

# NORM BERG: A CALLING FOR CONSERVATION

*In September 2007, American Farmland Trust (AFT) launched the Norm Berg Collection, an archive of speeches and writings by and about Norm Berg. Berg is our link to the beginnings of agricultural conservation in the United States. His far-reaching career began in 1943 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (SCS). As Berg rose through the ranks, he advocated for a broader understanding of agricultural conservation, recognizing before most that development posed a serious threat to the nation's agricultural resources. Upon retirement from public service, Berg became an advocate for AFT and the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS). Max Schnepf looks back at Berg's contributions and leadership, which helped chart the course for the nation's farmland protection movement.*

Norm Berg rises each morning at 5:30 sharp, just as he did as a teenager on the farm. If anything, age has strengthened his land ethic and lifelong commitment to conservation. 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 an hour and a half to the AFT office in downtown Washington, D.C., to advocate for protecting agricultural land and promoting its sustainable use. A consummate conservationist, Berg's drive and determination belie his age. 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 of my life than continue to assist those concerned about future generations."

## A CONSERVATION ETHIC TAKES ROOT

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 farmland protection and soil and water conservation circles.

The son of a railroad machinist, Berg spent his early childhood years playing in the same streets and sledding on the same Burlington 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 farm was covered by second-growth timber that had to be removed if the land was ever to raise crops. We spent hours upon hours placing sticks of dynamite under tree stumps, lighting fuses and running for cover. Every day was the Fourth of July!"

The elder Berg moved the family from Burlington 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. Milk was skimmed and fed to the livestock. Butterfat sold to the local creamery became our sole source of income.

"My father gave me his shotgun when I was 12 years old and told me, if it didn't put me on my butt, to use it. There were ducks to shoot." Norm and his father also fished from a rowboat on a nearby lake. Berg says, "This introduction to farming and the out-of-doors influenced my career choices."



*Norm Berg (left) with his sisters, Mary and Doris, brother John (right) and visiting cousin, 1935*

Life became more difficult 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.

That fall, a vocational agriculture teacher encouraged Berg to go to college, so he enrolled at the University of Minnesota with the idea of pursuing a two-year agricultural program. After reviewing his academic record, however, an advisor convinced Norm 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.

During his sophomore year, Berg was introduced to Ruth Askegaard. Like Berg, she attended classes on the university's farm campus in St. Paul, so the two could see each other regularly. 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 Ruth's unwavering commitment and support, and that of our four daughters."



*Norm Berg on his family's Grasston, Minnesota, farm, 1937*

After college Berg applied for a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (SCS). He knew little about this relatively new federal agency, but the chance to work directly with farmers on the land was appealing. When the SCS offered him a job, he and Ruth wrestled with the decision about whether to try their own hand at farming or to help farmers manage their land. In the end, Berg took the SCS position and moved to Downey, Idaho.

## THE SCS YEARS

"My area in southeastern Idaho," Berg relates, "had been home to several Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps prior to World War II. 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 under Forest Service management.

"Out of the long list of nature's gifts to man, none is perhaps so utterly essential to human life as soil."

*Hugh Hammond Bennett*

During his first year at the SCS, the legendary Hugh Hammond Bennett, considered the "father of soil conservation," was at the helm of the agency. Inspired by Bennett's dedication, Berg remained committed to conservation even after enlisting in the Marines. In 1945, while stationed in Washington, D.C., he set out to meet Bennett. After a couple of failed attempts, he finally succeeded. "We shared backgrounds 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 Marine Corps, he returned to Pocatello, Idaho, in 1946 and attended a month-long reorientation for SCS employees who had served in the war. The training further inspired him to commit his life and career 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, serving as a district conservationist, then an area conservationist. He focused much of his attention on Bennett's advice to organize conservation districts. During this period, he also gained an appreciation for how conservation happens—one farm and one farmer at a time.

Because of his demonstrated success organizing districts and managing staff, agency leaders encouraged Berg to apply for a graduate program in public administration at Harvard University. He was accepted in 1955. While at Harvard, Berg wrote a paper about the Small Watershed Program, a new SCS program authorized by the Watershed and Flood Prevention Act of 1954. Berg was particularly interested in the program because it addressed conservation problems across an entire watershed and recognized the importance of land treatment in flood control.



