and was tearing the strawberries up pretty bad.

WM: Sand is very abrasive.

ML: Yeah, it was bad. It was bad. And they weren't running the water trucks on the weekends. And I couldn't get it done. I didn't know but there is actually a guy with the EPA and his job is construction site sand blowing. I called this guy and he comes out. He was a real meek guy and I thought—I'd already talked to the guys and been cussed out. They had just been really ugly with me. I was wanting a big guy with a gun, or a big stick or something (WM laughs) I didn't think. And this guy walked over there and talked to them. I don't know what they said but they didn't do what he wanted them to do. He shut the job down. I mean on the spot! (laughs) I mean that minute. He didn't come back later with a cop. He made them turn their equipment off and go home. Leave it sitting.

What is it Garret? Hey buddy, give me a hug.

WM: I was wondering what that was underneath my feet.

Unidentified Child: Guess what?

ML: You going to Cypress Gardens.

Unidentified Child: With Kyle.

ML: Yeah, (inaudible).

Unidentified Child: Yeah you got motorcycles.

ML: Hey guys you need to give us a minute here.

Unidentified Child: I was going to play helicopter.

ML: You can't while we're talking I'm sorry. Go to mama.

WM: So these are your two grandkids?

ML: Yeah. Four and two.

WM: Four and those are—well I've heard about the terrible two's whether there's something to that.

ML: Yeah he's pretty wild.

WM: But the EPA guy shut them down?

ML: Yeah, but that was on sand blowing. That was just your construction phase. It had nothing to do with, urban encroachment. I mean, I guess it did during the construction phase. We had a little issue there, but it wasn't a real major—actually it was kind of funny. I had called the developer a couple of times and I said, “You know I'm going to sue if you keep destroying my crop.” I said, “I've tried to talk nice and you just pretty much hung up on me and told me you were going to do what you wanted to do.”

He said, “Mr. Lott, I'll just buy that crop and then you won't have to worry about it.” I said, “That's fine. But that crop is worth about 1.5 million dollars and that's what I want for it right now. And then you can blow sand all over it for the rest of the year. I don't care.” He goes, “There ain't no way a berry crop is worth that much money.”

So they called the University of Florida up there. And when it all boiled down, that also got their attention, it was a more valuable crop than they had anticipated it would be. And that was just an arbitrary number; it wasn't really a factual number. Some years it's more than that.

WM: Well, that's one of the things Dr. Hinton said, was that urban people don't understand agriculture at all. They don't give it any thought, so I can understand him not thinking it would be worth that much.

ML: Well, they just don't know what it costs to grow these things any more, how many people are employed. What they really don't understand, and I guess they're never going to get it. They're worried about homeland security, what's going to happen when we can't grow our own food?

WM: Absolutely. You ask kids where food comes from and they say Publix.

ML: But the reality of it is a lot of it comes from overseas. And you have no control of that. Five years ago nobody would have thought that Venezuela would have been against us, and now they're our archenemies, I guess.

WM: Well you think about—people complain when they can get oil, or they complain about the price of gasoline. But you need that human more than the gasoline. But you said that when they started building across the road, you were concerned about how that would affect the farm?

ML: Just from water. Not from people just from drainage.

WM: Your drainage? Water from the farm here would mess up them or water from the development would mess up you?

ML: The development would mess up me.

WM: Okay. So how did you stay on top of that?

ML: Well we just went to the County Commissioners, Rhonda Storms was still on at the time and she's our area's commissioner. She's from this area and got a pretty good agricultural base. We called Rhonda and talked to her. The County Commissioners said that as they went through the phase—it was kind of an unusual thing the County Commissioners did. Their engineers had to satisfy us before they could go through with it. They had to guarantee monetarily and, you know, in every way that they didn't effect the farm.

WM: I think it is fascinating, because the misunderstandings of agriculture. Most people think of farmers as planting seeds and driving a tractor. They don't realize that you have to be involved with land planning, and that sort of thing. So I think it's interesting that you work that. When you say that we went to the County Commissioners, does that mean

you and your family, or were there others?

ML: No, it was me and my family.

WM: Okay, so it was an individual effort on your part.

ML: Right.

WM: Could you describe it?

