



Special Topic: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Interviewee: Jontie Aldrich
In Claremore, Oklahoma

Interviewer: Libby Herland
In Pittsfield, Massachusetts

January 12, 2021 (interview conducted by phone)

Oral History Cover Sheet

Approximate years worked for in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program: 22 years, from 1991-2013; 24 years total FWS

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Private Lands State Coordinator, Oklahoma Ecological Services Field Office, Tulsa; Project Leader, Oklahoma Ecological Services Field Office

Most Important Projects: Wetland restoration, grassland restoration, stream crossings, and riparian restoration on private lands in Oklahoma; working with schools to develop outdoor classrooms and promote conservation

Colleagues and Mentors Mentioned in Interview: Mike McCollum (Regional Private Lands Coordinator, Region 2), Dale Hall

Brief Summary of Interview: Jontie explains how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program was conducted in Oklahoma, starting with wetland restoration on private lands and evolving into other habitat restoration projects including native grassland restoration, riparian restoration, stream crossings and prescribed burning. Jontie worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to design restoration projects. The Partners program was very well received in Oklahoma. Landowners would sign an agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service, contract for the work to be done, and then be reimbursed by the FWS when the restoration was complete. He discusses working with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, federally recognized tribes and tribal members throughout the State, Ducks Unlimited and The Nature Conservancy. He also discusses the outdoor classroom projects that were implemented at almost 100 schools throughout Oklahoma. Many of these had a wetland restoration project associated with them. Finally, Jontie provides very important history on how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act was developed, supported by Senator Jim Inhofe, and passed in Congress in 2006, officially authorizing the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program and establishing a permanent funding source.

The Interview

LIBBY HERLAND: Hi, this is Libby Herland. It is January 12th, 2021. And today I have the honor and privilege of interviewing Jontie Aldrich, who is a retired Fish and Wildlife Service employee, worked for several years in Oklahoma in the Partners for Wildlife program. We're going to learn more about his career. We're doing this interview as a special topic on the history of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program in the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, this interview is just focusing on that aspect of Jontie's career and the work that happened with the Partners program. This interview is being conducted by phone because of the COVID-19 crisis. We are not doing this interview in person. So, with that, we'll start. Good morning, Jontie. How are you today?

JONTIE ALDRICH: Good morning, Libby. I am great.

LIBBY: Great.

JONTIE: It's a great day here in Oklahoma.

LIBBY: That's wonderful. So happy to have you. And thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I know that you have a long history of working with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program. Your perspective of where you worked and the things that happened there will be really helpful to us. So why don't we just start with that? What years did you work for the Partners program and where did you work? I don't know if you worked in more than one field station in Partners. What were your job titles?

JONTIE: Well, let me take you back a little bit. I worked for 11 years for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), here in the State. And then the Fish and Wildlife Service had a job opening for a private lands coordinator out of Tulsa in an ES [Ecological Services] office. I started in 1991 and I retired five years ago, I guess whatever that would be. I guess that would be ...

LIBBY: 2015 or 2016?

JONTIE: Something like that. [June 2015.] I worked basically out of Tulsa Field Office. I started out as the [State] coordinator and worked for that [almost till retirement], but for about the last two years I was the [Acting] Project Leader for the Tulsa ES office. And then I retired.

LIBBY: All right. So, we're not going to talk about Tulsa [the project leader position] and we're not going to talk about your time in Oklahoma working for the State because you're also going to have a personal career interview. So, this one, we're really just going to focus on the Partners program and how it was implemented in Oklahoma. Okay?

JONTIE: Okay. Great.

LIBBY: I know that many people who worked in [the] Partners program, they worked on Farm Bill implementation, and they worked on private lands habitat restoration. Did you work on all [those]? Tell me a little bit what you did as the Partners coordinator. You were the Oklahoma coordinator, right, for the state.

JONTIE: Yes.

LIBBY: Okay.

JONTIE: Yes. When that started, at that time, it was kind of a program that they didn't know which direction they were going to go.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: So basically, each state kind of did their own thing with the funding. And we did work with the NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service] on CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] and Wetland Reserve program and the Farm Bill. Then once I picked up staff finally - we ended up with two people and then some folks part-time - one person was designated to work with the NRCS. But basically, at that time, a lot of the programs at the NRCS - they didn't have many programs, they didn't have any funding. So, we were able to work closely with them. They did a lot of design work for us. At that time, when we started the Partners program, wetland habitat was the biggest restoration issue we were working with. We would work with landowners to restore their wetland habitat on their property throughout the state. We worked on playa lakes and basically wherever we could establish or restore wetland habitat, we could work with landowners. We had a lot of lot of folks doing that. And then, we also at that time, we had a lot of flexibility. We started working to improve future folks; to be interested in conservation. I thought it'd be a good idea to work with schools in Oklahoma. We have a lot of rural areas where we could maybe put a wetland component in and plant wetland vegetation, and so forth. When I left, we had over 90 or close to 100 projects scattered across the state. Just about every one of them had a wetland component. I know other States would do grassland restoration and so forth, but for some reason out here we would put a wetland component into it just because we had the opportunity to do so. And some of these projects really were inspiring. I think the first project we had, we put a wetland component in. They had walkways around the wetland and they had little gazebos and all these types of things. The very first one turned out to be a great project. It was about a one-and-a-half-acre project. But then, what we learned is that about 2 or 3, I think it's three years later, they had to build a school on top of that wetland. (laughter) So, things like that happen.

LIBBY: Yes, they do.

