

2002 Cotton Grower of the Year: Wayne Reeves, Parker Joint Venture

By James Holden

If Wayne Reeves is the future of cotton growing in Australia, then we have very little to worry about. 'Parker' — the farm Wayne manages for a joint venture partnership between a local doctor and estate agent from Emerald — is a show-piece of practical farming. It has every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed.

Not only that, it is a farm the cotton industry can hold up to rural and urban communities as a great example of sustainable and environmentally-responsible cotton production.

Parker left us all shaking our heads. Rarely in the field of modern cotton farming was so much good stuff achieved by so few with so little equipment (sorry about the ripoff, Mr Churchill).

My native tongue (Estuary English) has an excellent expression for how we all felt about what Wayne had achieved on Parker — we were well and truly 'gobsmacked' (sorry about the ripoff, Mr Beckham).

The farm is a testament to Wayne's enthusiasm and vision and it's hard to know where to start — but what better place than at the front gate.

Here Wayne has erected a comprehensive sign that includes a large farm map, a warning about and list of sprayed fields, and contact phone and UHF numbers. With Emerald still Fusarium free there is also a message to not enter the property but advise of one's arrival. Even though the sign is a small thing in the scheme of things, it is typical of Wayne's attention to detail.

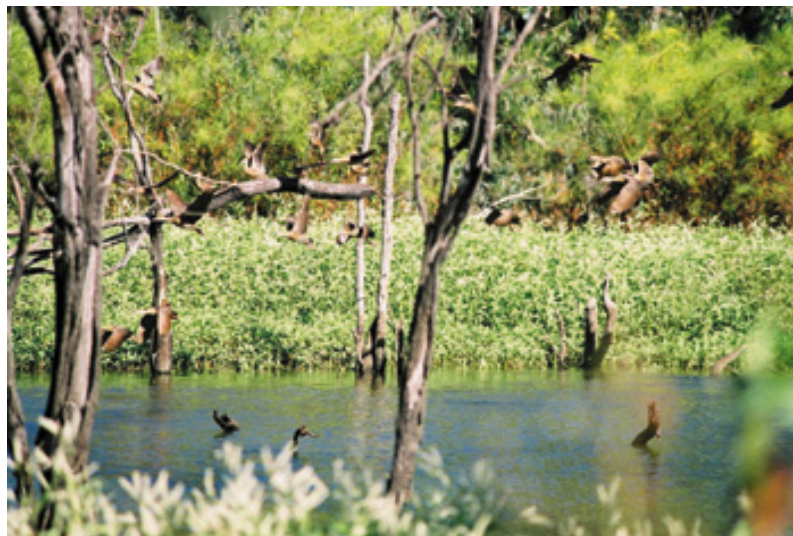
OH&S program

This is no more evident than the occupational health and safety program on Parker. Wayne's common sense approach to farm safety uses simple, inexpensive solutions to OH&S issues. For example, he has marked culvert and drain crossings with white-painted tyres. They are easier to see and less likely to get caught in machinery than the more commonly-used bale ties with marker tape.

Another good example is the bunding he has



2002 Australian Cotton Grower of the Year, Wayne Reeves.



This artificial wetland is maintained by the tailwater from Parker.

made for the back of the chemical mixing trailer — it's simply a three inch metal surround covered with meshweld. There is a drain through the floor of the trailer, controlled by a tap, in the event of a spill.

The workshop is another area where Wayne's OH&S program is self evident. It's clean, uncluttered and well signed. And on one wall of the workshop — right next to the first aid kit — are folders containing Parker's pesticide application management plan, storm water management plan, MSDS sheets and emergency procedure guides.

On the same shelf is a guide that gives step by step instructions for virtually every operation on the farm. Wayne says he takes every contractor through the relevant part of the operations guide before they start work on Parker.

Wayne's tree planting program is in full swing. Each year he plants around 1300 trees — generally a mixture of wilgas, melaleucas and river red gums — mostly on the farm's boundaries. To get them established Wayne runs a drip line along the base of the trees and uses a fire fighter pump to supply the water.

Also simple but effective is Wayne's use of a cotton planter to get wheat established on the farm's buffer zones. He uses it as a moisture seeker, planting in two directions to ensure a decent stand.

It is typical of Wayne's approach to farm equipment. He does not have the latest and greatest gear — in fact, unlike most farm yards, rows of machinery are conspicuous by their absence. True, Wayne relies on contractors for many farm operations, but what machinery he has he uses fully and often innovatively.