ML: Well, we contacted—there's people in place. We have an ag liaison, I'm embarrassed that I don't remember that guy's name. He's really a nice guy. There's a couple of them, employees of the county actually. The ag-liaison—he's actually the one that put me on to the guy with the sand blowing. I'll think of it in a minute.

WM: Okay. When you found out that, that was going to be turned into a subdivision, did you go immediately to the—I guess just—

ML: No. Actually I missed the first public County Commission, I sent my wife. I was somewhere else doing something and she went. She really wasn't verbal enough. But their entrance was supposed to be right across the road from the Hickory Hills subdivision entrance. Which I thought was a great idea because it would be a perfect place to put a four-way stop and slow the traffic down. But the lady who lived in the first house of the subdivision said, "I've got enough school bus traffic. I don't want that there." And just saying that got the guy said, "Ain't no problem, we'll move the entrance here.

Well, I had issues with that, cause I was really concerned about having thirty or forty school kids, every morning tempted when I may have sprayed the night before, while they were asleep. If they run out there and jump in the field, they may get sick, or something.

We don't use a lot of harsh chemicals anymore. We use all soft chemicals. We use bugs to eat bugs and so it's not like it was twenty years ago. But still it could be those times where you're trying to salvage a crop from serious pest that we normally don't have. That would put in harm's way, in legal's way. But they put there and you learn to live with it. It hasn't been too, too bad. At four in the afternoon and 7:30 in the morning I can't spray because—not on this side of the field, because the kids are sitting there.

WM: But you went to the County Commissioners meeting and what did you listen for?

ML: I just went in and stated that, you know, that I'd been in agriculture and I'd been here a long time. I stated that I believed in property rights. I wasn't there to shut this down; I was there to ensure that they didn't do something to hurt me. That was the approach I took with them. And I think we came with pretty good odds.

WM: That's good to hear about the cooperation but eventually, the developer just blew you off when you talked about sand damage?

ML: This was after they had already been permitted. They were building the subdivision. This was a real high piece of ground, so they had stockpiled dirt and sold it. Had a huge amount of dirt out there. I had called them a couple of times, other things. When they first pushed all the trees they piled them right here. They went to burn them and I called them up. I called them when they started piling them and I said, "If you're going to burn that there, that's a little close to a crop." I said, "I would appreciate it if you all would pile it further away." It doesn't scare me that they are burning or nothing, but they wouldn't do it. And when they went over and started burning we had ash and everything else falling. I'd just laid plastic; we hadn't even planted the plants yet. And ash was burning the plastic.

WM: Oh man! You don't want that.

ML: It burns holes in it. So I called up and I said, "You all either need to put in ashless burn, with a blower, or do something." And they got huffy about that. "Do you know how much that would cost us a day?" So I don't know who I talked to or who talked to what, but somehow, they were made to actually move the pile. They had piled; I'm talking huge amounts of lumber.

WM: Oh yeah, I can imagine.

ML: Then they had to come in there with loaders and load it and haul it. And then they ended up grinding it. So they did spend some money that they didn't anticipate spending. But I was probably not their favorite person at the time. But I had talked to them before they ever did it.

WM: That's the point, you had addressed the issue.

ML: Then, when they actually started selling the lots—

Unidentified Woman: Bye!

ML: You all going?

Unidentified Woman: (inaudible).

ML: Is Don here?

Unidentified Woman: He's headed here. Get out from underneath there.

ML: Who is it?

Unidentified Woman: Tommy. Come on, we're going to go swimming.

Unidentified Child: (inaudible)

ML: Where you going swimming?

Unidentified Woman: At the water park at Cypress Gardens. Say bye papa.

ML: Bye.

Unidentified Child: (inaudible).

WM: I can pause this if you want to?

ML: No, no. I lost my train of thought.

WM: You were talking about monitoring the development, to make sure that their drainage didn't mess you up and, moving the woodpile.

ML: They've actually tried to change the water—since the subdivision was built, the homeowners' association got a new president. He came over one day and he said their duck pond was drying up and he wanted to cut through the wetlands and drain water into the duck pond. He said he didn't like the way they had originally done the drainage. It drains the water towards Lake Weeks.

