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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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B-146856

JUN 23 1975

The Honorable Fortney H. Stark, Jr.  
Member, United States  
House of Representatives  
7 Eastmont Mall  
Oakland, California 94605



Dear Mr. Stark:

As requested in your October 22, 1974, letter, we have inquired into your constituent's proposal that military personnel replace civilian field buyers in procuring fresh fruits and vegetables for the Department of Defense. The constituent estimated that using military personnel already located in the commodity growing areas would save over \$1 million annually.

The proposal was based on the premise that military personnel already located at posts or bases in the growing areas could assume the procurement function and reduce costs. Accordingly, we determined both the cost of civilian field buyers and the feasibility of military personnel assuming the function at less cost.

After analyzing the information provided by your constituent and reviewing the field buying function at the Defense Subsistence Region - Alameda, we believe the proposal is not practical. We have concluded that (1) the actual cost of the buying function has been considerably less than estimated by the constituent and (2) using military personnel might increase costs without providing added benefits.

As the following table shows, the constituent made several erroneous assumptions and thus significantly overstated field buying costs.

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	Average annual cost	
	<u>Per constituent</u>	<u>Per GAO</u>
Average buyer cost:		
Salary	\$ 22,000	\$ 21,300
Per diem	11,000	4,600
Transportation	<u>1,000</u>	<u>a/420</u>
Total	\$ <u>34,000</u>	\$ <u>26,320</u>
Buyer cost at Defense Sub- sistence Region - Alameda (average cost x five buyers)	<u>\$170,000</u>	<u>\$131,600</u>
Buyer cost--all regions	b/ <u>\$850,000</u>	c/ <u>\$315,840</u>

a/Includes only transportation to and from growing areas.

b/The constituent assumed there were 24 field buyers on temporary duty nationwide. In reality only 12 of these are assigned to regional headquarters and would be on temporary duty for all site-buying trips.

c/Estimate based on 12 buyers at \$26,320.

The three major functions of a field buyer are to (1) visually inspect fresh fruits and vegetables for quality, grade, and maturity, (2) keep informed on field and packing conditions, and (3) recommend procurement action. Agency officials consider the inspection function to be the most critical and to require the most expertise. We contacted officials from the Department of Agriculture and the military services in an attempt to find an organization qualified both to inspect and procure fresh produce. The Veterinary Services of the Army and Air Force appeared to be the most likely organizations because they have a food inspection mission and are located throughout the country. However, officials of the Services did not agree with the constituent's proposal because (1) veterinary personnel were not qualified for the duties, (2) normal rotation of military personnel would require a continuing retraining program, and (3) officers rather than enlisted personnel would be required to perform the function. Another factor would be the additional cost of managing a decentralized operation. The two Services said they could not assume the function without committing additional resources.

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If, in fact, the military had to increase manning on a one-for-one basis, cost savings, if any, would be significantly reduced.

We plan no further distribution of this report unless you agree or publicly announce its contents.

Sincerely yours,

  
ACTING Comptroller General  
of the United States