JONTIE: We got at least a few years of educating a lot of folks. But the second one is still intact and that's outside Oklahoma City. And what's neat there is that they acquired funding to put a [replicate of an] original one-room schoolhouse with everything that they would see if they're going to school 100 years ago. That was a real cool one. So, it depended on the structures that they had. We started out with small ones and had large ones. That turned out to be very popular, and I think we inspired other states to do so as well. And it was a great program, helping the wildlife. It helped the students.

LIBBY: I don't know if we want to talk about this more now, but we might as well since we're talking about this. Were these wetlands restored at elementary, middle and high schools or mostly just elementary schools, or did it matter?

JONTIE: It didn't matter. What the teachers probably say that the creativity kind of is lost once they get into high school. So, we did have a few in high school, but most of them were in elementary. I'd say from

kindergarten on up to maybe seventh, eighth grade. I mean, where we had the opportunity, we had the interest, we'd worked with them.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: We didn't limit anything.

LIBBY: Right. That's really exciting. I know in, in the eastern part of the state [correction: country], there were a lot of schools that did backyard pollinator gardens and things like that. But I don't know how many wetlands we restored as part of a school project. I think that's awesome. When you started working in ES - did you always work in the Tulsa ES office under the Partners program in Oklahoma? The Partners program was run out of Ecological Services. Is that correct?

JONTIE: That's correct. We, I think after half the time, we moved at one time. But that was it. But it's all in Tulsa.

LIBBY: Yeah. And is that Region 2, old Region 2?

JONTIE: Yes. Southwestern [region].

LIBBY: Was the Partners program run out of, for Region 2, always run out of Ecological Services or did it depend on the state?

JONTIE: It depends on the state. In Oklahoma, it was ES. Each state had a coordinator and then we had a Regional Coordinator, and that Regional Coordinator was out of - actually he was out of the Austin Field Office. No, I'm sorry, it was out of the Dallas [Ft Worth] office.

LIBBY: Out of the Dallas ES office?

JONTIE: Yes.

LIBBY: Do you remember who that was?

JONTIE: Yes, that was Mike McCollum. And I'll get you that information. You might contact him.

LIBBY: Oh, right. Yes, I haven't done that. Right. And did you have other Regional Coordinators while you were working there, after Mike?

JONTIE: When I first started out, they did not have a Regional Coordinator. Well, they had one Regional Coordinator part-time. He was out of the ES office, but that lasted for about a year. And then you know how it works with government, things changed around. Probably on the second or third year of the program, the Regional Coordinator was out of Texas.

LIBBY: Okay. Right. Great. Well, that's really interesting. I know in Region 5, which is where I worked, the Northeast region, it was always run out of Ecological Services, but we did have folks from Refuges that worked on the program. But all those State Coordinators were Ecological Services people. So, you

were the State Coordinator for Oklahoma, and you were the first person hired to work on the Partners program?

JONTIE: Yes. Yes, I was.

LIBBY: Yeah. So, when you started working, you were working on Farm Bill mostly? More of the...

JONTIE: No. I guess they hired me because I had the experience working with the State as far as building wetlands.

LIBBY: Oh, okay. So, you were hired specifically because you had that habitat restoration background.

JONTIE: That's what we that's what they hired me for and that's what we did. [Jontie was the ODWC Waterfowl Biologist under the State Duck Stamp Program, responsible for establishing Canada Geese in Oklahoma and developing state-wide waterfowl hunting projects.] We targeted wetland habitat, then we spread out. We developed into prescribed fire. Whatever type of land, ecological perspective they have on the land, we would work with the landowner. Whether it be prescribed fire, developing a wetland, planting native grasses - whatever we could do that would benefit wildlife - we would work with landowners on.

LIBBY: Yes.

JONTIE: Some of the things we did, we worked closely with the Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC) [and Oklahoma Water Resources Board and many others.] They had offices and every NRCS office had Commission employees. And so, we would even purchase native grass planters and fire equipment and target areas that would use that equipment. They shared it amongst each of their counties. And that was very popular. We were able to get a lot of things done [including prescribed fire] by doing that.

LIBBY: Right. So, how did you start reaching out to landowners? I know you told me earlier you were working with NRCS, so can maybe just explain that relationship a little bit more and who took the lead on certain things.

JONTIE: Okay. Well, within NRCS, when we first started out, they didn't have all the availability they do now. They were glad to work with us because we had funding to do these things and work with landowners. As far as advertising for various programs, once the word got out, we really didn't have to [advertise]. It was all word of mouth and it spread like wildfire. We had more projects than we had funding for every year. We weren't short of potential landowners to work with.

LIBBY: And people were, they were happy to work with the federal government, it sounds like? (laughter)

JONTIE: You know (laughter) what amazes me? Of course, the NRCS has worked with landowners for a lot longer than the Fish and Wildlife Service has. But most of the landowners relied on us, and they trusted us more than they trusted the NRCS. Our program was very, very popular with landowners. We didn't have [a lot of bureaucracy]. Of course, things got a little tighter. When we first started doing the program, we had one-page agreements.