*Hugh Hammond Bennett, Soil Conservation Service Chief, 1935 to 1951*



*Norm Berg, 1960*

After graduating in 1956, Berg went on to implement the watershed program in South Dakota. But according to Berg, “Early program administrators forgot about land treatment, which comes first in the program’s name, and relied too much on manipulating water via stream channelization.” The program came under fire from the environmental community, which criticized the emphasis on flood control structures that destroyed wildlife habitat. Berg knew then how to improve the program but had to bide his time until he reached a leadership position. “It wasn’t until the early 1970s that SCS Administrator Ken Grant and I were able to refocus emphasis in the program on land treatment.”

### **A SOUTH DAKOTA SOJOURN**

Following his Harvard sabbatical, SCS leaders in Washington, D.C., selected Berg for the assistant state conservationist post in South Dakota. Two problems confronted the SCS there: One was an attempt to scuttle the SCS’ new Great Plains Conservation Program and the other was a move to rescind the state’s conservation districts. Agency leaders felt Berg’s work implementing other SCS programs and his experience organizing districts in Idaho could help. The Great Plains Conservation Program for the first time guaranteed multi-year funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to farmers and ranchers for both technical and financial assistance. But it also created a turf battle between USDA agencies. Leaders with USDA’s Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) objected to assigning administration of the Great Plains Conservation Program to the SCS. Berg helped build relations with the ASCS within the state and quietly urged SCS leaders to seek additional support from the secretary of agriculture. Ultimately, the secretary issued a memo directing

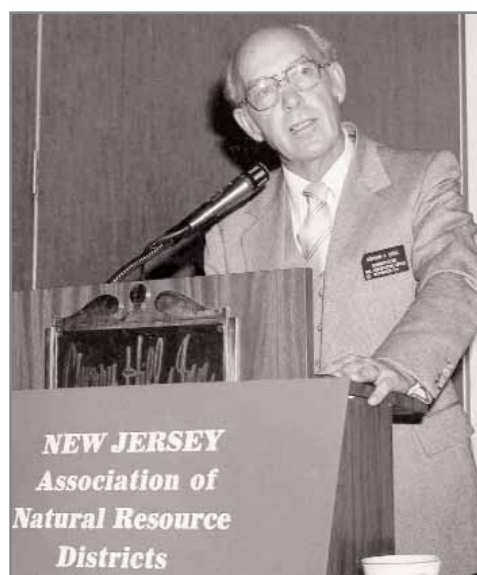
ASCS administrators in South Dakota to stop obstructing program implementation.

To save conservation districts, Berg worked with the state soil conservation commission to organize pro-district advocates at the county level. More importantly, Berg and the commission convinced the state’s attorney general that the process for disbandment of districts—which required only 25 signatures to force a vote—was expensive, time-consuming and not worth the effort. The attorney general threw out all further petitions to abolish districts, and the law in South Dakota and other states subsequently was amended to do away with the process.

### **MR. BERG GOES TO WASHINGTON**

“My South Dakota assignment ended in December 1960,” Berg relates, “when I reported to SCS headquarters in Washington, D.C.” Don Williams, then head of the SCS, hand-picked Berg to work as his confidential assistant and congressional liaison. “This gave me the opportunity to represent the SCS internally and also within the USDA and with members of Congress.”

During the 1961 farm bill debate, for example, Berg engaged in ongoing discussions with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman and his staff about the potential for an innovative rural renewal program modeled after the federal government’s relatively new urban renewal effort. The idea was to use old land utilization authorities to buy land and convert it to a healthy, sustainable agricultural use. This discussion eventually generated the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program, which aimed to promote economic development using a local area’s natural resource assets.



*Chief Norm Berg speaking to the New Jersey Association of Natural Resource Districts, 1980*

About the same time, Berg's conversations with Secretary Freeman and others about the USDA's interest in urban-oriented conservation problems led to a national conference, "Soil, Water and Suburbia," sponsored by the USDA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. At the secretary's request, Berg co-chaired the conference program committee. This experience heightened Berg's concern about the loss of agricultural land to development and reinforced his interest in national land use policy.