Regardless of the lack of machinery, or perhaps because of it, permanent beds are a feature of Parker. Wayne says some cotton fields still have the same beds from nine years ago. After two crops of cotton the fields are generally rotated with wheat followed by a summer crop of sorghum, rainfall allowing. If the beds have to be knocked down — for instance for a touchup with the laser grader — they are reformed with Beeline.

Water management

As you'd expect water management is a mixture of innovative practices and careful monitoring.

These come together in an artificial wetland-cum-billabong, which is fed by the farm's tailwater. Many growers would be nervous about running



Wayne keeps a close eye on the wetland's water quality by regularly monitoring aquatic macroinvertebrates.



The sign at the farm's front gate is typical of Wayne's attention to detail.

tailwater from cotton fields into this kind of feature, but Wayne feels maintaining a healthy wetland on a cotton farm demonstrates the industry's environmental awareness and responsibility.

One look and it is obvious the wetland is a waterbird haven. Yet Wayne was not content with assuming healthy-looking ducks meant a healthy wetland. With guidance from the Queensland Department of Natural Resources he began monitoring water quality on a regular basis as part of the 'Waterwatch' program.

Five to six times per season Wayne scoops water from the wetland into a shallow, white tray and counts the various forms of aquatic life in the sample. He says DNR have categories for the commonly-found freshwater macroinvertebrates based on their susceptibility to pollutants, such as nutrients and pesticides.

"DNR staff get quite excited when they look at water from the wetland because there is so much life in it — certainly a lot more than they see in water storages supplied by runoff from parks and sports fields. And our wetland water always contains species that are either susceptible or very susceptible to pollutants," he said.

Local school children visit the wetland regularly as part of their studies.

Wayne's water monitoring program also includes looking at efficiencies of every part of the irrigation system.

Involvement in the Rural Water Use Efficiency Initiative — coordinated by DPI staff including Sarah Hood — led to an on-farm trial on storage evaporation and leakage losses.

A number of 'mini-storages' with different designs — a combination of deep, shallow, covered and uncovered — have been constructed on the farm. Wayne says he really enjoys having research trials on Parker, and having the trial right next to his storage makes the work all the more interesting.

"We had leakage problems with our storage and had to spend around \$40,000 lining it with bentonite — so it's great to have this research on-farm, especially when it's so relevant to our situation."

Wayne is also concerned about efficiencies elsewhere in the irrigation system and has meters on key pumps and delivery pipes to keep track of water use.



A simple bund on this mix trailer is a good example of Wayne's common sense approach to farm safety and OH&S.



Wayne's tree planting program is in full swing on Parker.

In the field he monitors crop water use and schedules irrigations with an Enviroscan system.

He says water use efficiency is always vital, but was even more so last season, which was excessively hot and dry in Emerald.

“Last summer we had about 80 days at or more than 38°C and just 130 mm of rain for the season.

“As a result the crop used 9.6 megalitres per hectare — nearly three megalitres per hectare more than the 2000–01 season.”

Parker is just outside the Emerald Irrigation Area and as a result is a few kilometres away from the bulk of the region’s cotton area. Regardless of this the whitefly explosion was as bad for Parker as it was for the rest of the district, especially towards the end of the season.

“We used a couple of Pegasus sprays to knockdown the population, but the effect was very short-lived,” says Wayne.

Thankfully last season the whitefly problem resulted in just four bales from Parker downgraded for honeydew contamination — similar to most other Emerald farms.

Regardless of that, the district’s growers are well aware of the serious threat they are facing from whitefly.

Whitefly strategy

“We have to get a strategy in place for next season so we are better prepared for whitefly.”

And Wayne is not just talking about it, he is actively involved in the working party formed to find a workable whitefly strategy. This will include a trip to the US this winter to see how whitefly are managed in that country.

He is also a member of the local area wide management group, which meets before the start of each stage of the insecticide resistance management strategy. Extra meetings are held if necessary during the season.

Wayne’s industry and community involvement does not end there.

He regularly has Emerald agricultural college students on work experience and his farm is a popular stop on the ‘cotton discovery tour’, which gives tourists and locals a better understanding of cotton production.

It almost goes without saying that a Cotton Grower of the Year winner should be involved

with the Best Management Practices (BMP) program. Wayne is no exception.

He took Parker to the certification level last October and would be one grower who could rightly say he has implemented all of his action plans. Yet typical of Wayne's outlook, he continues adding more to make what is already an excellent farm even better.

Or to put it into Estuary English — "Gordon Bennet, it was a flippin' top gaff!"

And it has deservedly won Wayne Reeves the 2002 Cotton Grower of the Year Award.