

High mic: The main quality problem in 2001

By Jim Prendergast, Chairman, ACSA

Statistics compiled by the Australian Cotton Shippers Association (ACSA) and released at their November meeting in Brisbane revealed the quality problems associated with the 2000–01 crop were mostly confined to micronaire.

The much higher percentage of high micronaire (5.0 and higher) delivered by growers this season came as a shock to all in the cotton industry. In recent seasons we have seen 75 per cent of the crop fall into the prime micronaire range of 3.8–4.5 and last season this dropped to 47.9 per cent.

For the first time since the ACSA has kept quality statistics, the micronaire range of 4.6–4.9 was above 40 per cent (41.5 per cent compared to only nine per cent the previous season). The micronaire comparison in the 5.0 plus category shows 8.7 per cent last season compared to the previous season's 0.5 per cent.

With the final 2000–01 crop figure of 3,482,968 million physical bales, 8.7 per cent represents 303,000 bales of high micronaire cotton with not a single bale forward sold by merchants prior to picking.

The far-reaching consequences of this season's micronaire problems go much further than the lower monetary returns to growers. Much time, effort and expense has been used to promote the quality of the Australian cotton in our export markets. A lot of this promotion was done through the export marketing development seminars which ACSA has now held in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Italy, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China.

We have pushed the repeatability aspect of the quality parameters of Australian cotton and in

FIGURE 1: Staple of the 2001 cotton crop

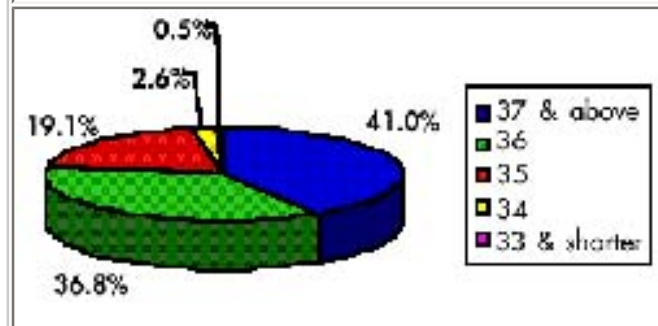


FIGURE 2: Micronaire of the 2001 cotton crop

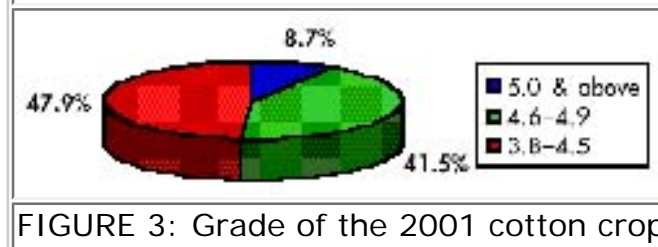


FIGURE 3: Grade of the 2001 cotton crop

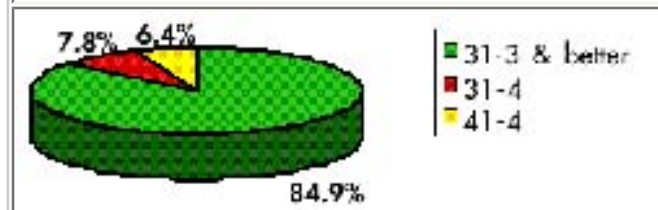


FIGURE 4: Strength of the 2001 cotton crop

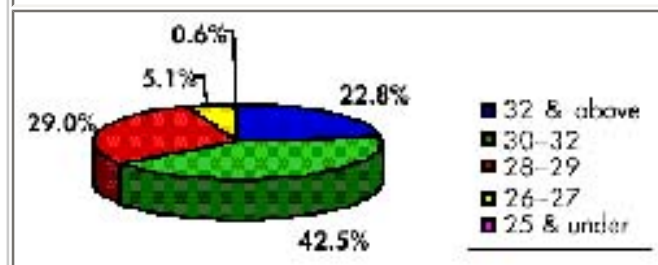
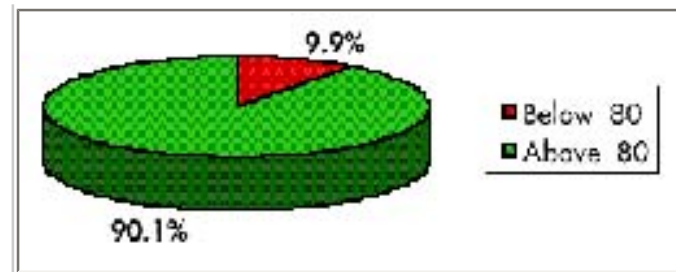


FIGURE 5: Uniformity of the 2001 cotton crop

many export spinning mills Australian cotton currently makes up the biggest percentage of their laydown. Mills spinning Australian medium to high grades to produce 30/40 count yarns and better, require a micronaire range of 3.8–4.5 and in using such a large percentage of Australian cotton, that tight range becomes even more important.



The main difficulties encountered by mills with using higher micronaire cotton are:

- Higher micronaire fibres are thicker, which reduces the number of fibres in a yarn cross-section, resulting in lower strength yarn;
- The mills can't mix high micronaire Australian with other growths such as SJV and West African — both of which have an average micronaire of 4.2; and,
- Mixing high micronaire (5.0–5.2) with prime micronaire (3.8–4.5) has a detrimental effect on the dyeing process. A fibre with 4.2 micronaire will absorb a different amount of dye than a 5.0 fibre.

As a result of this large percentage of 5.0 and above micronaire, most merchants were forced to renegotiate contracts, which was a costly process. In addition they then had the added burden of selling more than 300,000 bales of high micronaire into an unknown discount market.

ADDITIONAL DISCOUNTS

This in turn could lead to additional discounts on merchants P&D sheets in the future, much the same as with micronaire below 3.5. Cotton production experts tell me that last year's growing season was a one in 30 year event. I trust that means a return to normal for the 2001–02 crop.

Apart from micronaire the other quality parameters of the crop were reasonably good and acceptable to our customers.

Cotton graded 31-3 comprised 84.9 per cent of the crop compared with the previous season's middling (31s) at 68 per cent. This was due in part to the mainly dry picking period.

Staple of 11/8" (36) and longer was 77.8 per cent — only slightly above last season's 75 per cent.

The most satisfying result was the increase in strength of our product. Last year we were pleased to report the percentage of cotton testing 30 grams per tex or above was 51 per cent but that was well and truly surpassed last season with 65.3 per cent.

Uniformity remained very stable at an impressive 90 per cent — well above the required 80 per cent uniformity.

Spinners continue to complain about the excessive number of neps and short fibres in Australian cotton, but hopefully ongoing research into these problem areas will bring results that will appease our customers in the future.