



# FARMLAND INFORMATION CENTER

## NORM BERG COLLECTION

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Little did I know, as a wet-behind-the-ears environmental attorney in the late 1970s, that Norm Berg, the Chief of the Soil Conservation Service I sued over the agency's lack of a wetlands policy, would become a friend, a mentor and, along with his wife, Ruth, an example of loving togetherness for my own wife, Ann, and me. The lessons he taught me over the years are literally too numerous to recall. His passing leaves a huge hole in my heart and in the conservation profession that he was instrumental in shaping.

Norm can rightly be said to be the father of farmland protection in America. He instigated the first USDA land use policy at a time when few understood that urban development could take a significant toll on the country's seemingly unlimited agricultural resources. And he was the originator of the Department's National Resources Inventory (NRI), without which there would have been no National Agricultural Lands Study to launch the movement, no Farming on the Edge to document how much of America's food supply is at risk near our sprawling cities, and no way to monitor and respond—so he hoped—to urbanization, erosion and other threats to the land that sustains us.

The NRI is one of the most tangible bequests of Norm's fertile intellect and strong conservation ethic. But I wonder if it has kept pace with challenges it was designed to help us meet. During the three decades since the NRI was conceived, geographic information systems technology and available data have advanced exponentially. Meanwhile, pressure on the agricultural resource base has escalated to "perfect storm" proportions as a consequence of burgeoning global demand for food; domestic interest in more sustainable, regional food systems; the frantic search for alternative biofuels; evidence of wholesale environmental degradation like the "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico and, looming over it all, the prospect of climate change. Yet, the NRI itself appears not to have changed and adapted to agriculture's evolving needs, as Norm himself continually did in his progressive open-minded wisdom.

Therefore, as a tribute to our friend and mentor, I respectfully propose that USDA and its private sector partners, AFT among them, make an urgent and ambitious commitment to re-invent the NRI. We owe it to Norm to renew his vision of NRI as a world class, cutting-edge, scientific information and analytical tool in the service of the land. And as Norm himself might add—from somewhere inside the Pearly Gates, with Ruth once again by his side, and Hugh Bennett and Aldo Leopold smiling on a nearby cloud—we owe it to ourselves and our progeny to seize the opportunity and use it to meet head-on the unprecedented challenges facing American agriculture and farmland in the 21st Century.