LIBBY: Right. (laughter)

JONTIE: Now it's, there's no telling. I've been gone for five years. I guess there's no telling. It's probably a book now. But it was really easy early on. And of course, as years progressed, we were made more accountable. But that was fine. I mean, we were able to get the job done even when we had to do more paperwork. The landowners would work with us because they believed in us. So, we had a very good relationship with landowners all the way across Oklahoma. And I think, in all the states, that was not a problem. As a matter of fact, I remember, and I don't know the day it was, but when the Wetland Reserve Program, NRCS initiated that, we had a meeting. I think it was in Wisconsin. No, maybe it was in Minnesota. Anyway, it's one of those states, several years ago, probably in the early '90s, we had a meeting. Actually, the Fish and Wildlife Service led the meeting because they were doing a lot of that work for the NRCS. I remember we had a meeting with Molly Beattie. She was the Director at that time. So, we had all the State Coordinators there and she talked with us; tells us how great the program was. But since our program was discretionary funding, she said that "I need that money for something else." And so basically, she's telling us that the program, there would be no funding for the program.

LIBBY: Wow.

JONTIE: Well, that lasted - once everybody got back home to their state and once all our landowners and the constituents found out that the program was ending, they received so much contact from folks from about every state that she had to re-initiate that program. She had to put the money back because there's no way she could not keep funding it. The pressure from the Congressional folks and landowners was too much. So, our program stayed intact.

LIBBY: That's a great story because, you know, you don't hear that probably all that often, that private landowners are reaching out to keep a federal program funded.

JONTIE: Exactly. The reason all the Congressional folks and all the landowners liked it - it was a cost-share program. We'd put in a dollar, we'd get \$8 in return for it. So, it was a good government landowner-shared program.

LIBBY: The other thing about the one-page agreements, I've heard that from almost everybody that's been interviewed so far, is that the agreement started off real simple. (laughter) One-page agreements. And then as time went on, the whole process got more complicated and a little bit more bureaucratic. But it is still going, so it's still definitely worth it.

JONTIE: Probably why the program still exists is that, you know, each state is different, even by region. Each region is different, each state is different because there's different things going on in each state. So, we were able to adapt. Everyone can adapt to their own state and what is required and what's not required. And so, it worked out perfectly.

LIBBY: Right. Yes, I definitely see that. So, you started off basically doing wetland restorations. That's correct?

JONTIE: Yes. That's correct.

LIBBY: Were these on farmlands where they had just basically ditched wetlands and so you were able to go in and put in a simple ditch plug? And is that how that started?

JONTIE: Well. In Oklahoma, of course, it's drier than some of the northern states where they just plug the ditches up. In our situation, a lot of these areas have been drained for ag or for ag purposes in the past. And so, we could go in. [and restore hydrology.] Mostly we used water control structures with pipes because at one time, in order to match the functions of a wetland, a natural wetland, is being able to fluctuate the water level. We put in water control structures so we could fluctuate the water levels to mimic what would happen in an untouched situation. So that's how. Then some areas had been wet. Most of the areas had been wet at one time, but then they were drained. And so, we'd go in and resolve that issue by using levees, dikes and water control structures.

LIBBY: Okay. Right. So, if these wetlands could be manipulated a little bit with pipes and water and with water control structures, who would actually do that? Would you work up a plan for the landowner, and then the landowner was responsible for following that plan?

JONTIE: Exactly. Yeah. We would work hand in hand with them for the first year until they got an idea how to work with that [plan]. Yes.

LIBBY: Did you follow up with these folks like three years, five years later and make sure things were still...

JONTIE: Well, when I've always told people, when you work with landowner, you become part of their family. I mean, I can't tell you how many funerals I've been to - either family members or original cooperators. And so, you develop a relationship with the landowners. You may, some of these landowners, you outlive them, because we've been doing it for 20 some years. So yeah, so we always [went] back up. We'd do some questionnaires and see, make sure that everything is functioning as they wanted it to. And of course, then you have a lot of landowners change hands in the period of time that you've worked with them. Most folks taking over the property would want to do the same thing on the farm, so we would totally work with them on that.

LIBBY: Right. So, it really, truly was voluntary. You didn't put any deed restrictions or easements or anything on these wetlands. It was completely voluntary, and most people who would buy the land would be interested in the fact that it probably had a wetland.

JONTIE: Exactly.

LIBBY: What do you think the landowners, what was their incentive for getting involved with this program?

JONTIE: Well. I think that they had an interest in doing something. They could have been hunters. They could have been a landowner that had cattle, but they also had an interest in conservation. For instance, we worked with a dairy farmer that had, I don't know, milked over 200 cows. He had quite a situation there where he put his cows out there and they'd mess up his creek. So, we worked with him to put in a crossing that would help reduce the pollution from those cattle and also put in barriers to keep the pollution out of the creeks. Native grass barriers. So, there's different reasons they'd get involved, I guess you might say.

LIBBY: Right. Yeah. It sounds like a lot of the work that you did was similar to what I'm familiar with. I know we did some cattle crossings as well in the northeast, New Jersey [also New York and Pennsylvania] in particular. So, you started basically by doing wetland restoration, then it evolved. You mentioned planting native grasses. Was that kind of like the next focus? Did it just grow organically? And so, once you realized there was, [that] people wanted to do wetland restoration, but then other people said, "well, I can restore habitat for wildlife also", and so, it moved into other things. Grassland restoration would be one of them?

JONTIE: Oh yes. Oh yes. Initially, when I say it was wetland habitat, that was a component we could work on and then it spread out from there.

LIBBY: Right. Tell me about your native grassland restoration projects a little bit.

JONTIE: Well. I know one landowner. It's kind of a common situation. One of the landowners - he was a quail hunter. He was an elderly man. He was a quail hunter. But he wanted to do something that would benefit quail. So, he had some property that he had farmed in soybeans. We suggested that we take an area that wasn't a very productive area, and it also was an erosion issue, that if we come in there and plant native grasses, it would really take over and benefit his quail and his turkey and deer and everything else he has there. And so, he agreed to do that. As a matter of fact, probably 60 acres on that same farm -it's been in native grass. He never went back. It's been there for a few, over 20 years.

