Biologically Based Technologies for Pest Control

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he way the nation manages pests is changing because of efforts to reduce the reliance on conventional pesticides. Driving this change is strong public opinion coupled with action by Congress and by federal and state agencies. At the same time, pest control needs are rising. Many important pests are now resistant to formerly effective chemical controls. And new pests continue to enter the country or spread to new locations where they threaten agriculture, native ecosystems, or human health.

The farmers, foresters, ranchers, and others who seek to prevent excessive pest damage are increasingly aware of the shortcomings of conventional pest control approaches. Their need for more pest control options is acute. Current hopes are that integrated pest management (IPM)—which uses alternative tools as well as pesticides—will provide the key to meeting this need while reducing the reliance on conventional pesticides. This assessment examines an array of the biologically based tools that underpin effective IPM.

The report covers technologies ranging from enhanced biological control of pests by their natural predators and parasites to commercial formulations of microbial pesticides. Today, such approaches have joined the mainstream. Biologically based technologies have penetrated most major applications of pest control and are the methods of choice for such widespread pests as the gypsy moth. They could be used more widely to help solve the nation’s pressing need for pest control tools. What happens next will depend largely on federal policies and programs.

The federal government’s role here is extensive through its involvement in research, technology transfer, plant protection, land management, and pesticide regulation. Annual expenditures for research and implementation of biologically based technologies for pest control exceed $200 million. But the system does not work as well as it might. A better match between national priorities and the portfolio of federally supported research would improve delivery of new pest control tools into the field. An improved regulatory system would streamline the regulatory process while more closely evaluating the occasional high risks. Finally, the relative roles of the private and public sectors warrant rethinking, because the private sector on its own will go only so far in supplying new biologically based tools.

*Biologically Based Technologies for Pest Control* was requested by three congressional committees: the House Committee on Agriculture; the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee; and the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands.

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ROGER C. HERDMAN
Director
Advisory Panel

Katherine Reichelderfer
Smith, Panel Chair
Director, Policy Studies Program
Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture
Greenbelt, MD

Paul A. Backman
Professor and Director
Biological Control Institute
Department of Plant Pathology
Auburn University
Auburn, AL

Ring T. Cardé
Professor
Department of Entomology
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA

Willard A. Dickerson
Plant Pest Administrator
North Carolina Department of Agriculture
Raleigh, NC

Roger C. Funk
Vice President of Human and Technical Resources
The Davey Tree Expert Company
Kent, OH

Harry J. Griffiths
Chairman
Entomological Services Inc.
Corona, CA

Judith A. Hansen
Superintendent
Cape May County Mosquito Extermination Commission
Cape May, NJ

Dennis L. Isaacson
Program Director
Noxious Weed Control Section
Oregon Department of Agriculture
Salem, OR

Deborah B. Jensen
Vice President, Conservation Science and Stewardship
The Nature Conservancy
Arlington, VA

Tobi L. Jones
Special Assistant to the Director
Department of Pesticide Regulation
California Environmental Protection Agency
Sacramento, CA

Peter M. Kareiva
Professor
Department of Zoology
University of Washington
Seattle, WA

Allen E. Knutson
Associate Professor and Extension Entomologist
Texas Agricultural Extension Service
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX

James B. Kramer
Family Farmer
Hugoton, KS

David W. Miller
Vice President for Research and Development
EcoScience Corporation
Northborough, MA

Timothy L. Nance
Crop Consultant
Gro Technics Consulting
Naples, FL

David O. TeBeest
Professor
Department of Plant Pathology
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR
Jeffrey K. Waage  
Director  
International Institute of Biological Control  
Ascot, Berks, UK

Michael E. Wetzstein  
Professor  
Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics  
University of Georgia  
Athens, GA

David M. Whitacre  
Vice President, Development  
Sandoz Agro, Inc.  
Des Plaines, IL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EXECUTIVE BRANCH LIAISONS</strong></th>
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</table>
| **Gary H. Johnston** | National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC |
| **James Krysan**<sup>1</sup> | Agricultural Research Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, DC |
| **Anne E. Lindsay** | Office of Pesticide Programs  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Washington, DC |
| **Thomas C. Roberts**<sup>2</sup> | Bureau of Land Management  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC |
| **Sally J. Rockey** | Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, DC |
| **Judith St. John**<sup>3</sup> | Agricultural Research Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, DC |
| **William S. Wallace** | Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Washington, DC |
| **Lewis H. Waters**<sup>4</sup> | Bureau of Land Management  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC |

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<sup>1</sup> Until February 1995.  
<sup>2</sup> From April 1995.  
<sup>3</sup> From June 1995.  
<sup>4</sup> Until March 1995.
Clyde Behney
Assistant Director

Walter E. Parham¹
Program Director
Food and Renewable Resources

Robert Niblock²
Program Director
Environment Program

Elizabeth A. Chornesky
Project Director and Senior Analyst

Cynthia M. Palmer³
Analyst

John Longbrake
Research Analyst

Christine Taverna⁴
Research Assistant

CONTRACTORS AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

John M. Houghton
Contractor & Workshop Organizer

Priscilla S. Taylor
Editor

Gary Jahn⁵
Analyst

William Westermeyer⁶
Senior Analyst

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

N. Ellis Lewis¹
Office Administrator

Kathleen Beil²
Office Administrator

Nellie M. Hammond
Administrative Secretary

Kimberly Holmlund²
Administrative Secretary

Sharon Knarvik²
Administrative Secretary

Babette Polzer⁴
Contractor

Carolyn M. Swann¹
PC Specialist

¹ Through February 1994.
² From March 1994.
³ From January 1995.
⁴ From May 1995.
⁵ April through July 1994.
⁶ February through May 1995.