



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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SOURCES AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

B-133192

The Honorable
The Secretary of Agriculture

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As part of our review of federally financed research and development programs related to pest control and pesticides, we noted problems in the pilot boll weevil eradication experiment which we believe merit your consideration before proceeding with a cotton belt-wide program to eradicate the boll weevil.

The experiment was to determine whether it was technically and operationally feasible to eradicate the boll weevil-- a major pest of cotton causing crop losses and control costs of almost \$300 million a year. During fiscal year 1972, the Department of Agriculture; the States of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Texas; the National Cotton Council; and Cotton, Incorporated, cooperatively undertook the 2-year experiment in an area centered in southern Mississippi and extending into southwestern Alabama and southeastern Louisiana. The experiment was completed in August 1973.

One of the greatest obstacles to developing and demonstrating effective suppression techniques in past boll weevil research was the lack of adequate isolation of experimental areas to prevent migration of boll weevils from surrounding areas.

We found that because only \$4 million of the estimated needed \$5 million was available, the Department altered its initial plans for insuring that boll weevils would not migrate into the experimental area. Consequently, prevention of migration could not reasonably be assured, making it impossible to establish whether boll weevils found in the area after the experiment were migrants or survivors of the eradication treatments.

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Many experts have concluded that, although considerable progress was made in the experiment in greatly reducing boll weevil populations, it did not demonstrate that the boll weevil had been eradicated from the test area.

Department officials acknowledged that with adequate funding they might have been able to prove the boll weevils could have been eradicated.

The Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 (7 U.S.C. 1305) authorized and directed the Department to carry out programs to eliminate cotton boll weevils in infested areas of the United States, if it were determined that methods and systems had been developed to assure success in eradication. As of June 1974, the Department was evaluating the results of the eradication experiment to decide whether it was feasible to initiate a cotton belt-wide boll weevil eradication program. Estimates of the cost of such an effort, which would take about 10 years, ranged from \$600 million to about \$1.4 billion.

In a report we submitted to the Department for comments, we proposed that, because the boll weevil had not been eradicated in the pilot experiment, a cotton belt-wide program not be adopted until the technology was further refined and its effectiveness demonstrated in large scale field tests.

We also proposed that Department agencies, before undertaking demonstration projects, determine whether adequate resources are available to attain the desired objectives; if not, they should gear the projects to meet revised objectives considered attainable with available resources.

In its comments dated October 30, 1974, on the report, the Department said that increased funding for the pilot experiment would have reduced the level of uncertainty about conclusions drawn but that it probably would not have eliminated all uncertainty nor resulted in needed improvements in various components of the suppressive system.

Regarding our proposal, however, the Department said:

"A large-scale field trial is being considered by the Department to further refine the technology employed in the earlier smaller pilot project. In the course of the planning we will closely evaluate the resources needed to achieve program goals."

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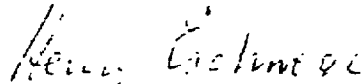
In May 1975 a Department official told us that the Office of Management and Budget had advised the Department not to request funds from the Congress to initiate the trial program and suggested that the Department accelerate research in support of such a trial in fiscal year 1976. He said that the Department was committed to a goal of assessing the costs and benefits of eradicating the boll weevil through a trial program as soon as economic and fiscal conditions permit.

In view of the actions the Department has taken or plans to take, we plan no further reporting on this review.

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We appreciate the cooperation and assistance extended to us by the Department during this review.

Sincerely yours,



Henry Eschwege
Director

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