Berg was promoted to deputy administrator for programs in 1965 and to associate administrator in 1969. During this period, Berg visited conservation districts and state associations nationwide and delivered speech after speech to advance important issues and advocate for policies to protect agricultural resources. Berg also networked with members of the House and Senate, including Mississippi Congressman Jamie Whitten, who served for years as chairman of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee. Berg used Whitten's office as a stopping off point during Hill visits. In Berg's view, "These special relationships instilled confidence among congressional interests in the ability of the SCS to deliver programs to the nation's farmers and ranchers."

By the mid-1970s Berg's stature at the USDA and among members of Congress enabled him to help craft and advance federal policies to protect agricultural resources. Berg worked with the assistant secretary of agriculture to hammer out USDA's first land use policy. According to Neil Sampson, then assistant to Berg, "Norm was the guiding hand, working at the side of the assistant secretary. Through many meetings of an interagency committee, and many, many drafts, he kept the process moving forward." Berg also was asked to help draft the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA). As Berg recalls, "Jim Giltmier, a member of Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge's staff, called me and suggested that the SCS needed natural resource appraisal and conservation planning authorities. I helped write the act that provided those powers."

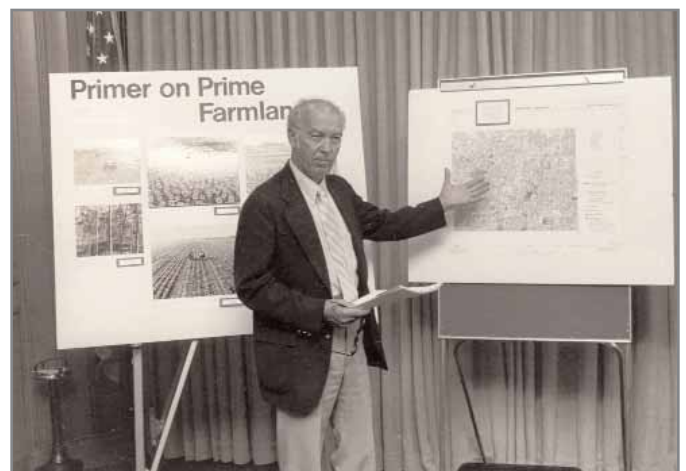
The bill was vetoed by President Gerald Ford in 1976 but signed into law by President Jimmy Carter the following year. According to Berg, "The most valuable contribution of the...act was the much stronger natural resource appraisal authority...and the law's requirement that the USDA periodically send to Congress a national conservation plan." Notably, the first national plan included the concept of "cross compliance"—linking USDA commodity program benefits with conservation goals—long advocated by environmental groups. Congress subsequently incorporated cross-compliance provisions for highly erodible land and wetlands into the 1985 Farm Bill.

In 1979, President Carter appointed Berg SCS administrator (Berg changed the title back to chief), and Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland and the chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) commissioned the seminal National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS). The NALS was an 18-month project to document the extent and cause of the loss of farmland. The SCS, with Berg at its helm, oversaw the work. Berg brought Bob Gray, a staffer for Vermont Congressman James Jeffords, into the SCS to lead the project.

"...with the naming of Norm Berg as Chief—came an agency-wide sense of relief, pride and optimism that the SCS would be getting back on track to encourage private farm and forest landowners across the country to treat their land with care and respect in the sense that Aldo Leopold spoke of the ideal relationship of human beings to the land."

*Rupert Cutler, Former Assistant Secretary of Agriculture*

"The 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. "The most important upshot of the study was language in the 1981 farm bill authorizing farmland protection efforts by the USDA and creation of a farmland information center. In Berg's view, the RCA, coupled with the NALS, "produced a synergy of thinking among USDA officials about the allocation of land in the United States for various uses, the need for conservation of agricultural land and how to go about improving conservation policy and program delivery within the department."



