



A CONSERVATION CALLING

This fall, American Farmland Trust launched the “Norm Berg Special Collection,” an online archive of speeches and articles by conservationist Norm Berg, whose far-reaching career began in 1943 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service, an agency formed in response to the Dust Bowl. Today, at nearly 90 years old, Berg continues to serve as a senior advisor to AFT and as a representative for the Soil and Water Conservation Society. Max Schnepf looks back at Berg’s career spent saving the soil—and raising awareness about the destruction of the nation’s farmland.

AT LEFT: Norm Berg in 1998

Norm Berg’s Lifetime of Saving the Land

BY MAX SCHNEPF

Norm Berg rises each morning at 5:30 A.M., just as he did as a teenager on his family’s farm. Age has only strengthened his land ethic. At 89, he actively pursues soil and water conservation efforts in his local community and on the national scene. Three or four days a week, he commutes to the American Farmland Trust office in downtown Washington, D.C., where he advocates for protecting agricultural land and promoting its sustainable use. The word “retirement” rarely comes up. When it does, Berg’s response is short and to the point: “What better things do I have to do with my time at this stage

NORM BERG YEARS: A LIFE OF CONSERVATION LANDMARKS

◀ Berg with his family circa 1935

1918

Norm Berg is born in Burlington, Iowa. He becomes a lifelong advocate of soil conservation and farmland protection.

1926

Berg’s family moves to a farm in Grasston, Minnesota, where they weather the Great Depression thanks to their small farm.

1933

A severe drought in the Great Plains and decades of farming without conservation practices leads to the Dust Bowl, an ecological and agricultural disaster in North America.



MOLLY ROBERTS

of my life than continue to assist those concerned about future generations?”

The Roots of a Conservation Ethic

Norman A. Berg was born in Burlington, Iowa, on March 14, 1918, not long after another famous Burlington resident, Aldo Leopold. Like Leopold, who became a national icon in wildlife conservation circles, Berg has become an icon in soil conservation and farmland protection circles.

The son of a railroad machinist, Berg spent his early childhood years playing in the same streets and sledding on the same hills as Leopold. “But,” Berg recalls, “summers were special because of trips to a small farm our father purchased in Minnesota, between the Twin Cities and Duluth.” The elder Berg moved the family to the farm permanently in 1926.

Berg remembers, “Enough cropland had been carved out of the timber to support small numbers of dairy cows, horses, hogs, chickens and geese. We weathered the Great Depression quite well. Butterfat sold to the local creamery became our sole source of income.” Berg and his father also fished from a row boat on a nearby lake. Berg says, “This introduction to farming and the out-of-doors influenced my career choices later in life.”



A poster for the Civilian Conservation Corps

Life became more difficult for the family when Berg’s father died in 1934. Berg was a sophomore in high school, his brother, John, a freshman. While their father had insisted that the boys receive a college education, Berg remained on the farm until his brother graduated in 1937. “I assumed my brother would stay on the farm,” Berg remembers. “Instead, he enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps.” Known as “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” enrollees in the corps worked on conservation programs in rural areas.

A vocational agriculture teacher encouraged Berg to go to college, and he enrolled at the University of Minnesota. An advisor convinced Berg to set his sights on a four-year degree, which would qualify him to work as an Extension Service county agent or a vocational agriculture instructor.

At a Friday night dance during his sophomore year, Berg was introduced to Ruth Askegaard. Like Berg, she attended classes on the university’s farm campus in St. Paul. Berg reminisces, “She became my lifelong partner on November 20, 1941, not long after our graduation from the university and just a couple of weeks before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Ruth and I enjoyed a wonderful togetherness for nearly 70 years. I couldn’t have pursued my career in conservation without her unwavering commitment and support, and that of our four daughters.”

The SCS Years

After college, Berg applied for a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service (SCS), a new federal agency. The chance to work directly with farmers on the land appealed to Berg, and when the agency offered him a position in Idaho, he and his wife moved there in 1943. “My area in southeastern Idaho,” Berg relates, “had been home to several Civilian Conservation Corps camps. I also oversaw another former CCC camp west of my area. That land was farmed but never should have been. We converted the area back to grass. Eventually, it became a national grassland.”

1935

Congress passes legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national priority. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service (SCS) is created.

1937

President Franklin D. Roosevelt asks state governors to pass legislation allowing soil conservation districts, local bodies to help landowners manage natural resources.



1941

Berg and Ruth Askegaard marry; two weeks later, the U.S. enters World War II.



1943

Berg accepts a job offer from SCS and moves to Idaho before joining the Marine Corps.

Berg and a livestock judging team in 1940



THE NORM BERG SPECIAL COLLECTION

Norm Berg's conservation achievements not only tracked an emerging movement; his leadership charted the movement's course. AFT's Norm Berg Collection—an online archive of documents by and about Berg—makes his wisdom available to future farmland protection advocates.

