

Anderson: Charlie Berg was a folksy sort with great vision

Article by: DENNIS ANDERSON
Star Tribune
February 14, 2014 - 12:17 AM

As free-spirited as they came, Charlie Berg ran the table as a legislator, by turns a DFLer, a Republican and an independent, the latter intentionally with a lowercase “i,” as in, by Webster’s definition, “self-reliant, liberated.”

Berg, who died Jan. 22 at age 86, was both of these, and the Senate was better for his 26 years of service. A farmer from Chokio in the west-central part of the state, he possessed among his many fascinations wildlife and wildlife conservation, interests he argued were widespread in his profession.

That he farmed on land that once was the state’s best pheasant range made him all the more interesting to me.

In 1982, some friends and I had incorporated Pheasants Forever, and soon thereafter proposed establishment of a state pheasant stamp, the purchase of which would be required by ringneck hunters. We wanted proceeds from stamp sales to help fund a pheasant resurgence in Minnesota, where the bird once proliferated.

Berg supported the idea, and eventually a Minnesota pheasant stamp came to be. But his conservation legacy extends much further, because it was his foresight that helped lay the groundwork for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which was first included in the federal farm bill in 1985.

In 1983, President Reagan’s Agriculture Department had announced a farming program called PIK, or Payment in Kind. This was a land-diversion plan intended to reduce production, because major grain commodities had been overproduced for a number of years, and prices were depressed.

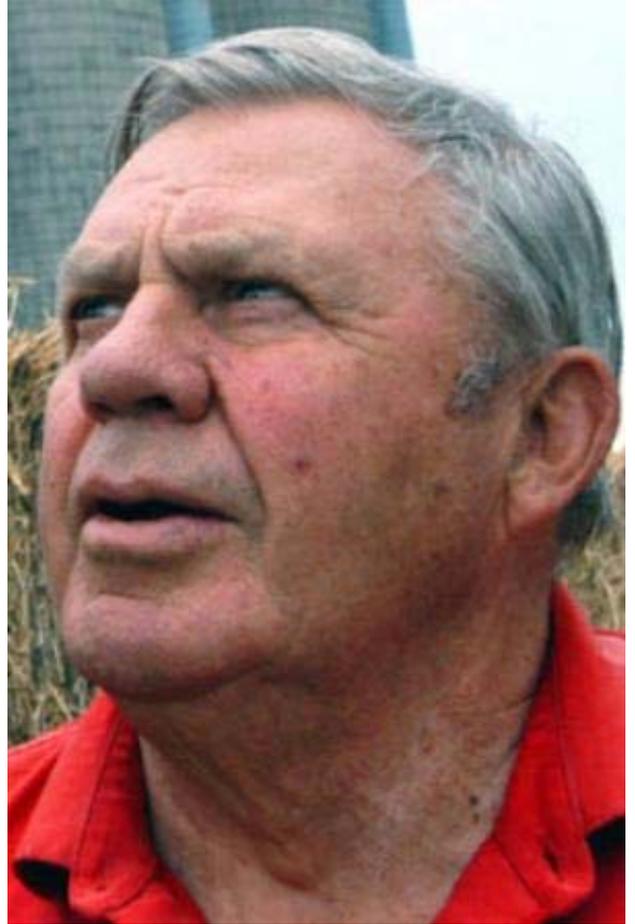
“The problem,” Berg said at the time, “is that PIK doesn’t allow farmers to sow down permanent cover on the acres they idle. If they did, and if the state pheasant stamp becomes law, I think we can make some real progress with pheasants in Minnesota.”

Oddly — or not — one of Berg’s closest friends and political allies in the Legislature was Bob Lessard of International Falls, himself a maverick who would hopscotch among party affiliations (Lessard is now a special assistant to DNR commissioner Tom Landwehr).

In March 1983, Berg and Lessard, along with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Carl Madsen of Fergus Falls and myself, traveled to Washington to meet with Agriculture Secretary John Block.

Block was from Illinois, which, like Minnesota, had a long pheasant-hunting heritage, but few birds to show for it. Berg’s idea intrigued him.

“It wouldn’t really be a change to our overall program,” Block told us. “We could just announce it as a new part of PIK.”



Berg
Feed Loader,

Ultimately, serendipity prevailed, and the Minnesota pheasant stamp became a reality. Wisely, thanks to the recommendation of the late Department of Natural Resources fish and wildlife division director Roger Holmes, some of its proceeds were sent to Washington to garner support for a modification and expansion of Berg's idea — a plan that exists yet today, CRP.

And while other people and other ideas ultimately helped formulate the original CRP, no one was more vital than Berg, a good legislator and a great guy who also virtually single-handedly re-established dove hunting in Minnesota — despite the protestations of his nemesis on the subject, the late Sen. Allan Spear, DFL-Minneapolis (also a good and very funny guy).

During one of countless committee hearings Berg chaired en route to finally winning approval of a dove season, an elderly woman testified that “doves can't be hunted because they eat obnoxious weeds, and we have too many obnoxious weeds.”

“Perhaps you mean noxious weeds,” Berg said.

“Don't you hear well?” the woman replied, putting Berg in his place.

And making him laugh.

A sample of his other wildlife-oriented witticisms, of which he possessed countless:

- “Last fall, I read in the paper where a guy was nicked by the DNR for taking raccoons — they should have given him a medal instead.”
- “Right now, the way the state's deer herd is being managed, what we're left with is a lot of does and fawns and a few Pigmy bucks. That's right, Pigmy bucks.”

One of the last times I saw Berg was in September 2004, when a friend and I hunted his farm for doves. We scratched out a few birds, then shared laughs with the gracious and very funny landowner, who didn't shoulder a gun himself, but instead passed the day in his basement trading stocks, with an eye on the futures market, a longtime interest.

Happy trails, Charlie.

Memorial services will be held March 22 at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Chokio. Visitation will be held on March 21 at Pedersen Funeral Home in Morris. Times have not been set.

© 2014 Star Tribune

Reprinted by permission of the **Star Tribune** (Minneapolis, MN).