He said that he had reviewed the County Commissioners response on how they had set this up and it was in there that nothing could be done without my approval. And I told him, I said, “You need to get somebody smarter than me or you to show how this is going to affect us. But I'm not going to say go start digging ditches.” I said, actually, “I don't think you can legally do that.” I mean you can't alter the drainage of a subdivision without some study or something.

He was okay with that. He did come to me, but I think he didn't get what he wanted. I didn't tell him he couldn't do it. I really didn't care as long as they made sure it wasn't affecting us. When they were selling the property their salesman told the potential buyers that they had already bought this farm and it would be Phase III. But they never bought it.

WM: Did they approach you about buying the farm?

ML: They had never approached me. That was just hearsay too. Some of the people that would come over to the “You-pick berries” had said that they had been told this was part of Phase III for that subdivision and they were wondering when they were going to start building it?

And this subdivision, like a lot of the boom around here, was supposed to have been finished in 2007. They were supposed to start Phase II or Phase III, whatever, in aught-seven [2007] and they were sold out within fourteen months, or two years of even starting the thing. I mean it went quick.

WM: Wow. You said that because of the subdivision over here that you were careful about when you sprayed and, you know—

ML: Both subdivisions!

WM: Both subdivisions, okay. I think you're very conscientious. What kind of a burden is that? Maybe responsibility would be a better word to use.

ML: I don't know. In the past, for the last twenty years or so, it hasn't been a big deal. I don't know that—I always concerned, but I was a little bit of, “I'm here first. It's my right and it's how I make my living.” I'm not going to do anything on purpose, but if my headlights flash in your window at midnight, so be it.

I kind of feel that way. I still (laughs) tractor at two or three in the morning. I'm surprised they don't say something. I got unusual work ethics. In the last recent years where public perception of pesticide use, crop protection. You're not supposed to use pesticide any more. You're supposed to say crop protection. (laughs)

But anyway—It scares you a little bit, because it's just like the thing that happened with AgMart, down there, where the babies were born deformed. The media grabbed that and ran with it. The company was a pretty good-sized company and they were trying to do everything in their power and from what I can understand Publix won't even take that label. Nobody will even buy that label. They had to throw that label away. Nobody will even buy the label.

WM: No this is something I've not heard of. Could you tell me about it?

LM: Two years ago ag-mart—I can't put this in the interview.

WM: Okay, let me put this on pause.

pause in recording

WM: And now we're recording again. Good. Okay, so you're concerned about not adversely affecting your neighbors?

ML: Right.

WM: How has that added to your workload?

ML: Well, I mean, you might not be able to do things as timely as you want. So far we've been able to work around it. Some of the new products that are—when we lost methyl bromide, the EPA jumped on—not really the EPA—the Clean Air Act, jumped on methyl bromide in 1992 and they promised us a replacement.

I was paying sixty-cents a pound for it in ninety-two [1992]. In my opinion, a replacement is a product that works as well, is at least as safe and cost somewhere in the ballpark, the same amount of money. Well we're now at \$3.25 a pound for the same product. And they haven't found a replacement. The possible replacement—they don't even have a manufacturing plant for. It was zoned out in aught-five [2005] now we're on an Emergency Exemptions and buying inventories that's been sitting around forever, trying to get another crop out. Well really this is shaky ground. Some of the new products—methyl iodide is one of the ones that they hope has a chance of doing it—they are saying nine, ten dollars a pound. And you're going to have to use it under a fully impermeable plastic, which is double the price of regular plastic mulch. And the machinery we have won't even lay it. I mean it's really just a huge expense. But what I'm trying to get to is, just talking about residential influence.

As they're writing these new chemicals and reviewing them, they're trying to set setbacks to them they're trying to set setbacks in them. And some of the setback they are talking about is if you have a forty-acre farm and you used the setbacks, you'd get about six to eight acres in the middle of that farm. You can't afford to farmlands that's worth \$40,000 or \$60,000 an acre to eight acres in the middle of forty. Those are horizons, problems, things that are going to have to be dealt with in the future. California has dealt with them for a long time.

WM: Well, it's interesting that they have the setbacks for the farm and not for the development.