At the collection's core are nearly 200 speeches and articles written by Berg from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, when he was in leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (SCS). The papers demonstrate Berg's tireless commitment to farm and ranch land protection, and his role in steering the agency and its partners toward a broader understanding of agricultural

conservation. The collection also includes key laws and reports, biographical sketches and tributes prepared by colleagues and friends.

AFT assembled the collection with help from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly SCS). The archive is housed within AFT's Farmland Information Center (FIC) Web site. The FIC is a fitting home for Berg's works because it was authorized by the Farmland Protection Policy Act, one outcome of the National Agricultural Lands Study launched by the U.S. Department of Agriculture during Berg's term as SCS chief.

To view the collection, visit www.farmlandinfo.org.

During his first year at SCS, the legendary Hugh Hammond Bennett, considered the “father of soil conservation,” helmed the agency. Inspired by Bennett's dedication, Berg remained committed to conservation even as World War II interrupted his SCS work. In 1945, while stationed with the Marines in Washington, D.C., Berg set out to meet the visionary Bennett. After a couple of failed attempts, he finally succeeded. “We shared backgrounds,” Berg remembers, “and before I left, he admonished me to return to Idaho after I completed my military service and help get conservation districts organized.”

Berg did just that. After three years in the Marines, he returned to Pocatello, Idaho, and attended a reorientation for SCS employees who had served in the war. The training further inspired him to commit his life to conservation: “The soil erosion problems on those long, rolling hills just had to be dealt with. Working in the field, with farmers and ranchers, to improve their operations was a real challenge.”

Berg spent the next 10 years in Pocatello, focusing much of his attention on Bennett's advice to organize conservation districts. During this period, he gained an appreciation for how conservation happens—one farm and one farmer at a time.

A Growing Concern: the Loss of Agricultural Land

After earning a master's degree in public administration at Harvard in 1956, Berg went to South Dakota, where he served as the assistant state conservationist and continued his work to bolster local conservation districts. He also played a role in saving the groundbreaking Great Plains Conservation Program, one of the first programs to give technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers to help them adopt conservation practices.

In 1960, Berg reported to work at SCS headquarters in Washington, D.C., where he became an assistant and congressional liaison for Don Williams, then head of SCS. Throughout the years that followed, as Berg rose through the ranks at SCS, he became increasingly concerned about the loss of agricultural land to development. Co-chairing a national conference called “Soil, Water and Suburbia” reinforced his interest in national land use policy.

A few years later, Berg played a key role in drafting the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA), which gave greater authority over natural resources to the

1945

While in the Marines, Berg meets legendary SCS chief Hugh Hammond Bennett, who urges him to return to Idaho after his military service to organize conservation districts.



1946

Berg returns to work for SCS in Idaho, organizing conservation districts and working in the field with farmers and ranchers on soil erosion.

1955

Berg is accepted for a graduate program in public administration at Harvard University.

1956



Berg graduates and SCS leaders select him for the assistant state conservationist post in South Dakota. Legislation creates the Great Plains Conservation Program, which is novel for sharing the cost of conservation measures with farmers and ranchers under a contract.

A LEADER IN CONSERVATION

- Early in his career, Berg counseled countless farmers on improvements to save their eroding land and was a tireless advocate of conservation districts, formed to help local communities manage their natural resources. He has served on his local conservation district board in Maryland for over 25 years.
- Berg has been a mentor to countless conservationists. At the Soil Conservation Service, he led initiatives to bring greater diversity to the agency and expanded the agency's reach to international conservation.
- At SCS, and then as an advisor to AFT, Berg sounded the alarm early about the nation's farmland loss, advocating for key changes in policies related to conservation, including the creation of a national farmland protection program.

U.S. Department of Agriculture and required the agency to send a national conservation plan to Congress. The bill passed both houses of Congress and was sent to the president for signature in 1976. "But," Norm remembers, "Bureau of the Budget officials read the bill as a national land use planning law and recommended that the president veto it. President Gerald Ford did so. National land use policy had become a hot-potato issue for policymakers in the 1970s."

After he was elected, President Jimmy Carter asked for the bill to be reintroduced. It passed both houses of Congress, and he immediately signed it into law. The act led to USDA commodity program benefits being linked, for the first time, to national conservation goals.

In 1979, President Carter appointed Berg as chief of SCS. That year, Berg oversaw work on the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS), an 18-month project to

document the extent and cause of the loss of the nation's farmland. "NALS generated many important questions and recommendations about the availability of suitable land for agricultural purposes and the impacts of urban and related development on agricultural enterprises," Berg says. An important result of the study: language in the 1981 Farm Bill authorizing farmland protection efforts by USDA and creation of a farmland information center.

The AFT Years: A Second Career

Berg served as SCS chief until 1982, when he was forced to retire his post by the Reagan administration, which turned the career civil service position into a political appointment. Within days of his retirement, Berg was asked by leaders at American Farmland Trust, then a fledgling non-profit organization, to come on board as a senior advisor.

Against the backdrop of the National Agricultural Lands Study, philanthropist Peggy Rockefeller and Pat Noonan of The Nature Conservancy had set out to form a national farmland protection organization. Doug Wheeler was selected to head the new organization. Ralph Grossi, a Marin County, California farmer also was part of this group (he later became AFT's president).