LIBBY: Wonderful.

JONTIE: It's still in native grass. So that was the situation there. I have a farm, too. You know, we farm, and I realize you still got to make a payment. So, we try to have the work with landowners that's going to benefit him, the wildlife and let him still make his monthly payment. You know what I mean?

LIBBY: Yeah. Would you?

JONTIE: So we ...

LIBBY: Go ahead. Go ahead.

JONTIE: And then as far as fire, we did a lot of...

LIBBY: Oh, well. Before we get to fire, because I do want to talk about that. But tell me just a little bit more about the native grasses? Who actually did the work? How did you go about converting an area from soybeans to native grasses? What was the process like?

JONTIE: Normally, this was a process that the NRCS, I think, still recommend. Of course, you plant soybeans and they're usually Roundup ready, so they spray so there's no weeds in there. We'd come in and use the native grass planter and plant right over the stubble of the bean. And that was the best way, as far as being productive, that was the best way to do it at that time. That's the reason that's the only thing we did. We would place native grass planters around the state in various counties and so the landowner could go borrow their native grass planter. I think that they run for like \$10 a day or some, some level like that. And so, they went ahead and planted the native grasses themselves.

LIBBY: So sometimes it was Fish and Wildlife Service people running the seed planter, the grass planters or...

JONTIE: No, no. We had no - this was all landowners. Somewhat different here, like when we had to use a contractor to do the dirt work and install the pipe. Initially we installed the pipes ourselves, but then it got overbearing. The landowner hired a dozer operator to do the dirt work under the direction of NRCS. They [NRCS] would design the system. So, it was a little different. I know. And then also we had a couple occasions where we were working with the school and we talked to Refuges. Could they bring their equipment out and then develop the wetland for us? So, we've done some of that around the State. But mainly it was, we would work with the landowner to get the project. Once the project was finished, we would give the funding to the landowner. He would pay his contractor.

LIBBY: Okay. Yeah. That's part of this project - is learning how the projects were actually done on the ground. Because in some states the Fish and Wildlife Service did the work themselves. And even Ecological Services people were operating heavy equipment. And then...

JONTIE: Right.

LIBBY: And then, in others, sometimes we brought in folks from refuges on details to work on the projects or they were from Refuges [and Wildlife]. If Refuges were running the program in that particular region, they had people go off the refuge to work on private lands. And then, a lot of it was done by contractors. But you know, people bought equipment. Sometimes Fish and Wildlife Service offices bought the equipment. Others, they rented equipment. So, it's really interesting to see how, just like you said, every region, every state had different projects because they had different conservation needs and they had different situations with the landowners.

JONTIE: Exactly.

LIBBY: But the way the program was implemented was really different. Very varied across the Fish and Wildlife Service as an agency.

JONTIE: Right. Another reason that we decided to go with contracting is because we'd do 30, 30 projects on up to 60 some projects, as time went along, across the state. And there's no way we could do the work ourselves and have enough dozers to get all the work done within a year. So, using contractors was really our best bet.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: Plus, having that partnership with NRCS, they had all the technicians. They could design it for us.

LIBBY: Right. Right. That was really helpful, I'm sure, to have them do a lot of the design work. Most of your landowners had relationships with NRCS initially, would you say?

JONTIE: Yes.

LIBBY: Right. Okay.

JONTIE: I'd say most of them had. Some we had to, we worked with them to let them know the various agencies they could work with too, as well as work with us. But most of them had worked with them. And at that time, NRCS would be out in the field promoting our programs too [as was ODWC and OCC.]

LIBBY: Right. Right. So, you're doing wetland restoration, native grass restoration. You were putting in cattle crossings to try to protect some stream crossings. Did you do riparian restoration work?

JONTIE: Yes, we did. We did some projects in cooperation with other state agencies like the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, where they were planting trees and so forth and doing some rock barriers.

LIBBY: Wow. And then, you wanted to talk about prescribed fire. And I'm very interested in this because I just learned about, and I think it might have been Region 2, that tried to rely heavily on the Partners program for their prescribed fire operations. We did not do that in the Northeast region that I am aware of. So, talk to me a little bit more about how prescribed fire was used in the Partners program.

JONTIE: Well, that was a tricky issue, too. We tried to work with Refuges. We've had a couple opportunities to do that, but we haven't since. I think they're doing more now since I've been gone. But basically, we'd worked with the landowner and with the NRCS. They could, at this point, they could write a prescribed fire burn plan - NRCS can. And then sometimes they worked on it in order to do the prescribed fires. Most of the time they do it themselves and work with NRCS. But you've got to remember in Oklahoma, they, especially the native grasses, they burn, I don't know, thousands of acres across the state for their farming operation.

LIBBY: Oh, no. I didn't know that.

JONTIE: Yeah. The landowners knew how to burn, especially ones with cow-calf operations and in tall grass areas.

LIBBY: Okay.

JONTIE: So prescribed fire wasn't an alien word with landowners. Most of them had already been burning. The biggest problem we had out here was red cedar. And it takes over everything. Causes erosion. Very invasive. A lot of our fire was to eliminate red cedar. The fire could destroy on up to five-foot. After that, they'd have to cut them first and then use fire. A lot of our projects were related to red cedar.