ML: Right. A developer comes in—you're absolutely right. They should have the setbacks off of the farm, because they know the farm was there first. But, you know you're not going to dislocate people. (laughs)

WM: Have you ever been approached by developers or real estate people about selling your farm?

ML: I get five or six letters a week.

WM: Wow.

ML: Mostly, I may have the wrong opinion of this, somebody sends me a—it's not a personal letter, it's a random letter. If somebody sends you a random letter they're not interested, big interested. I've had one or two guys approach and I really think they watched the TV show, "No Money Down-Get Rich." (WM laughs) No a couple of them came by; if I'd put up my land for collateral they'd develop it. Well if I'm going to do that I'll develop it myself.

I think, that—I mentioned it to Chip several times and he doesn't feel like that's his mission and it's probably not. His mission is to keep the ag here. But I think at some point we all need to look a little harder at what steps we need to take to prepare ourselves for development. Do we need to go ahead and plot our land early? I was told, fifteen years ago, that I ought to plot my ground, go ahead and plot it up. But I didn't think about it.

Actually another interesting thing, when they built this subdivision—I was twenty-six when they built this subdivision here and if my farm is here—this subdivision is around me, like an "L." This subdivision went in and applied for higher density, per acre, three per acre, or whatever. Well when I was twenty-six, all I was going to do was get rich farming. Young and dumb (laughs). Now I'm just old and dumb (laughs).

But they actually drew the urban development line like this. And there is a road here. There is a road right through here. It would be the smartest thing—I'm sure that if I had just walked down to city hall and said—or the County Commissioners and said, you know, "Why are you all isolating me out like this. Why don't you just draw that line down Chastain Road and include me?"

It wouldn't have done anything to my property values. I mean my property values would have been higher now. I didn't know. They actually drew it right around my property line and disallowed me from the urban development area. I'm of a less density than they are because of that. It would actually help this subdivision too, because that line went through them. They got a higher destiny here than they do here. That was something. That kind of information would be good for us to know.

WM: When you say plotted out for development, could you explain what you mean by that?

LM: I don't know if they do it any more, but it used to be you could go and plot—plat it."

WM: Plat?

ML: You could plat the land, go ahead and have it platted and leave it as agriculture but the county commissioners would already have that plat in place for some many units. And if they wanted to build a road—I guess through this subdivision and you're already platted, they have to take that number of units into consideration for your infrastructure. But that was one of my projects this summer, was to look into that.

WM: That's interesting that you'd talk about getting together with farmers to prepare for development, because when I talked to Dr. Hinton he talked about doing things to keep agriculture in the area and working out cooperatives so that agriculture could exist with subdivisions. So you are thinking about preparing for development?

ML: I think, that—and I'm just one person—personal opinion. I think that agriculture is very important. We need to do everything in our power to keep it here. What it does for green ways, what it does for the environment what it does—I know at least the local agriculture is very good stewards for the land. Some of these strawberry farms I can take you to have been growing actively for eighty, eighty-five years. Same row! Not just the same field. Irrigation is permanent, so it is the same three inches of ground where that berry plant sits every year. I mean it's that precise. And it's been done for years and years and years and if you can do that on a concentrated piece of ground.

Everybody was talking—years ago they were talking about that we needed to go organic, we needed to be more creative. All of that involves crop rotation. So then if you want a hundred acres of berries you got to have four to five hundred of acres of land cut up, so you leave a lot of green-way in there, you know. Anyway—I got off track now.

WM: You were talking about preparing for development.

ML: But my thought is that as a businessman, you know this is a business. Citrus, half of the citrus here in the last five years—there were what 15,000 acres of citrus in Hillsborough County? Maybe it was more than that. Anyway, the tristeza and Japanese beetles moved into the area. Most of the citrus was on sour root. The tristeza demolished the sour root. And the Japanese beetle, there's been no real cure to kill him or his larvae and he's taken care of a lot of the other citrus. So, along with this real estate boom, all came together at one time and all that dead citrus—this used to be some of the prettiest citrus groves you'd ever see—we pushed ours. I'm farming groves now, because we lost a young grove to tristeza

That land went on the market fast, and if the real estate boom had not hit, timed perfectly, they might not have gotten so much money for their property and its agriculture. Wonder if we loose methyl bromide. Wonder if there are setbacks that are put in place down the road where we can't spray within a half a mile of a house?

