Earth Man

Norm Berg has been on a 60-year crusade to raise awareness about soil conservation.

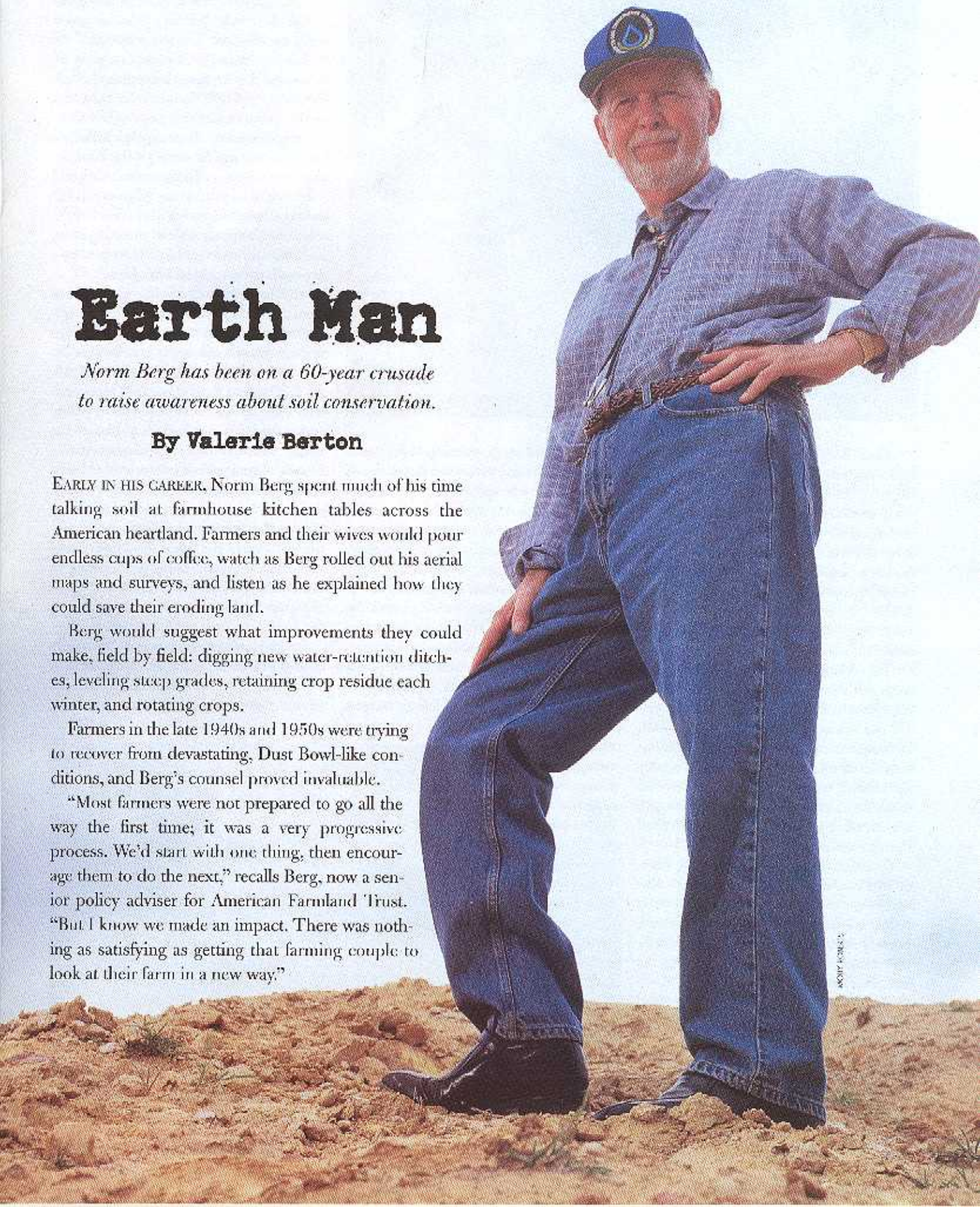
By Valerie Berton

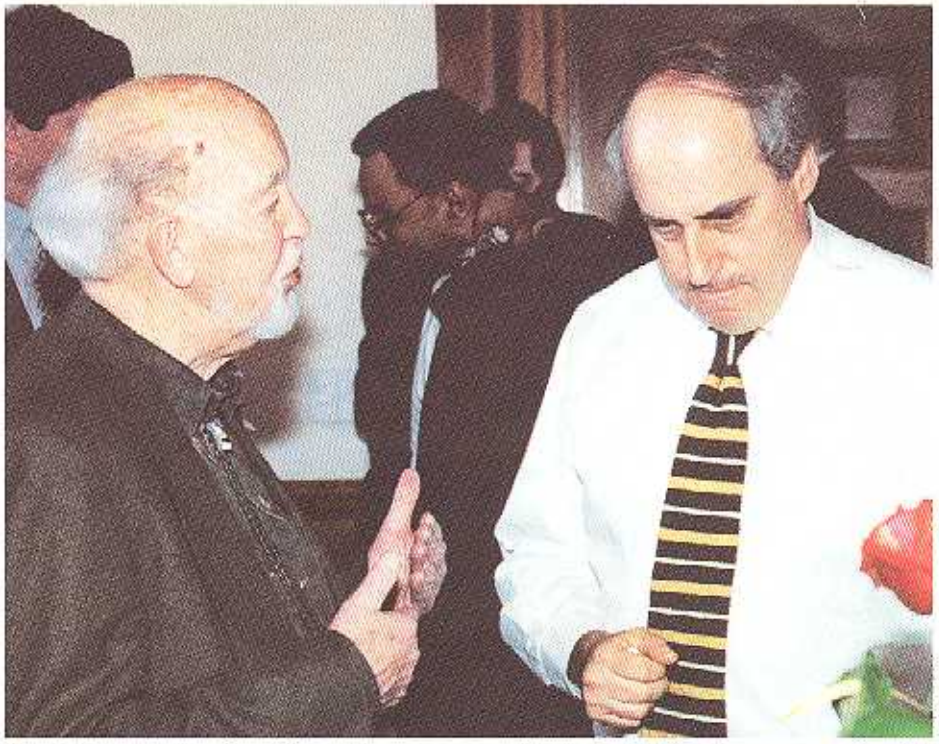
EARLY IN HIS CAREER, Norm Berg spent much of his time talking soil at farmhouse kitchen tables across the American heartland. Farmers and their wives would pour endless cups of coffee, watch as Berg rolled out his aerial maps and surveys, and listen as he explained how they could save their eroding land.

Berg would suggest what improvements they could make, field by field: digging new water-retention ditches, leveling steep grades, retaining crop residue each winter, and rotating crops.

Farmers in the late 1940s and 1950s were trying to recover from devastating, Dust Bowl-like conditions, and Berg's counsel proved invaluable.

"Most farmers were not prepared to go all the way the first time; it was a very progressive process. We'd start with one thing, then encourage them to do the next," recalls Berg, now a senior policy adviser for American Farmland Trust. "But I know we made an impact. There was nothing as satisfying as getting that farming couple to look at their farm in a new way."





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When Berg, who turned 80 this year, takes stock of his six decades of work—at the U.S. Soil Conservation Service and such organizations as AFT and the Soil and Water Conservation Society—he sums it up this way: Although he has dedicated his life to improving the soil, he says helping the people who depend on that soil—farmers, government officials and the public at large—has been his most significant contribution.

One of Berg's most prized birthday presents this year was a new title to add to his impressive collection of awards and honors. He was named chief emeritus of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the agency he headed when it was called the Soil Conservation Service. The agency also gave him an office across from the one he filled during the Kennedy administration.