LIBBY: That's really interesting. So, it was a way of trying to control what's an invasive species in that part of the country.

JONTIE: Exactly.

LIBBY: Wow. Very interesting. (laughter) Who would actually do the prescribed burns? Again, would it be the Fish and Wildlife Service, our fire crews?

JONTIE: Well, you know, in recent times - when we first started out, the landowner would do it. At that time, prescribed fire burn[ing] didn't need a plan. But now they are. They have evolved into that. And so, the NRCS would write the plans for that. A lot of landowners just did it themselves. A lot of times with red cedar, we would also fund them - cutting the cedar and then burning too. In other words, we would provide funding to cut it, if the landowners would do the burn.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: That would be their cost share. We did a lot of that. I'd have to go back and look at the records, see how many acres we burned for red cedar. But that's been a huge problem out in the western part of the State.

LIBBY: Wow, That's fascinating to me. Any other kind of habitat restoration projects that you can think of?

JONTIE: There's some strange ones in other states going on. But I remember when, well, you're going to interview them - they can tell [about] the projects they do. But I think, basically any type of project we can work on with landowner that's going to benefit either the fisheries resource or benefit terrestrial resources - fish, wildlife, any bird habitat - we will work with landowners. For instance, we've had some cases where somebody, the county or somebody dumped rock in some of these intermittent streams and permanent streams and just totally messed it up - just prevented the fish and the other organisms that migrate up and down the stream. And so, we would work with them to remove the rock and restore [the water] back to the levels that used to be there. Anything. We worked with a lot of the tribes on some of those projects. We worked with different tribes throughout the State doing a lot of wetland work and also on some of these stream habitat projects. We worked with some of the timber companies on stream habitat when there was an endangered species or species of concern.

LIBBY: All right.

JONTIE: So, we were not limited. We had an open book. Are you still there?

LIBBY: Yeah, I am. You're basically tracking everything that I'm thinking because I was just going to ask you about fish habitat, and you start talking about that. So, I think that's great. And endangered species. So, you were doing some habitat restoration work for invasive species control. You also did some for endangered species. Can you tell me about a couple of those projects?

JONIE: Well, we mentioned the one about removing the rock that had been dumped in various creeks, or some of the bridges collapsed and had to be removed. That usually would involve either a species of concern, some of the darters or, or if it was just a total blockage, we try to benefit all the fisheries resources. Then we also work with landowners in the western part [of the State] for the lesser prairie chicken. That was basically fire, out there as well.

LIBBY: And is that endangered or threatened?

JONTIE: Well, I think now it's probably, I think it might be endangered. The lesser prairie chicken.

LIBBY: Yeah. But it definitely was a listed species when you were working on it?

JONTIE: Yes.

LIBBY: How did the landowners feel about restoring habitat for a listed species? Were they a little wary of that?

JONTIE: Well, some of them were excited about it.

LIBBY: All right.

JONTIE: You know, if we're willing to work with the landowner to help restore those things, they'll work with us. They liked working with the Partners people. They just don't, they didn't like working with the endangered species biologist telling them that "You're going to have to do this."

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: We would compromise with them.

LIBBY: Right. Did you ever use the "Safe Harbor" agreements on these projects?

JONTIE: I think we might have. We looked at doing some of those. We might have done some. We'd work with the endangered species staff to do some of these things. And I can't remember if we did that or not. I'm sure we probably did on some of them. I'm sure we had to for the lesser prairie chicken.

LIBBY: Right. I would think so. Even though you'd be excited about doing a project for an endangered species, and I can definitely see that, you want to make sure that you don't end up getting penalized as a result. (laughter)

JONTIE: Exactly. We'd clear everything with them and try to pull them in to work with them too.

LIBBY: Right. Yeah. So, let's go back to the meeting that Molly Beattie attended and which she said she was going to have to pull the funding for the Partners program because it was, as you said, discretionary funding. You know, when the program started, it was maybe the Fish and Wildlife Service would get a budget increase and the Partners program would get some of that money, but maybe some of it came from other programs. And it wasn't a program that was authorized in the budgetary sense of things.

JONTIE: Right. Right.

LIBBY: But that changed. And I know that you can explain a little bit about how that happened. So, can you tell us the story about how Partners went from being discretionary funding funded to an actual line item in our budget and the support we got from Congress for that?

JONTIE: Sure. Well, we'll start with Senator Inhoff. In fact, he's still our senator. [He retired in 2022.]. His staff really liked the Partners program. Do you want the whole story like I told you earlier?

LIBBY: Yes, I do.

