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Obituaries

Norman Alf Berg, 90; Conservation Expert

By [Joe Holley](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Norman Alf Berg was a soil and water conservation specialist at the Agriculture Department. (Family Photo)

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Norman Alf Berg, 90, a retired soil and water conservation expert at the Agriculture Department and a national expert on preserving productive land, died of complications from a heart attack March 18 at Washington Hospital Center. An Edgewater resident, he had previously lived in Severna Park.

Mr. Berg was born in Burlington, Iowa, and grew up on a family farm in Pine County, Minn. His commitment to soil conservation grew out of his awareness during the Great Depression of the Dust Bowl, an ecological disaster caused by a severe drought in the Great Plains and decades of farming without conservation practices.

He received an undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota in 1941 and served as a Marine in the District during World War II. He received a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University in 1956.

He joined the Soil Conservation Service in 1943, working in Idaho and South Dakota before moving to the agency's national headquarters in 1960. He served as chief from 1979 to 1982.

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Throughout his career, Mr. Berg stressed the importance of preserving and protecting farmland. "We have been farming in this area for over 300 years," he told the Capital newspaper in Annapolis in 2000. "But in my travels I have been to farmland that has been kept in agriculture for 1,000 years. We must preserve the land for future generations."

He was instrumental in the passage of the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977, which gave greater authority over natural resources to the Agriculture Department and required the agency to send a national conservation plan to Congress. President Gerald R. Ford vetoed the bill, but his successor, Jimmy Carter, signed it.

Mr. Berg told the New York Times in 1980 that a total of about \$1 billion was being spent on soil conservation by all sources, public and private, an amount that was about a third of what he believed should be spent. "We've achieved about 40 percent of the adequate protection that our soil and water resources need, after 45 years of working on it," he said.

In 1982, Mr. Berg was forced into retirement after Agriculture Secretary John R. Block replaced him with a longtime farmer friend because of a stated desire to have farmers in top policy jobs.

Block's action did not sit well with Democrats in Congress. "A little candor would be helpful," said Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton (D-Mo.). "You decided to have a full-time farmer in this job because he's your buddy. You eulogized Norman Berg for 39 years of great service. You thought so well of him that you kicked him in the ass."

Mr. Berg remained an advocate for strenuous soil conservation as a senior adviser to the private American Farmland Trust. "It is an urgent situation when one-third of our really good cropland is suffering net soil loss, with some soil eroding at twice or three or even 10 times the tolerable limit," he told the Christian Science Monitor in 1982. He blamed the Agriculture Department and other government agencies for paying insufficient attention to poor farming practices and for allowing conservation programs to deteriorate.

"I'm a product of an agricultural background and training, 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," Mr. Berg told an American Farmland Trust publication in 2007. "I've been a longtime advocate . . . of a strong national land use policy that recognizes the need to allocate limited land resources among competing uses."

He remained an adviser to the American Farmland Trust until his death. He had also been a member of the Anne Arundel County governing board for the county Soil Conservation District since 1982.

Mr. Berg's wife, Ruth Berg, died in 1999.

Survivors include four daughters, Susan Morgan of Okatie, S.C., Jane Paulsen of Delran, N.J., Pamela Lieb of Bishopville, Md., and Rebecca Schroeder of Crofton; 10 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

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