Questions about the fêtes and ceremonies marking his 80th year make the normally loquacious Berg a bit sheepish. Sitting in his well-tended Severna Park, Maryland, home, he'd much rather talk about how far the country has come in conserving the land, and how far it still has to go.

He only need glance at another favored birthday present—a rare family portrait showcasing his four daughters and 10 grandchildren—to ruminate on the future.

"Can we leave our grandchildren's generation options for how to use the land and water we have?" he asks. "What will conditions be like as our population continues to grow? People need to face the fact that land is an important factor, and how it has been treated is written clearly on the landscape."

Certainly it is with those young ones in mind that he still commutes an hour and a half into Washington, D.C., nearly every day, that he still attends and testifies at federal conservation policy hearings, and that he still remains a vital player on the national conservation policy scene.

"There are very few other public policy areas where one person has remained in the center of it, working for as long as Norm has," says Jeffrey Zinn, a natural resource policy analyst for the Congressional Research Service. "Conservation really benefits from Norm's presence."

Berg's direct involvement remains as important as ever, says Max Schnepf, coordinator of NRCS' National Conservation Buffer Initiative.

"Norm has had an enormous influence on policymaking, in terms of the relationships he's cultivated in the environment and nonprofit sector and on [Capitol] Hill," Schnepf says. "He knows a lot of key legislators well enough to talk to them regularly, and a lot of what you're able to get done depends on personal relationships."

AFT has benefited from Berg's presence as an elder statesman—a man the organization's policy division can turn to for sage advice. "Norm has been instrumental in AFT's success over the past 18 years," says AFT President Ralph Grossi. "His experience and counsel on conservation policy and government relations, and his unique ability to work with individuals across a broad political spectrum have made him an indispensable asset at AFT."