JONTIE: Okay. Well, the ES office would always give briefings at least once a year to the various Congressional staff that would want to come to see what we're actually doing. And most of them would come. First one I went to, of course, I was new in the program. We had a gentleman in the audience who was a big hunter - really liked wildlife. He was a staff member at that time for Senator Inhofe. Well, he and the [Senator's] State Coordinator [correction: Director] were both big into wildlife; they had an interest in that. I think John {Collison}, the staff member, was a big hunter too. But he just loved this program because it was working with the landowners and the landowners loved it. He mentioned there were landowners that told him about the program. And so, he started tagging along with us for several of our Regional Coordinator meetings, 'cause he was really into the program. Then his boss, he left. He got another job, and then John took over as being the state director for Senator Inhofe in Oklahoma. Well, we also had a - one of the guys that came on one time was Ryan Jackson - he was working on the Environmental Senate Committee, of which Senator Inhofe was the chairman, I guess, at that time. And he was from Oklahoma. And he loved this partnership that the Partners offered to the landowner, the government-private partnership. And so, both him and John were very interested in the program. Well, then over the years, they asked about funding, and we said, well, at that time, it was discretionary. We never knew what we were going to get. So, Ryan Jackson went to his boss, I guess, and said, "Hey, we need to work with these guys and try to get some enabling legislation. Make it a bill so they'll have funding every year." So, that friendship we developed with their staff over the years led us to getting enabling legislation. And at that time, we had great support from the Southwest region. And Dale Hall was the Regional Director, and he was very supportive trying to get this law through. And so, we worked with a lot of different landowners. We were invited to a lot of different meetings. They had these various committee meetings, and we had several landowners go up to their committee meetings and talk to them about why the program is so valuable. And then we had one outside meeting, or they had to have one. So, Senator Inhofe and Ryan Jackson came down to Tulsa and we had a meeting set up there which was an official Senate meeting. And various landowners came in and talked to them about why they enjoyed the program, why they thought it was a great program and they needed to do something that's going to benefit the program. So anyway, that went through and eventually we had the Senate. We had support in the Senate, but they need to get somebody from the House. At that time, John Sullivan was the representative for Tulsa. And his staff called up and wanted us to take him and show him an outdoor classroom. And he just fell in love with it. He thought this was great. He wanted to know what he could do. So, he co-sponsored the law. And, of course, that was history. He sponsored it from the House, it went to the Senate and the Senate approved it 100%.

LIBBY: Terrific!

JONTIE: That was in - I'll give you some dates. It became public law. And that law number is 109-294. It was approved October 3rd, 2006, and signed by George Bush.

LIBBY: Wow, that's really awesome. Do you have the name of the bill there, or the name of the Act?

JONTIE: I've got it on the wall here. It just says, "Public Law 109-294." There's no actual name on it. Partners. No, wait a minute. It says "To authorize the Secretary of the Interior to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners to restore, enhance and manage private land to improve fish and wildlife habitat through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program."

LIBBY: Wow. Wonderful.

JONTIE: The Act is called “The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act.”

LIBBY: Okay.

JONTIE: And it told them, it authorized appropriations to the Fish and Wildlife for this program of \$75 million each year.

LIBBY: Did you say \$75 million?

JONTIE: That’s what it said.

LIBBY: Wow, I know that’s the authorized...

JONTIE: There is authorized to appropriate to carry out this Act not more than \$75 million for each year.

LIBBY: I understand there's a big difference between authorization and appropriation. (laughter)

JOHNTIE: Exactly. Exactly. We never got that much. (laughter) But, you know, I way I kind of look at it, this law, this Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act, is not different any different than the Endangered Species Act.

LIBBY: Correct.

JONTIE: From a law, they're equal. So, I thought that's pretty cool. That was the thing that we always did. We tried to encourage all the states to work with their legislative folks, because they wanted to know what we're doing out there. And for some reason, I think that's (unintelligible) in different parts of the States. But at that time, we had the greatest support from the senator here in Oklahoma. And now I think that they built up more support. I know several different projects around the state [country], but it all varies by state. I mean, like Texas, we'd always give them a hard time because they're in the southeast [correction: southwest] region, too. And we said, “You’ve got a huge state. You've got all the political folks up there.” But they did not give yearly summaries of what we did to their Congressional staff. But then again, it's not a one-way street. You had to have somebody from the legislative end of it that would be interested in programs like this. And we were fortunate to have that.

LIBBY: Right. Well, I really appreciate getting that bit of history. I was not aware of that. And I think that's really important to have. And when I see Senator Inhofe on television, next time I'm going to look at him in a different way. (laughter)

JONTIE: Right. Well, they're all, you know, they're up there for certain reasons and sometimes you say, “What?”

LIBBY: Right. Yeah. That's really great. So, you worked a lot with the NRCS and you worked, you did mention the tribes. What tribes did you work with and how often? Were a lot of your projects with tribal nations?

JONTIE: I think we've got five recognized tribes in the state plus a bunch of smaller tribes. I think that's our responsibility as a government agency to work with tribes. We tried to work with as many as possible. And some are easy to work with and some are more difficult. But our hand is always out there to work with them whenever we had an opportunity. And we did. We did a lot of different work with them. And of course, you know, it's a little different here. I don't think we have any real reservations. We have one that's like 80 acres, but we don't have anything like what North and South Dakota and maybe even Colorado have.

LIBBY: Oh, okay. Right. So, if you would work with the tribes, can you give me an example of a project that you think is fairly representative? Or was each one unique?

JONTIE: We did some, we helped fund some small, prescribed fire projects. We've had better luck doing outdoor classrooms with them. Because the situation here is, the tribal members own their own land. So, we probably worked with people who are (unintelligible). Of course, everyone's card carrying if you're can prove you're Indian. So, we probably worked with a lot of folks that are card carrying. But from a tribal aspect it's just certain lands we could actually work on.

LIBBY: Right, I get it.

JONTIE: We were limited.

LIBBY: Right. Yes. I understand. I definitely understand that because we have the same thing in Massachusetts. Not a whole lot of lands that are held in trust by the tribe.

JONTIE: Exactly.

LIBBY: But a little bit of land, and we've done some work with them. How about...

JONTIE: The last project that I worked on was with a Choctaw Indian school. It's been here forever in southeast Oklahoma. And we worked with them on doing a couple of outdoor classrooms with them. And they had to, because the tribal members, the kids that come to the school were from all over the country. It's a live-in school. So, we would work with them. I think it's the only Indian school they have in the State.