"A small grant," Berg says, "enabled us to generate a report in the early 1980s titled *Soil Conservation in America, What Do We Have to Lose?* That report helped set the

Norm Berg has devoted his life to the conservation of land and water—not only in this country, but all over the world. He has helped thousands of farmers and governmental officials protect and improve the nation's agricultural resources. Thank you, Norm Berg, from one farmer to another, for 50 years of distinguished service to the protection of our precious Earth.

—President Jimmy Carter in 1991

1960

Berg reports to work at SCS headquarters in Washington, D.C.

1965

Berg is promoted to deputy administrator for programs at SCS, then to associate administrator in 1969.



1977

President Jimmy Carter signs the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, requiring USDA to send a national conservation plan to Congress.



1979

Carter appoints Berg as the head of SCS. Berg oversees the National Agricultural Lands Study, which sounds the alarm about the loss of the nation's farmland.



Primer on Prime Farmland



Berg presents results from 1979's groundbreaking National Agricultural Lands Study, which sounded the alarm about the loss of the nation's farmland.

stage for the 1985 Farm Bill debate and the innovative Conservation Reserve Program.”

During this period, Berg also was offered a position as the Washington representative for the Soil and Water Conservation Society, an international scientific organization for conservation professionals. He agreed to split his time between the two organizations. During Berg's “second career” with AFT, he engaged in multiple farm bill debates and advocated for voluntary, incentive-driven conservation programs, including the creation of a national farmland protection program in the 1996 Farm Bill.

“I'm a product of an agricultural background and training,” Berg says, “but I learned early on in my career that urban residents have an important impact on the land and a great deal at stake with what happens in rural America. I've been a long-time advocate, as a USDA employee and since, of a strong national land use policy that recognizes the need to allocate limited land resources among competing uses.”

Berg also saw to it that USDA implemented a key provision of 1981's Farmland Protection Policy Act. The

act aims to minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the development of agricultural land. It also directed the Secretary of Agriculture to create a clearinghouse of information on farmland issues, policies and programs. The agency shelved the law until 1994, when Berg helped win agency support for AFT to create and manage a Farmland Information Center, which it operates to this day. (See page 19 for more information on the FIC.)

AFT President Ralph Grossi sums up Berg's tenure at the organization by saying, “Norm's value to AFT has been felt on many levels. First, he has provided an unparalleled depth of knowledge, both technical and political, about conservation. Norm is a walking library who provides regular counsel to many within AFT—putting issues in perspective and helping sidestep critical mistakes along the way. In very diplomatic ways, he regularly reminds us that our latest idea or concept is not new—usually by pulling out an old article in one of the stacks on his desk!”



1980

A group of farmers and conservationists concerned about the loss of farmland form American Farmland Trust.



1981

The federal Farmland Protection Policy Act, which passes in the farm bill, aims to minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the loss of agricultural land.

1982

Berg is forced to retire his post as SCS chair by the Reagan administration. AFT asks Berg to come onboard as a senior advisor.

1985

AFT publishes *Soil Conservation in America: What Do We Have to Lose?*, a report that leads to the creation of the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).





Berg with AFT President Ralph Grossi on the occasion of AFT's 25th anniversary in 2005.

Wisdom for Future Generations

When asked about the future of conservation, Berg warns that the current competition for land continues to threaten our farmland. “We pushed agricultural production to the fence lines in the past to the detriment of conservation. Now, with the newfound focus on energy production, we may again push the limits of the land to a point that we cannot sustain. We must consider what we leave as a natural resource base for our grandchildren.”

He observes that Europe has moved well ahead of us. “Many European countries have strong land use controls. We shirk from such. We deal with policies on air quality and water quality, but we don’t have policies on soil quality or land use. Eventually, we must face up to this issue. Policymakers and the broader public need to buy into the greening process that has been going on in this country

and share the cost of producing environmental commodities on our farms and ranches.

“The reality today is that farming and ranching remain a risky business, and what happens on the ground is largely up to the individual owners and managers of the nation’s cropland, pasture, rangeland, and forest land. Conservation gets done in an incremental way—from farm to farm and ranch to ranch. Our job is to get the people of this nation, particularly urban interests, to understand how farmers and ranchers contribute to the environmental well-being of us all.”

A longer version of this article is available as part of the Norm Berg Special Collection at www.farmlandinfo.org.

MAX SCHNEPF retired in 2004 after a 40-year career in natural resources, including 27 years as an editor of publications for the Soil and Water Conservation Society.



▲ Berg with Senator Richard Luger

1990

Berg is given the Soil and Water Conservation Society’s prestigious Hugh Hammond Bennett Award.

1994

AFT creates the Farmland Information Center (FIC), authorized by the federal Farmland Protection Policy Act. The name of the Soil Conservation Service is changed to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

1996

The 1996 Farm Bill leads to the creation of a national farmland protection program.



2007

The FIC launches a special online collection to honor seven decades of Berg’s conservation work.