TO MAKE SENSE OF why Berg, at 80, continues to carry the torch for conservation while his contemporaries are relaxing in retirement, you have to go back to the soil. He grew up with a strong connection to the land.

In 1924, when Berg was 6, his family moved from Burlington, Iowa, to a farm in Pine County, Minnesota, halfway between Minneapolis and Duluth. But soon after

Above: Berg confers with Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman last February. Right: Berg and his wife, Ruth, in 1940. Opposite top right: In 1971, Berg (center), then a Soil Conservation Service associate administrator, worked on land use issues for Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin (far right). Bottom right: In June 1970, Berg (left) spoke at a watershed project dedication at Lake Lakota in South Dakota.

the family established the farm, where they raised dairy cows, chickens, hogs, alfalfa, corn and oats, the Depression hit. When the Bergs shipped their hogs to market in St. Paul in the mid-1930s, the price they fetched did not cover the trucking bill. Of all their products, only the cream they sold to Land O' Lakes brought a small profit.

The family scraped by through a feat of ingenuity. Berg's father, Alf, knowing that children in the region had difficulty getting to their school several miles away, built a school bus on the bed of an old pickup truck. Alf Berg became a school bus driver, and hauled 35 children to and from school.

The family had no electricity, telephone or indoor plumbing. Berg, however, never thought of himself as poor.

"When we could get the battery charged, we'd hear over the radio about people in the Twin Cities standing in line for food," he recalls. "We never went hungry."

Berg was an avid student, excelling in grade school and going on to high school when many of his peers returned to full-time farm work in their teens. There, he found a mentor in his high school principal, who helped him weather the death of his father from a perforated ulcer when Berg was 16.

Berg, the eldest son, decided to learn more about agriculture, and began attending a vocational class in the evening. It opened his eyes. "For the first time, I saw books on farm improvements," he says. "I was fascinated by the fact that [agricultural] education existed."

He enrolled in a winter agriculture course at the University of Minnesota, but the registrar encouraged him to take a full academic load. Berg scraped together the $26 fee for the fall quarter, intending to get his undergraduate degree and then return to the family farm. In the meantime, however, his mother sold the property and moved to nearby Pine City.

After a series of summer jobs and a stint as an agriculture teacher in northern Minnesota, Berg took the civil service exam for the new Soil Conservation Service (SCS). The agency hired him, and sent him and his new wife, Ruth, whom he met at the university, to Idaho in early 1943. A few months later, Berg's career was interrupted by World War II. He enlisted in the Marine Corps, spending the last two years of his three-year hitch in Washington, D.C., training Marine and Navy personnel to use radar and sonar technology.

USDA PHOTO

After the war, he returned to Idaho with his wife to work for SCS, and lived there until mid-1955. The West was a dramatic change for the Midwesterner. The dusty ranges and rolling, high terrain differed markedly from the Midwest's flat, dense soils. The steep, dry fields there were especially vulnerable to soil loss.

Berg's job was to convince wheat farmers to stop practicing methods that had been passed down from generation to generation. By rote, they idled their fields every other year with no soil cover, and burned their wheat fields clean in the fall without leaving soil-stabilizing crop residue or cover crops. The farmers, naturally, were key to improving the soil, and Berg found his kitchen visits to be the best approach to changing their ways.

Berg made an even greater impact when he began to climb the ranks at SCS. After earning a master's degree in public administration at Harvard in 1956, Berg went to South Dakota, where he helped start several small watershed projects and participated in the groundbreaking Great Plains Conservation Program, one of the first agricultural cost-share programs to offer farmers funds

EARL H. BERG/USDA, SCS CONSERVATIONIST, RETD.

for adopting conservation methods.

When the region experienced a bone-dry summer that harked back to the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s, SCS led a movement to convert the land to grass. Farmers pitched in to build windbreaks and irrigate their fields to control dust.

"I learned we had to be more concerned about wetlands and the protection of potholes and other habitat," Berg says. "Water quality was being impaired from what was happening on the land."

In the mid-1950s, one of Berg's former Idaho colleagues, Don Williams, became the SCS chief. In the fall of 1960, Williams hired Berg as his special assistant and congressional liaison. Five years later, Berg became deputy chief, then associate administrator to the chief. In 1979, he became SCS chief, serving until 1982. He was forced to leave his post when the Reagan administration decided to replace him with a political appointee. Until then the slot had been filled by a career official.

At SCS, Berg played a key role in many critical conservation projects, such as a Great Lakes land use group. He also served as chairman of an Agriculture Department land use committee and was a member of the agriculture secretary's coordinating committee for the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act.