LIBBY: Wow. That's cool. How about other [partners]? Did you do much work with the state fish and game agencies?

JONTIE: Oh yeah. Yeah, we worked hand in hand with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. They had a private lands program and we helped support them on some of their projects. We would, if they would help us do some of our projects, we could provide the funding where they could pay for those things. So yeah, we worked very closely with the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and also with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife and Conservation. I can't think of any other ones, but those are the two major ones that we worked with. And we did hand in hand again on lots of the projects.

LIBBY: You probably knew a lot of those people anyway because you had worked with the State beforehand.

JONTIE: Oh yeah.

LIBBY: So that helped a lot.

JONTIE: Right. And then one of my, actually the individual who took over my job, I hired him. He was a State private lands coordinator. So, we robbed them before I left. (laughter)

LIBBY: Good for us. Good for you.

JONTIE: It's just little things, like years ago, we started putting together a wildlife calendar that put dates down for different things that the Wildlife Department wanted. But, you know, it had colorful pictures and we split the cost with the Oklahoma Wildlife Department and with the NRCS. So, it's a yearly calendar we've been doing for years. And it's pretty popular because landowners all get one. They call and say, "Hey, where's my calendar?"

LIBBY: That's awesome. I love that.

JONTIE: So, we did stuff like that. Another thing we did before I left, we worked with these schools. Have you ever heard of archery school?

LIBBY: Archery?

JONTIE: Archery school. Yes.

LIBBY: No.

JONTIE: It's a very big program in Oklahoma. I think it goes from, I don't know, maybe fifth grade on up to senior. They always used to have an annual competition from the schools around the state. It just is unbelievable how many kids are involved. But then, we had a lot of requests if we could go out - especially to the tribes - if we could come on and work with them with archery in school. So, we ended up buying a trailer and archery equipment for kids and we'd give programs to them. We worked with some of the - we had a National Guard unit [in Oklahoma City.]. All the soldiers were overseas, and they wanted to do something for the kids. And so, we brought our trailer out and set up archery for two days every year for those kids that were missing their folks. They always had an annual get together.

LIBBY: Right. That's wonderful.

JONTIE: We'd do a lot of that in school, too. Also, I acquired skins and skulls that we either put together or purchased. So, we'd give wildlife programs to kids, too. All my staff would give programs.

LIBBY: Nice. Yeah.

JONTIE: The problem was, all the Partners [staff] would do it, but, well, some of the other biologists didn't think that was that important. I think they're scared of kids though. (laughter) But anyway.

LIBBY: You know, it takes a special kind of person to talk with kids. I understand why some people are not comfortable with it, but, you know, you've got to inspire the youth. That's really important. That's so important. You really, you've told me a lot about your successes, but what were some of the big challenges that you had? Or was it always just, it always went so well? (laughter)

JONTIE: Well. (laughter) It was quite a new program. Of course, my supervisor totally supported me. He said, "You go to the direction you want to go." So, it was very good. Of course, we had our own funding. The successes we were having were great for my supervisor, but it was great for everybody. We never had any problem. Our Regional Coordinator, Mike McCollum, totally controlled the budget at that time, and I think that's what should be happening now. In fact, they talk with Washington, everybody. We probably should have an assistant director over the Partners program. Because what happened now and I don't know, I don't know if you care to hear about this now, but now when Mike [McCollum] left, he used to know where every penny went. When he left the region, he was stationed in Texas, but he was still the Regional Coordinator. He would know where every penny went. Of course, we could follow those pennies coming from Washington. Well, then when he left, they did not fill his job for a while, and they ended up taking that away from the Partners program. So, the problem we had, we had to fight with the Region because they were using our money for other things.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: So, I guess that's part of it. But it's getting better now, I think. The person that was involved in that, they're gone. And so, the new people are working better with Partners now. So, it's a transition.

LIBBY: Yeah, that's a challenge when you're funding is taken away.

JONTIE: Well, it wasn't - funding wasn't taken away, but it was, it was reduced compared to what we were getting.

LIBBY: Right. Well. That can be a challenge also. You know, I don't remember Mike McCollum and I don't know why. I was a Regional Coordinator from 1988 until 2005. I don't remember him.

JONTIE: You should have known him.

LIBBY: Yeah, I should have known him.

JONTIE: Oh, you would have known him if you met him.

LIBBY: Probably if saw him, I'd be like, "Oh, yeah, right." But I just...

JONTIE: There you go.

LIBBY: I need to see [a photo].

JONTIE: Oh. I'll get you that number and you contact him.

LIBBY: Definitely. I will.

JONTIE: I tried to call him. And I finally got his number. I just hadn't got around to it, but I'll just give you the number and I'll get him a shout out too.

LIBBY: Yeah, do that. Talk to him and let him know what we're doing and give him my contact information and or send me his contact information. I'd love to interview him. Any other thoughts? Anything you want to share with me? Anything we didn't cover?

JONTIE: I will go through this here real quick here. (Looking at his notes) I think, I guess I already mentioned, but what's the unique thing about this program was that the differences in ecosystems across state lines required us to operate differently in each state. And we had that latitude that made the program very effective, I think.

LIBBY: Yeah. And in Oklahoma, you have - a lot of Oklahoma is in private lands.

JONTIE: Exactly. I think it's like 80% or well, maybe higher than that. It is private land.

LIBBY: Right.