I'm not saying these things are in place or in the books, but in negotiations methyl bromide we have seen half-mile setbacks discussed. Of course that's impractical. What they end up with is still too much. But if those things did happen—immigration! This immigration issue is huge. We have to have—we have to have this migrant labor. It ain't just us. Look at who's building houses.

WM: Oh yeah.

ML: You look who's serving you a hamburger at McDonald's. What we really need is the housing association, McDonald's, Burger King and the motels to get with agriculture and let's put enough lobby to get what we need in place; 'cause they need them too.

We have weaknesses in our industry, immigration's one and the use of pesticides in urban areas is another one. You get enough political push, I mean you can close the public boat ramp, so the rich people can have their private lake and now the sinkhole has eaten it up. I mean you get the right people around you, and they can put pressure. When that happens with a business you have to be able to get out with the most money in your pocket. And this is what I'm talking about, that we also need to be experienced in how to deal with development. That is our highest out.

WM: So when and if that time comes you're ready?

ML: You're ready.

WM: You can make the most of it rather than having to sell out to whoever is willing to pay.

ML: Glenn Williams is a dear farmer in the area and they have one of the large, large farms. They grow mostly Driscoll's berries. And Glenn buys land every year. As long as I've known him, Glenn has out a new farm in every year, for years. He's making a lot of strawberries. And Glenn has always said, "I never bought a piece of property to develop

it.” He's bought it all to farm. But (laughs) on the backside of that, when it he can't farm it he's got to develop it. He can't just look at it—unless the county wants to buy it and look at it. Even that, you have to be prepared. If the county wants to buy it to set aside, or a park or something, you need to be able to be in position to get your money out of it.

WM: Well, You've talked about being prepared to sell.

ML: I'm not. (laughs)

WM: I know you're not planning to sell, but you are thinking about that possibility.

ML: Three years ago we had one of the worst markets I've ever seen. The ag was the worst market I've ever seen. This industry lost millions. There's no telling how many millions. I mean, it took a lot of reserves out of a lot of guys' hard work. It wasn't there no more. If we'd had a repeat year the next year, then we would have possibly been forced into selling. It was an eye-opening thing. I mean you've done this for your whole life and you get a little confident. You're always shaky, you're fighting Mother Nature, but you get a little confidence, you get money in the bank. For the last three years we've done pretty good. So now I can sit back.

My grandkids absolutely love this place. The little one that was under the table, knowing he was going to go get in the car and go to Cypress Gardens all day long. He'd have been just as happy to stay here. (both laugh) He would rather have stayed here than go to Cypress Gardens, to be honest with you. So I sit back now and I go, “If I can make it another ten years, and keep the money I got in the bank now, maybe we'll just give it to the kids.” You know, I won't sell it. But that has not been my plan. My long-term plan for years has been, sixty-five, sell this thing and I got a little place over on Lake Louise and go live there.

WM: I think it very wise on your part to prepare for that. It's like having a fire extinguisher, you don't want your house to burn down but you want to be ready for it.

ML: Absolutely. You got to have a plan too.

WM: What have you done to maintain this farm? When I say maintain, I mean to keep from being developed out.

ML: I haven't done anything.

WM: Well, you talked about watching the water usage, the drainage system that went up on the development that went up across the road. That sounds kind of like—a defensive measure.

ML: That was more to keep it in agriculture and to develop it. You didn't want to make this side wet. You'd do that if it had been your yard. Whether it was for business or not you would've—if you'd lived across the street, I think you'd a been concerned.

WM: I ask that question because when I interviewed Chip Hinton he talked about educating farmers about land policy and working with county governments and state governments to make sure that you don't wake up some morning and find that a law has been passed that will make it difficult for you to farm.

