

# Jerry McKinley

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*Picture outline:*

*Tillman County farmer Jerry McKinley, left, and his son, Brad, has both served the Oklahoma Boll Weevil Eradication Organization. Jerry recently retired from the OBWEO board of directors after being its chairman since the program's inception 14 years ago. When the elder McKinley retired in March, Brad took his position on the board of directors. The McKinley's grow cotton, wheat, grain sorghum, corn and raise cattle near Tipton, Ok. (NTOK Cotton photo)*

Hobart, Ok.-- A person's existence on earth is often measured by his contribution to the welfare of others. Such a person is Tillman County farmer Jerry McKinley.

McKinley retired this month after serving for 14 years as board chairman of the Oklahoma Boll Weevil Eradication Organization, a group created in Oklahoma in 1996 as part of a national program to rid the cotton-growing states of a debilitating pest, the cotton boll weevil.

By the late 1990s, continually-increasing populations of the boll weevil had removed dryland cotton as a source of income for farmers throughout the cotton-growing states of the US. From the Atlantic Southeast states across the Midsouth of Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas into Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico, cotton had become too expensive to grow for dryland farmers.

The main reason was the cost of multiple applications of insecticides to control boll weevils feeding on the cotton crop. Due to the boll weevil, at least two generations of cotton growers were removed from US productivity of cotton for cloth and food. Dozens of cotton gins with their crews and payrolls, warehouses, and mills were shut down with nothing to process. Oklahoma was one of the hardest hit of the cotton-growing states.

In 1997, a cooperative effort by state and federal entities created a boll weevil eradication project. Starting with no funds or infrastructure, each cotton-growing state was called on to form an association dedicated to removal of the costly insect.

McKinley, a third-generation Tillman County farmer, was asked to chair the new organization for Oklahoma. Cotton growing in Oklahoma is concentrated in the southwestern corner of the state, so it was only natural to seek out experienced growers from that area to head up the new group.

The Oklahoma Boll Weevil Eradication Organization was headquarter in Hobart, Ok., with Dr. Jerry Coakley, a retired Oklahoma State University Extension entomologist, as its first director. After Coakley's retirement, another OSU Extension entomologist, Dr. Bill Massey, followed in his footsteps.

Helping to get the organization headed in the right direction from a technical standpoint was Dr. Miles Karner, an integrated pest management specialist with OSU Extension, McKinley said.

Following Massey's retirement, Joe Harris, who had worked for the state organization since its inception, became director and still serves in that capacity.

McKinley's skill in organizing a new agency with both federal and state regulations was admired by Harris. "It would be next to impossible to overestimate the impact of Jerry McKinley's tenure as board chairman on the success of the boll weevil eradication effort in Oklahoma," Harris said. "Early on, his ability to articulate the vision of a weevil-free state during numerous meetings with cotton growers, legislators and others helped build solid consensus in support of the program.

"As weevil numbers dropped and top crops became commonplace, his leadership enabled the organization to stay focused on its mission. Jerry can be justifiably proud of his selfless contributions to boll weevil eradication as are we who worked closely with him over the years."

The "top crop" referred to by Harris concerns the late-season production by cotton which the boll weevil's feeding usually prevented. Many knowledgeable cotton farmers will tell you the "top crop," that portion of bolls opening at the top of each cotton plant means the difference

Between a dryland cotton farmer making a profit or not.

Failure to make a "top crop," sometimes as much as a half-bale to the acre in contribution to the total per acre yield, often made the difference between a dryland farmer making a profit or failing to pay for his seed, fertilizer and pesticide bills.

Several years elapsed between the removal of dryland cotton production due to the boll weevil depredations and the start of the cooperative eradication program. During these years, farmers quit growing cotton, gins went broke and about everyone, with the exception of those growing cotton under irrigated conditions, moved on to other crops.

So, McKinley, and the others who worked with him in Oklahoma and other states, had a tough time just getting people to admit there was a solution to getting cotton back as a commercial agricultural crop.

"We had a difficult time selling the idea of an eradication program" McKinley remembers. "We had to find people willing to contribute a lot of time, without being paid, to organize the program. We had to find ways to cooperate with new federal and state laws that would govern how the program would be funded and run after being organized.

"Farmers always have to watch their expenses closely. We were asking them to vote in referendums to allow us to collect funds from their cotton production to finance the boll weevil eradication. We asked them to allow our employees to scout for weevils in their fields so we could apply insecticides.

"We had to hire professional staff people who knew how to identify the boll weevil and effectively combat it without removing any beneficial insects that naturally fed on the weevils."

So, to make a long story short, the OBWEO program is entering the post-eradication phase now; a time when cotton fields will be scouted in diminishing numbers in the future.

But no one will ever completely hang up the boll weevil removal effort. There will be a minimally-funded program continuing to be vigilant against any future boll weevil depredations, Harris said.

"Following the recent hurricanes that blew in through the Gulf of Mexico, certain areas in South Texas had sudden weevil attacks," he said. "It is thought those winds carried weevils in from Mexico or Central America. We must never let down our guard completely."

Serving with McKinley from the first years were: Leon King; Mark Nichols; Ron Whittenburg and Sam Pfenning.

McKinley's place on the current board was taken by Brad McKinley, Jerry's son, who is carrying on the family's farming tradition in Tillman County. Serving on the current board with Brad are Dan Vinyard, Phil Bole, Ron Whittenburg and Shelby Long.