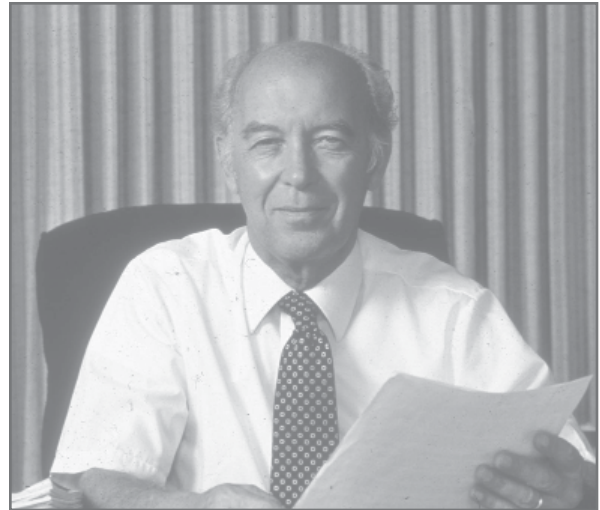
*Norm Berg announcing the launch of the National Agricultural Lands study, 1979*

As Berg advanced agricultural conservation on the national scene, he also led initiatives within the SCS to recruit and train staff. He sought to bring greater diversity to the agency. With the assistance of Tennessee State Conservationist Ralph Sasser, Berg gained an understanding of the South and encouraged the 1890 colleges to create curricula to train potential employees for the agency.

Berg was a dedicated teacher and mentor to countless individuals within and outside of the SCS. He served for 37 years as a member of the USDA's Graduate School faculty. His class on supervision and management began as an evening class and later became a correspondence course with students from all over the world. After leaving the USDA, Berg served two four-year terms on the graduate school's board of directors. While with the SCS, he also encouraged agency leaders to participate in a self-improvement course held at the University of Georgia and taught by the internationally known ecologist Eugene Odum and colleagues. "We drew on competent people outside the agency," Berg says, "to help our employees understand what was happening in the broader world and how they could do a better job within the USDA."

Berg also expanded the agency's reach to international conservation affairs. He was among the first agency heads to send a team of experts to China following President Richard Nixon's visit. He initiated SCS involvement in Europe through the Organization for European Cooperation and Development and created an International Programs Office to facilitate exchanges of technical expertise between the agency and comparable institutions overseas. "SCS employees had much to offer their counterparts in both developed and developing countries," Berg observed, "but we had much to learn from them as well, and that remains the case today."

As Berg's career at the SCS wound down, many awards and honors rolled in. Two stand out as especially important. A charter member of the federal government's senior executive service, Berg was among the first governmental leaders to receive the prestigious Presidential Rank Award in 1980. That same year he became the first individual from the soil



*Chief Norm Berg, 1979*

and water conservation community to receive the National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Award.

Berg served as SCS Chief until 1982, when he was forced to resign his post by the incoming Reagan administration. Within days of his retirement, Berg received a letter from leaders at AFT, then a fledgling nonprofit organization, asking him to come on board as a senior advisor.

## **A SECOND CAREER**

Against the backdrop of the NALS, prominent 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 organization. Wheeler and Noonan knew Berg from his involvement with an AFT advisory group. Also part of this group was Ralph Grossi, then a Marin County farmer who had experience with farmland protection issues in California and who later became AFT president. Bob Gray who had worked on the NALS team also was on board to welcome Berg to his new post.

Right out of the gate, Berg's work helped shape national agricultural conservation policy. "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 stage for the debate and the innovative Conservation Reserve Program and conservation compliance, sodbuster and swampbuster policies that were incorporated into what became known officially as the Food Security Act of 1985."

During this period, Berg also was offered a position as Washington representative for the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS). He agreed to split his time between

"Norm had an uncanny way of finding the staff help he needed, no matter what the organizational chart might say. And he was a delight to work for. You never had any doubt that you were working at the intellectual forefront of the agency when you worked with Norm."

*Neil Sampson, Former Acting Director,  
Environmental Services Division, SCS*

the two organizations. Berg was a charter, fellow and life-long member of this international scientific organization for conservation professionals, which honored him for his many significant contributions to conservation on the national and international scenes with its prestigious Hugh Hammond Bennett Award in 1990.