ML: This is true and he's working on the Right to Farm Act, the property owners—there's all kind of things you can now put certain lands as set-asides and you can get tax rebates and deductions on it. But generally speaking, in our agriculture, the agriculture in Hillsborough County—some of the agriculture, where it's big huge expanses of land, where you've got a 1,000 of acres and 200 of them you can't farm anyway, and you're paying taxes on that 200, that comes into play, pretty big. But if you're going to farm right here, where we're farming, property values are so high; you'd better be using all of your land. I mean, we were probably—I think property values are down a little now. Things are sagging a little bit. But six months ago we could have probably—I was told by realtors that we could have gotten a 100,000 an acre on this place.

WM: Wow.

ML: You know, 750,000. Fairly reasonable. So if you're looking at that kind of land values. Actually to buy and build a farm right now, a strawberry farm—that's another thing that people don't realize. If somebody gives you the piece of property and you developed it. If somebody gives you an old grove and you pushed the grove and drilled you a well, put you a pump on the well, out your pipes in the ground, layered the ground, so your drainage was proper, dealt with the county—I mean we did a forty acre grove and I got 14.5 acres net, because I had to re-route the water a different way then they wanted—then had been flowing for a million years. They wanted it to flow another way.

But to go through all of that stuff and to get that farm, not planted, no plastic on it, no bedded, no single year crop expenses, just to make it a potential strawberry farm, you're

going to spend between 25,000 dollars and 30,000 dollars an acre in set-up money, on top of the land purchase. So even if you found the land for 20,000 an acre, or 25,000 an acre, you've got to fifty grand an acre just to farm it. So you've got to get every inch out of it. That's my point. So a lot of the setbacks, a lot of the estuary things and stuff, don't apply a lot to the local guys, in my opinion. It's really intense agriculture. You really got to use it.

WM: It's interesting talking about the permitting that you have to go through in order to farm. Could you tell me more about that?

ML: Well, to drill a well, to get the water, if you pump the water on top of the ground, you've got to show them where that water is going to go. You have to get a permit for the water, you have to get a permit for—to get that water permit you have to have a surface water permit, so it's—it took me three years to get the permits to take a grove that was actively in agriculture for 100 years—for as long as I know, before we ever bought it and (inaudible)—just to switch it from oranges to strawberries. It took me three years.

WM: Wow. Most people—I had no idea it was that involved. I figured if you had the land —

ML: Well, I did it during the time when we were just following that big drought. Everybody had tightened the screws real hard on permits. Actually, when they got through with it, they give me the same water allotment that I had for the grove. Forty acres of strawberries uses more water than forty acres of citrus. Not that it uses more daily, but during the frost protection surges, during emergency surges, you use more.

I needed to drill a bigger well to do that. When they got through diddling around and everything else, about 14.5 acres of strawberries uses the amount of water that was for the citrus. (laughs) So that's what they allotted me and I didn't need a bigger permit. And I used the same well, so it turned out that they won, I guess.

But they actually sent me a letter saying that the farm was unfit for agriculture. I said, “It's been in citrus for a100 years how can you say it's unfit for agriculture?” They it had too much slope to it. That's where the battle began. That's where the three-year battle began. Not all projects take three years. I had some unusual circumstances.

WM: But you took it back and proved to them that it was fit for agriculture?

ML: I just think it was unfortunate that the guy who wrote the letter had written it the way he did. The way he wrote the letter was very negative. So when I presented the letter to the local people—it was (laughs).

WM: Well, who was that? Was it the County Commissioners?

ML: No, actually I showed it to Chip and I showed it to Hugh, not Hugh Grant, the nurseryman. (unintelligible) The agriculture liaison, why can't I think of his name? (laughs) I showed it to SWIFTMUD [Southwest Florida Water Management District]. I showed it to different guys and—

WM: But who was the board, the group, and the body—

ML: There was nobody, there was no one body that I went to.

WM: No. I mean, to get the allocation for the water.

ML: SWIFTMUD.

WM: Oh. Okay.

ML: SWIFTMUD is who you deal with water. But to get to that point who had to get surface water. SWIFTMUD wasn't an issue there. The surface water was the issue. You had to deal with the Soil, Water and Conservation people. They've got a new name now; I don't know what it is. They've changed their name. They came out and did a walk-around. They've got a deal now where instead of seeing the EPA today and getting the wetlands guy the next day, they all come in a group.