JONTIE: Oh, yes, we did. We worked a lot in the field. We worked with The Nature Conservancy. Somewhat with Ducks Unlimited. But, since there not as wedded as maybe in Mississippi or Arkansas or Louisiana, we didn't work with them that much. But we worked with The Nature Conservancy, and we co-sponsored a lot of state wetland projects and other projects as well. We never turned down a potential partner for a project. So, we tried a little bit of everything that we thought that could benefit the resource either through education or through restoring their habitat. We would work with them.

LIBBY: Yeah, Yeah. It's easy to feel good about your career when you work in the Partners program.

JONTIE: Oh, yeah, yeah. I think probably everyone tells me, "Well, you guys, your biggest contribution is getting that Act, that enabling legislation." I think that too. And then the other thing, when I worked for the State, I was the state waterfowl biologist and also restored wetland habitats. That was great. But then working with landowners, I thought it was, it felt a lot better [working with] landowners because you knew they're going to come back and take care of everything because it's their project and their land. And that was great. That's the biggest (unintelligible). You didn't have to work with the biologists on that particular area. You know, you got to work with landowners. They take a lot of ownership in that project.

LIBBY: Yeah.

JONTIE: I thought that was pretty cool. That's all I can think of. I'm sure I'll think of other things later.

LIBBY: Well, I think this has been fantastic. And you really filled in, in terms of the whole project, you filled in a crucial part, which was the discussion of how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act came to be and the enabling legislation. That's a critical piece of information that we hadn't collected yet. So, I really appreciate that. But I really appreciate knowing how the program evolved in Oklahoma and getting a sense of it. And what I can say is that it sounds very similar to what happened where I'm familiar with in the Northeast. And I just think that's really great. Even though it was its own program or it had its own flavor, if you want to call it, in Oklahoma, it still was the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. You could meet any of your fellow State Coordinators from the Fish and Wildlife Service and you are all

speaking a common language and you had common experiences, even though they might be a little bit different. And I think your emphasis on schools is something that's also a little bit different than perhaps some of the majority, anyway, of the Partners programs. Definitely other parts of Ecological Services field stations - I know there were several that ended up doing backyard school habitats and you probably inspired that as well. So that's pretty neat. Just being open to working wherever there was a need and working with whatever partners you could find.

JONTIE: Right, right. That's important. That gave us credit to work with other people, knowing that you can work with the Fish Wildlife Service, which is a government agency. So, our program was widely appreciated. I don't think anybody that that's worked with us, had a negative experience. Put it that way.

LIBBY: No. Sounds great. Well, Jontie, I think we'll wrap up the interview, but it's been great. I cannot thank you enough for your time. So, we'll talk soon.

JONTIE: Okay. And I'll get this release out to you today.

LIBBY: Great. Thank you so much, Jontie. Okay, take care.

JONTIE: Thank you. Have a good day.

LIBBY: You too. Bye-bye.

JONTIE: Bye.

Key Words: conservation, endangered species, habitat restoration, invasive species, legislation, partnerships, prescribed burning, riparian environments, species of concern, tribal lands, wetland restoration

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS PROVIDED BY JONTIE AFTER THE INTERVIEW: As I recall, Region 2 was the last Region to develop a Partners Program in each State in the Region. So basically, each State Coordinator developed their Wildlife Habitat Restoration Program based on habitat needs and restoration potential. Initially, each state was on their own until a Regional Coordinator position was filled and a Regional approach was developed.

The Southwest Region wildlife habitat is very diverse and so were the Habitat Restoration Projects. Funding was based on projects and Oklahoma always had more projects than other states and was rewarded with additional funding, As I understand it, Oklahoma Partners folks still lead in getting funding. I started out working with many Partners, NRCS on CRP and Wetland Reserve program and the Farm Bill. Then once I picked up additional staff, two biologists and occasional part-time summer help. One person was designated to work with the NRCS. We had a great working relationship with the NRCS state-wide. Before the Wetland Reserve Program, their programs funding was limited. So, we were able to work closely with them on wildlife habitat restoration. They did a lot of technical design work and identified landowners that wanted to work with the Partners Program to restore habitat on their property. Early on, the Partners program targeted wetland habitat restoration. We would work with landowners to

restore their wetland habitat on their property throughout the state. We worked on playa lakes and basically wherever we could establish or restore wetland habitat, we could work with landowners.

We had a lot of flexibility and we started working with schools to develop Outdoor Classrooms. I encourage all of us in the Partners Program to give wildlife programs to schools. Throughout my wildlife career, I thought that all the Wildlife agencies, state and federal, should connect with the young generation to preserve our wildlife resources. All biologists should be required to give wildlife and conservation programs to improve future folks, to be interested in conservation good stewards of our natural resources. With that thought process, I thought it'd be a good idea working with schools in Oklahoma. We have a lot of rural areas where we could maybe put a wetland component in and plant, you know, wetland vegetation, and so forth. When I left, we had over 90 or close to 100 projects scattered across the state. Just about every one of them had a wetland component. I know other states would do grassland restoration and so forth, but for some reason out here we would put a wetland component into it just because we had the opportunity to do so. And some of these projects really were inspiring. The federal Tishomingo Fish Hatchery provided fish for nearly all the Outdoor Classrooms.

The relationship we had with the NRCS was great for both our agencies and the landowner. The majority of the NRCS DC's had wildlife backgrounds and were very interested in PFW since we had funding to put projects on the ground. At that time NRCS didn't have available funding for habitat restoration. They were glad to work with us because we had funding to do these things and work with landowners

The PFW program still exists because of the government/private landowner partnership.