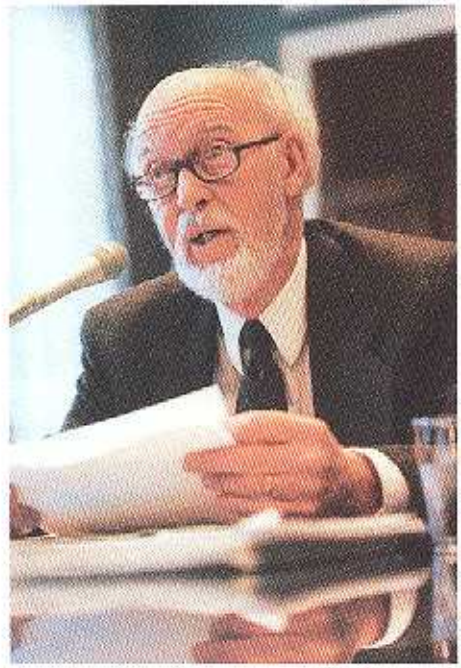
Over the years, Berg also helped raise awareness about land use issues both in the agency, which had tended to focus solely on soil, and in other federal departments. Through his writings and presentations, Berg stressed that the best soil-saving measures could not stand up to a bulldozer. "I was able to emphasize that we could save eroding soil, but if it then totally disappeared to development, it was a greater loss," he says.

BERG FIRST BECAME interested in farmland conservation in the 1960s when he served as the co-chairman of a USDA conference on soil, water and suburbia. It was one of the department's earliest attempts to broaden its focus beyond farming and rural issues.

"We looked at how to handle the land going from rural to urban, which could bring about a great deal of soil loss," he says. "For the first time, we were beginning to talk about that twilight zone between rural and urban areas that contain some of our best land."

The group was way ahead of its time. Years later, the seminal 1979 National Agricultural Lands Study reported that the country was losing 1 million acres of prime farmland annually. A year later AFT was launched, and Berg joined its staff in 1982, filling a much-needed niche in the organization's efforts to shape federal policy. He also became Washington representative of the Iowa-based Soil and Water Conservation Society.

Raising the issue of vanishing farmland



Berg is still a presence on Capitol Hill. Earlier this year he testified before Congress on farmland conservation.

on Capitol Hill, Berg, Grossi, Edward Thompson Jr. and other AFT staff members began pressing for implementation of a law requiring local governments to look at the impact of building new infrastructure on farmland. They continually cited the dire statistics at hearings and in members' offices, hoping that the legislators would incorporate farmland protection initatives in their farm bills.

Their perseverance paid off. As part of the 1996 farm bill, Congress established the Farmland Protection Program to protect farmland from conversion to non-agricultural uses. The program authorized $35 million in matching funds to state and local programs for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, which permanently tie the land to farming.

Observers attribute Berg's success to his interpersonal skills and his ability to consider how land use policy affects people. He appreciates the positions of both die-hard environmentalists and anti-regulation landowners, and can find common ground.

"He has an extremely balanced approach to conservation and natural resources management," says Max Schnepf at NRCS' National Conservation Buffer Initiative. "He's sensitive to landowner needs, but can factor in all the environmental conditions that ought to be considered in making land use decisions."

For Jeffrey Zinn at the Congressional Research Service, Berg is a mentor who has lived the history of federal conservation. Berg's calm voice is sometimes the most rational during heated debates, says Zinn. "Norm has an even-handed, common-sense view toward what conservation is and should be," he says. "In contrast to some of the shrill rhetoric of environmentalists and production ag interests, he straddles the line, looking for answers that work for conservation. His genuine interest is in the quality of the resource, and that comes through very clearly."

Berg predicts Congress will appropriate more funding for the Farmland Protection Program, which is scheduled to run out of money at the end of fiscal year 1998. But he says advocates should not rely solely on Congress. At a July AFT conference on the future of conservation policy (see "Experts Convene on Future of U.S. Farming," page 5), Berg and others reminded participants that they need to build on successful state and local farmland protection efforts. That will require a comprehensive approach that considers mainstream farming and the urban-edge agriculture responsible for so many specialty crops, Berg says.

Berg also believes that public support for farmland conservation efforts will continue to grow—especially if advocates can capitalize on the built-in antipathy that rural, suburban and urban residents have for sprawl. In fact, the public's distaste for sprawl—and the higher taxes, traffic congestion and pollution that accompanies it—could be the savior of prime farmland, he says. "Farmland protection issues are showing up in areas where people didn't appear to care before. We need to build on that." ❦

Valerie Berton, a former editor of American Farmland, is a communications specialist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. For Norm Berg's papers, go to www.farmlandinfo.org and click on "Stewardship."