In theory that works great, but I mean they drove around the farm and walked around the farm and looked at it with me. Did the initial interview and they said, "There is no problem with this Mr. Lott. It's been in agriculture forever." They go back to their office and one of them sends me a letter saying the place is unfit for agriculture. Bing! Then we start—Why? And then its just, you know, we got it done, just part of doing business.

WM: Well, I was surprised at the complexity of it all. It's not nearly as simple as it seems, when you first look at it.

ML: It probably would have been simpler to get forgiveness than permission. (laughs)

WM: (laughs) I've always heard it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. What do you see in the future? You've talked when you reach sixty-five you might sellout or keep it for your grandchildren.

ML: I don't want them to farm.

WM: You don't?

ML: No.

WM: Tell me why is that?

ML: It's—things are costly. The cost versus potential income, it's too much. There's—I wouldn't tell them not to farm. I wouldn't totally discourage them from farming. I'm not negative on farming. Don't get me wrong. But, I—when I started growing strawberries, and this don't make no sense. People ask, “Why did you start growing strawberries?”

I really don't know exactly why I started growing strawberries other than necessity to make a living. The job I was in wasn't very good. In our town, in Plant City, if you weren't raised there you wouldn't know. The strawberry farmer, when we went to school, their kids were right up there with doctors' kids. I don't know if it was money, it was an image. I mean the hotel, and every building on it, the hotel, the Strawberry Patch, Strawberry Public—every thing was strawberries. The whole town was consumed in it, the Strawberry Festival.

Right out of high school I went to work in one of the phosphate plants. I didn't really like it. And between jobs I worked at a growers' association, Plant City Growers' Association. I was actually rebuilding the spray pumps for the farmers. I got to meet all of the farmers and everything else. One of the farmers came in to see me, they didn't even grow strawberries, they grew exotic—endive and Swiss chard. They grew some of the more odd stuff. I was making about buck and a quarter a week, with a wife and a kid.

This guy got cancer; his name was Harold Frye. He'd already planted and his wife comes

to me and she said, “Would you finish the crop, on halves?” I said yeah. So me and my wife went over, he didn't have a very big farm. We were working two jobs; we were running paper routes at night, and working a job. Doing everything we could to make a living. So we farmed it on halves.

Well, he sold everything on the Tampa Market. So we would harvest it personally me and my wife. I was working a full time job. She would harvest and then I'd come in and harvest, or spray or whatever. And then at three in the morning I'd load up and go to the Tampa market. Sell it and then go to work at seven. I went from hundred and a quarter a week. I bought a nice used pick-up truck. Had money in my pocket. The Tampa Market—I probably shouldn't tell this but it is all cash sales.

So you go from having not a penny in your pocket to coming home every morning with \$500.00 or \$1,000.00 in your pockets. Well you had to spend the money or put it in the bank, to do it right. But there is a feeling of satisfaction that wasn't there before. (laughs)

WM: I can well imagine that.

ML: So that's how I kind of kept going. And I had uncles that had been in the strawberry business for years and years and years. The Griffin family is my mother's side. The Griffins and the Dukes and the Williamsons were the original berry growers in this area. So I had a heritage there and that's how I ended up in the berry business.

And for my grandkids to have that same feeling. I mean I go into Plant City, and I'm sitting in a restaurant, half of the people that come in, we know them. I would like them to have that small town feeling and to be part of agriculture. I love it. My brother didn't go that route. Dollar-wise, he's—whew! He's much more successful. And some of those opportunities there, they could go that route along avenues that he has laid.

WM: No I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what I hear you saying is that there is an awful lot of work and worry involved in farming, and that you don't want your grandchildren?

ML: Right. And when we first started growing berries we used to grow strawberries only, and make a living. This is a big change in the industry that I'm fixing to describe here. We used to grow strawberries six months a year and take five or six months off. There's always been a joke about the berry farmers only working half a year. And we made a good living doing that. We really did! But with the cost of gas, the cost of plastic, cost of fuel, the cost of labor, cost of housing, all the cost that have been laid upon us and we're

still getting—we're probably getting more for our product but we're not getting—

The cost per box, every flat of berries you sell has a certain—you know, the box, the labor—and even if you raise it cheaper—the freight, the shipping. We raise cantaloupes too and we paid sixty dollars a bin, we raise cantaloupes too, we pay sixty dollars a bin for freight to ship cantaloupes. I got almost eighty dollars a bin in cantaloupes now—picking and freight. If I get that cantaloupe to New York and you decide like them, I eat the freight; I eat the bins. I eat the cantaloupes. They don't, you don't, nobody does! It all falls back to me. (laughs)

