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Testimony

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U.S. - MEXICO OPIUM POPPY AND MARIJUANA
AERIAL ERADICATION PROGRAM

Statement of
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Before the
Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and
Control
House of Representatives



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Mr. Chairman,

We appreciate this opportunity to discuss our views on the U.S.-Mexico aerial opium poppy and marijuana crop eradication program. We reviewed the aerial eradication program in accordance with Section 2007 of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which required GAO to evaluate the effectiveness of U.S. international narcotics control assistance provided pursuant to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. We expect to issue a report on our review in the near future.

The U.S. Department of State and the Office of the Attorney General of Mexico have been long-term partners in a program to destroy opium poppy and marijuana fields in Mexico with herbicides sprayed from aircraft. U.S appropriations for this program since 1977 exceed \$150 million. The United States allocated \$15.5 million for fiscal year 1987, \$10.55 million of which will cover the cost of aircraft spare parts and maintenance services under a contract between the Attorney General's Office and a U.S. firm. U.S. officials in Mexico reported that Mexico's 1987 appropriation will exceed \$18 million.

We reviewed the joint aerial eradication program to determine

1. the extent to which the program has over time reduced the amount of heroin and marijuana which is produced in Mexico and smuggled into the United States;

2. whether the Office of the Attorney General of Mexico is using U.S.-purchased and maintained aircraft in a manner which maximizes aerial spraying of opium poppy and marijuana fields; and
3. whether the program's formal bilateral agreements provide an adequate basis for the ongoing cooperation needed to eliminate, as quickly and efficiently as possible, opium poppy and marijuana cultivation in Mexico.

Our review did not cover other bilateral narcotics control activities such as investigations or interdiction, nor did we review other Mexico efforts to limit production and trafficking of dangerous drugs or conversion and transiting of cocaine.

Program statistics show that between 1977 and 1980, the eradication program, benefitted by poor weather, caused significant decreases in the U.S. availability of heroin and marijuana from Mexico. To illustrate--in 1975, 5.2 metric tons of heroin available in the United States originated in Mexico; however, by 1980 the U.S. supply of Mexican heroin had dropped to less than 1.4 metric tons. Although statistics from the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of State and the National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee differ, they agree that, while the supply of heroin from Mexico is significantly less than during the peak

years, it has increased in recent years and now represents about 40 percent of the United States supply. In 1986, according to the Department of State, between 2 and 4 metric tons of heroin reaching the United States originated in Mexico. As a result of the earlier aerial eradication program, the supply of Mexican marijuana in the U.S. market was only 6 percent, or about 750 metric tons, by 1982. However, by 1986, 37 percent of all imported marijuana available in the United States, or more than 3,000 metric tons, originated in Mexico.

Annual cultivation and eradication statistics are equally inexact; however, they do show that less than 40 percent of the total estimated cultivation of opium poppy and marijuana has been eradicated by the bilateral program.

We found several problems with the management of the program, which, if addressed, could result in improved program performance. For example, there is a need to improve the information base for planning purposes, increase the efficiency of personnel and resource management, and improve the administration of the aviation operations administered by the Deputy Attorney General. In regard to the latter we identified areas where improvements in aviation management and maintenance could improve aircraft availability and utilization rates and thereby increase the number of flight hours devoted to spraying.

Also, reported corruption has had an undeterminable but detrimental, effect on the program.

At the time of our fieldwork, the Attorney General's airfleet consisted of about 30 airplanes and 55 helicopters. In addition to this airfleet, the Department of State had assigned a varying number of fixed-wing agricultural spray planes to the Mexican program on a trial basis.

Department of State personnel in Mexico had developed aviation performance expectations for the eradication program. For example, they believed it was reasonable for each aircraft to be flown an average of 80 hours per month. They also believed it was reasonable to expect that, on the average, 80 percent of the airfleet would be in operating condition and 20 percent in maintenance. However, they had not developed a standard or expectation regarding the percentage of flight time which should be devoted to aerial spraying as opposed to other aviation tasks such as reconnaissance, verification or transporting personnel and supplies.

We found that program aircraft were flown an average of 48 hours per month; substantially fewer than the 80 hours per month average considered reasonable by Department of State officials. We did not independently determine the extent to which maintenance delays reduced aircraft availability; however, various reports suggest

that at times as little as 40 percent of the airfleet was in running order and available for program purposes. This compares poorly to the U.S. suggestion that 80 percent availability was reasonable and even less favorably to the 90 percent availability rate called for in the maintenance services contract between the Attorney General's Office and the U.S. contractor.

