

Tales from the dark era (December 2024)

Hi, my name is Brian Baird. I began my journey way back in the late 1970s, the same year that synthetic pyrethroids were commercially released.

The industry breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, we had a product that would control heliothis spp and provide residual as well. Prior to that the industry was still v using DDT and adding some really nasty products, organic phosphates, terrible products.

Well, it took us no more than four years to totally destroy pyrethroids with overuse.

We struggled through the 1980s and 1990s with very few options. Two spotted spider mite became a major pest, with few options that worked. Adding to the problem we were still using pyrethroids, organo phosphates, thiodicarb methomyl, all of which were exacerbating the mite problem.

The year prior to the first genetically modified cotton we had basically lost control of both heliothis and mites. The year was an expensive exercise from an economic point of view but also psychologically. Farmers, consultants, chemical suppliers and aerial operators were exhausted and stressed. Farming, I have always thought, should be fun but this was far from that.

It was a challenge to keep pests to a reasonable level and mostly every check was above threshold. But we survived and crops were still respectable even by today's standard.

I can remember a farm average of 12.5 bls per ha in 1992. Young ones would laugh at that achievement now but it was big then. With the advent of Bollgard we basically gained management control of insects and more importantly our lives.

I recite this boring story of the old days not looking for any recognition but as a stern warning to the younger generation of farmers and consultants.

I am very concerned that you are repeating the very mistakes that we made.

We did what we had to do to get an economic crop but we should not be at all proud of what we left behind. Insect and weed resistance is our legacy and damage to the environment which probably will never be repaired – and it doesn't need to be that way. With today's technology we have time on our side.

Time to reassess – do we really need that spray? Or can we come back in a few days to see if nature has done a better job than any chemical intervention? We did not have that luxury before Bollgard cotton. I see farmers already applying insecticides and it is history repeating.

Finally as I enter the twilight of my career , the thing that I am most proud of, the thing that gave me the most satisfaction, was not the large crops , not the crop awards , but actually watching a farm, a field, which was what I called in balance. I could spend hours watching the interaction of insect pests and predators. This balance even in non Bollgard crops could go on for weeks even months.

The most overrated indicator in cotton in my opinion is fruit retention. I would much prefer a 60 percent retention on healthy cotton than 95 percent on cotton that was about to cut out. Way too much emphasis is placed on this useless indicator. Just my opinion.

From Brian Baird. (BR and AM Baird Pty Ltd)