The same with strawberries. We were at sixty cent for a flat, now were at a buck, buck seventy-five for a flat. That's not to harvest it, that's just for the box. An empty box to put them in and it's thrown away when you take it home. But I had to buy it! Those expenses have reached the point that we are now farming all but thirty days a year, an active crop. We grow squash, we grow zucchini, we grow cantaloupes, we grow strawberries. We double crop the land, just to survive, where we used to do it in six months.

So the fact that you got six months a year off, that is just gone. That was one of the (laughs) nice parts about doing it. Now if we get four to five weeks off in the summer, and what, there's fifty-two weeks in the year? And you get Saturday and Sunday off and didn't get any vacation; you'd have more time off than would. You know what I mean. You'd get one hundred and four days, not counting Christmas and the other holidays. I got, five times seven? Thirty days. When you've got a crop in the field you don't go nowhere. You're seven days a week. You don't usually work on Sunday, but you're here just in case you have to.

WM: Yeah. Sometimes you do have to work on Sundays.

ML: Right.

WM: Well, I've been throwing questions at you for the past hour or so. Is there anything, you want to—any question you want to answer that I haven't asked? Anything you want to talk about that you haven't commented on?

ML: No. I might have talked too much.

WM: No, it's been great. Because I feel like I have a better understanding of what's involved and that will be in the interview for other people to benefit from. Can you think

of anyone else it would be worthwhile to talk with about these land use issues?

ML: Chip and them know what the county is doing and they are working. There has been a lot of work to put things in place. Easier permitting for labor camps. Easier permitting for barns and stuff and farm structures. There's things been done to help to keep in agriculture. And I hope we all—I hope that I stay in agriculture, at least another ten years, you know. But I think it's a very real fact and we're all going to have to realize that we're farming in a place where people evidently want to live. (laughs)

There is a battle there. One of my biggest fears is that they paint us in a corner. Where we've farmed so long that the infrastructure won't let us develop our property, and then it has no value. And then we have kept the land and fed the people and then we don't get the apple pie at the end. You know, whatever the cliché would be. And that can happen. I think there has been some talk and some moves, and I'm hoping that it all goes into place to protect us in that. That gives us the right to farm it longer. But let us have, you know, to protect our zoning in a way, that if I want to farm another twenty years, but if it gets to where I can't, I still can sell.

WM: You wouldn't want to be punished by not being able to sell it for what your neighbors had sold for.

ML: Right. Right. There really needs to be something in place for that. Whether we get it or not, I really think that. And it could be abused. I mean, it needs to be active agriculture. (laughs) But I do think if somebody is willing to do that, we ought to get—to be able to—you know we're willing to keep in agriculture longer than we should be able to do it.

You can ride down the road and see development and houses, houses, houses. And you'll see a piece of property sitting there with nothing on it and I'll wonder, “Did he wait too long?” Are the schools full and the roads full and now everybody is going; “We can't build no more on this road? The developers left him.” No, I don't want to do that.

WM: You want to be able to protect your options?

ML: Right.

WM: Okay. Well I really appreciate you taking the time out to talk with me. I've enjoyed it. And I always remind folks that I interview that the information you've shared with me in this interview will be deposited in the Special Collections of the Library at the

University of South Florida, and be available for research, we need your permission to use this interview for research.

ML: You got it.

WM: Okay. And you know how it is with government work. I've got the release form that I need to get you to sign. Today is June 23rd.

ML: My daughter graduated from UF—I mean USF.

WM: When did she graduate?

ML: Well Garret's four, so must have—four years ago, maybe five years.

WM: What did she major in?

ML: Primary education, is that what they call it? First, second, third, fourth grades. Something like that.

WM: Yeah. That'd be primary education.

WM: My wife grew up on a farm in eastern North Carolina. She's an agricultural historian and my grandparents—

end of interview