There were numerous problems in the aviation operation which could account for the program's relatively weak performance. For example, poor maintenance scheduling caused overloaded repair facilities, and inadequate inventory controls resulted in excess supplies of some parts, and insufficient supplies of others. Overloaded facilities and poor parts management lengthened the time aircraft were on the ground for inspection and repair thereby decreasing available flight time.

Another problem concerned eradication personnel. We were told that because their salaries were substantially less than those paid in the private sector, there was high turnover among program pilots and mechanics. In April the program had 113 pilots and needed at least 24 additional pilots to maintain a full-time program. There was a comparable shortage of trained mechanics. Various reports stated that mechanics have engaged in a work slow down for several months to protest their low wages. The shortage and turnover of pilots and mechanics not only had an adverse effect on aircraft utilization and availability rates but could increase accident

repair and training costs which the United States has historically paid as part of its contribution to aviation maintenance and management operations.

Statistics showed that helicopters were used less often for spraying than for other program tasks such as reconnaissance or transport. The Deputy Attorney General told us the extensive use of helicopters for non-spraying purposes reflected the program's need for additional aircraft. It appears that Department of State and Mexican officials are in agreement on the need for additional aircraft to increase the airfleet's eradication capability. In late 1983, the United States provided the first of several fixed-wing agricultural spray planes for the Mexico program. The planes were added to the eradication program on a trial basis dependent on favorable evaluations by both the United States and Mexico of its utility in Mexico. However, Mexican officials were never convinced that the aircraft was suitable for spraying operations in mountainous terrain and as of April the planes were reassigned. We have been advised that the Attorney General's office has decided to purchase 14 additional helicopters for the program. However, U.S. officials believe that Mexico is purchasing a relatively inefficient model because they are limited to use at lower altitudes and have limited fuel and herbicide spraying capabilities. It is unfortunate that neither purchase was based on bilateral analysis of the airfleet and agreement as to need for any changes or additions. Lack of bilateral acceptance of the U.S.

spray airplanes ultimately resulted in their removal from Mexico, and it remains to be seen whether Mexico's most recent choice of helicopters was the optimal one for the program.

In addition to operational problems which reduce the effectiveness of the current airfleet, there were broader issues requiring bilateral attention. For example, after more than a decade of activity, program managers still lack a complete picture of the extent and location of opium poppy and marijuana cultivation throughout Mexico. In addition, the United States and Mexico have not been able to agree upon a methodology to develop annual eradication goals based upon mutually acceptable aviation performance standards.

We also noted that the bilateral verification project, implemented by DEA and the Attorney General's office in fiscal year 1984, and designed to provide more credibility to eradication claims and information on the effectiveness of equipment, herbicides and spray techniques, could be improved by adding a ground verification component. The project has primarily been limited to aerial verification because it lacks a helicopter needed to obtain on-ground intelligence. Although DEA was promised a helicopter, one had not been provided by the time of our field work. Various U.S. observers have also suggested that verification may be less accurate than claimed because of the difficulty of verifying small fields from high- and fast-flying fixed-wing aircraft, which may be

more useful for general reconnaissance than for more precise verification.

We found that the formal agreements between the United States and Mexico, which should document mutual understandings and expectations, do not address important program elements. Specifically, recent agreements do not

- address the methodology for comprehensive surveys of the Mexican cultivation base,
- include mutually acceptable annual eradication targets developed in accordance with pre-agreed standards for aircraft utilization and availability,
- provide for a mutually acceptable and fully equipped program to measure and verify eradication accomplishments, and
- provide for a mutually acceptable program of periodic evaluation and audit.

Many of these problems are not new. In 1977 we also found unreliable information on the extent of opium poppy cultivation and problems in program management such as insufficient spare parts, low salaries, and inadequate program monitoring. After 10 years, U.S. and Mexican program managers have not solved these problems nor

agreed on annual goals and standards for aviation management and evaluation even on an informal basis. Since we believe resolution of these issues is important to program success, we believe that they should now be made part of the program's formal agreement process.

We understand that since the completion of our fieldwork the Embassy in Mexico has developed an operational plan which, if effectively implemented, could help resolve many of the issues noted in our review.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement, we will be happy to respond to any questions you or the committee members may have.