

Farewell to an ag giant -- Norm Berg was busy doing important work until the end

**By Jerry Hagstrom, Special to Agweek
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WASHINGTON — With the death of Norman A. “Norm” Berg, the chief emeritus of the old Soil Conservation Service, the nation has lost a giant agricultural leader and I have lost the role model for my old age.

Berg, who was born in Iowa, educated in Minnesota and served the government in Idaho and South Dakota as well as Washington, died March 18 at the age of 90. He lived in Maryland.

“It is rare in life that one gets to work with a true pioneer in agricultural conservation, and who at 90, felt so passionate about the importance of our nation’s natural resources that he commuted an hour and a half to downtown Washington, D.C., to continue writing and developing policies in this area,” said Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust, the group with which Berg was associated at the time of his death.

Early ag background

Norm Berg was born March 18, 1918, in Burlington, Iowa, the son of a railroad machinist.

As Max Schnepf of the Soil and Water Conservation Society said in a profile in 2007, “Berg spent his early childhood years playing in the same streets and sledding on the same Burlington hills” as Aldo Leopold, another Burlington resident who became a national leader in conservation circles. Berg’s father purchased a small farm in Minnesota between the Twin Cities and Duluth where Berg began to spend summers helping his father clear second-growth timber so that crops could be raised. The family moved to the farm in 1926. Berg was a sophomore in high school when his father died in 1934. He remained on the farm until enrolling at the University of Minnesota in 1937. He met his wife, Ruth Askegaard, at the university and married her Nov. 20, 1941. After college, Berg applied for a job with the Soil Conservation Service, then a relatively new federal agency. His first assignment was in Downey, Idaho, where his job was to convert land that never should have been farmed back to grass.

While serving in the Marines during World War II, he was stationed in Washington, where he made a point of meeting Hugh Hammond Bennett, the founder of the SCS. Bennett encouraged him to return to Idaho when the war was over. He did return to Idaho and became dedicated to conservation.

He told Schnepf, “The soil erosion on those long, rolling hills just had to be dealt with. Working in the fields, with farmers and ranchers, to improve their operations was a real challenge.”

In 1955, after 10 years in Idaho, Berg attended a graduate program in public administration at Harvard. In 1956, he moved to South Dakota to implement conservation programs across entire watersheds and deal with flood control. In South Dakota, he encountered the first of many turf battles between the SCS and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (now the Farm Service Agency).

In 1960, SCS Chief Don Williams picked Berg to become his confidential assistant and congressional liaison in Washington. Berg kept rising through the ranks and, in the 1970s, was involved in U.S. Department of Agriculture’s first land use policies. These policies made compliance with USDA conservation goals a requirement for receiving commodity program benefits. This “cross-compliance” link still is controversial among some farmers, but most farmers recognize today that farm land is a resource that has to be protected and cared for.

In 1979, President Carter appointed Berg chief of the SCS. As chief of the SCS (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service), Berg supervised the first National Agricultural Lands Study. Grossi says it was the baseline documentation of the extent and causes of farmland loss in the United States. As a result, the 1981 farm bill authorized farmland protection efforts by the USDA and established the Farmland Information Center. Berg headed the agency until 1982, when President Reagan decided that he wanted a political appointee to head the agency. Many environmentalists still consider Berg’s forced resignation to be a low point in the agency’s history, but it was the beginning of a new career for Berg.

A new opportunity

Berg joined the staff of American Farmland Trust as senior adviser just after the organization’s inception in 1982. Concurrently, he served as the Washington representative of the Soil and Water Conservation Society of which he was a charter member and fellow. USDA acknowledged his enduring influence in 1998 naming him chief emeritus and offering him a permanent office at NRCS headquarters.

Some farmers still don’t accept Berg’s views that the government and urban Americans have a role to play in managing farmland. But he always recognized that it is the farmers who protect the land.

“Conservation gets done in an incremental way — from farm to farm and ranch to ranch — on the land,” he said in 2007. “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.”

Berg was one of my favorite sources of information in Washington. I was always struck by how up to date his information was.

I didn't get to know him until recent years after his beloved wife, Ruth, died. They were married for nearly 70 years and had four daughters, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. He told me recently that even though he loved his family, it was his work that kept him going after his wife died.

Some men retire to a life based on golf and alcohol. But if I have the privilege to live as long as he did, I would choose Norm Berg's life, involved in important work until the end.

The American Farmland Trust established the Norm Berg Special Collection, an online archive of speeches and writings by and about Berg, and key laws and reports that represent milestones in agricultural conservation.

The archive can be found at on AFT's Web site, and the collection's director, Jennifer Dempsey, welcomes additional materials. Visit the online condolence book for Berg at www.farmland.org.