“Norm doesn’t just work for conservation, he embodies conservation.”

*Craig Cox, Executive Director,  
Soil and Water Conservation Society*

During Berg’s “second career” with AFT and the SWCS he engaged in multiple farm bill debates and advocated for voluntary, incentive-driven conservation programs, including the federal Farmland Protection Program (now the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program). He also saw to it that the USDA implemented a key provision of the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA). FPPA aims to minimize the extent to which federal programs lead to the conversion of agricultural land. It also directs the Secretary to create a clearinghouse of information on farmland issues, policies and programs. The agency shelved the law until 1994. That year the agency published a final rule, signaling renewed interest in farmland protection.

Berg and AFT staffer Ed Thompson seized on the opportunity. They won agency support for AFT to create and manage a farmland information center (FIC). They worked with Robert Long, an assistant secretary at the USDA, to craft an agreement between AFT and the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS, formerly SCS). AFT’s FIC has

offered an answer service and online resources since 1995. The FIC Web site ([www.farmlandinfo.org](http://www.farmlandinfo.org)) was revamped in 2004 to better serve visitors. Today, the FIC reaches more than 80,000 people a year in person and online.

“I’m a product of an agricultural background and training,” Berg says, “but I learned early on in my career with the SCS 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’s tenure at AFT is summed up thusly by President Ralph Grossi: “As you might expect, Berg’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. Berg 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 is not new—usually by pulling out an old article in one of the stacks on his desk!”

“I, along with many others, can proudly call him one of the most important and influential mentors in our conservation careers.”

*Neil Sampson, Former Acting Director,  
Environmental Services Division, SCS*

Berg has remained involved in several other conservation activities. For 15 years he served as SWCS representative to the Natural Resources Council of America, an association of more than 80 national and international conservation and environmental organizations. He remains an emeritus member of the council’s board of directors. Berg also has served as a supervisor of the Anne Arundel Soil Conservation District in Maryland and this past July received recognition for his 25 years of service. Berg continues to advise NRCS leaders. His enduring influence was acknowledged in 1998 when USDA Secretary Dan Glickman named him Chief Emeritus and offered him a permanent office at NRCS headquarters.

Perhaps most important for the next generation is Berg’s continued commitment to mentoring young conservation professionals. According to AFT’s Grossi, “Berg has been a crucial advisor and mentor to many over the years.” In recognition of this important role, the SWCS created the Norman A. and Ruth A. Berg Conservation Fellowship Program in 1990 with support from the Bergs’ long-term friends, Fran Robinson and Ken Novak. Berg fellows were selected



*Norm Berg with AFT’s President Ralph Grossi at AFT’s 25th anniversary celebration in 2005*

annually to participate in national conservation policy-oriented activities ranging from moderated discussions during the SWCS annual meeting to a two-day national forum in Washington, D.C., on conservation policymaking. “Those forums,” Berg says, “helped the next generation of conservation leaders assume responsibility for maintaining what we’ve been fortunate to enjoy.”

Observers attribute Berg’s success to his diplomacy and patience. Many remark on his ability to appreciate and balance the positions of different groups; Berg always looks for common ground. And underlying these traits is his unswerving commitment to conservation. As Norm once said to SCS employees, “Ours is not an occupation, it is a vocation; it is not so much a career as a calling.” But Berg chalks up his achievements to the support he received from his family and talented colleagues and staff available to him throughout his career.

### WORDS OF WISDOM

When asked about the future of agricultural conservation, Berg warns that the current competition for land threatens 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 the point that we cannot sustain what we must. We must consider what we leave in the way of 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.”

Berg contends that the USDA’s role now extends well beyond traditional commodity production: “Policymakers

“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.”

*Former President Jimmy Carter, 1991*

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 current administration’s farm bill proposal has some good points, but I’m not sure Office of Management and Budget leaders are convinced of this new federal role yet. They’re not convinced that the environmental benefits per dollar spent are there.”

But then Berg returns to the basics: “The reality today is that, regardless of national policy nuances, 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—on the land. 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.”

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*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.*