

Norm Berg: A Steady Hand

Remarks prepared for delivery by Arlen L. Lancaster, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service, at a reception marking the launch of the Norm Berg Collection webpage on the Farmland Information Center website.

Washington, DC

November 20, 2007

Thank you, Ralph [Grossi]. Good morning. I am privileged to be part of today's celebration honoring our colleague and friend Norm Berg. I am struck by how appropriate it is to have this event during Thanksgiving week, which is itself a celebration of the abundance of American agriculture and its enduring importance in our national narrative.

In our traditional retelling of the story of that first Thanksgiving, we make a point to recognize the critical role of the Native Americans who generously shared their foodstuffs, their wisdom, and their knowledge of the land with the Pilgrims, ensuring their survival.

Can anyone think of a more perfect metaphor for Norm's career in public service? So many of us here this morning, whether when new to the Beltway or when facing a new leadership challenge, have benefited from Norm's wise counsel and his extraordinary knowledge of the land—both always freely shared, and both undoubtedly key to our survival. Although no longer new to D.C. or the ways of government, I still look forward to every one of my regularly scheduled meetings with Norm, confident I will come away with useful insights and advice to nourish and inspire me.

Imagine how invaluable it is for me as Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to be able to consult, at will, with the acknowledged expert in conservation on working lands, a man whose career spanned the depth and breadth of the Agency I am now honored to lead.

It is no exaggeration to say that Norm Berg is a man whose steady hand has helped both farmers and presidents realize their visions for productive agriculture and improved natural resources.

As I said, it is indeed a privilege for me to count on Norm's friendship and advice, but I understand that not everyone has such access. As there are many other decision makers grappling with conservation issues in Our Nation's Capital and elsewhere across the land—but, alas, only one Norm to go around!—it is comforting to know that the compendium of his writings, policy documents and speeches, as well as legislation he shaped, is now available to any Internet user, twenty-four-seven, through the Farmland Information Center website.

We at NRCS are proud to be partners with American Farmland Trust in making the Norm Berg Collection available to an ever-expanding audience, including new generations of conservationists and historians.

As a result of Norm's influence, and the effort of thousands of SCS and NRCS employees, partners and cooperators throughout our nearly 75-year history—who, like him, have dedicated their lives to helping people help the land— we have taken significant steps towards our goal of productive lands and a healthy environment. We have improved the condition of our nation's soil, water, air and wildlife habitat. And we have contributed to the viability and livability of communities everywhere in the country by helping people understand how their actions on the land affect its sustainability for agriculture, recreation and natural beauty.

But, there is more to do. With two-thirds of U.S. lands in private hands, many opportunities to effect meaningful change are still before us. Within NRCS, we are focused on preparing ourselves for the future, to meet the needs of our changing customer base—including beginning farmers and ranchers—with hopes of making every acre count for conservation.

Max Schnepf did a recent profile of Norm that is featured on the new FIC webpage and in it, Norm summarizes the challenges facing us in his usual cogent way, saying:

“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.”

Thank you, Sir, for continuing to provide us with such clarity about the road ahead, and for all you have done for so many years to help us find our way, as an agency, as a conservation community, and as individuals following your example. In this week of giving thanks, you have given us much to be grateful for.

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