

# Cotton Conference focus on Murray Darling

By Gordon Collie

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The stressed state of the Murray Darling basin and implications for the cotton industry will be high on the agenda at the 11th Australian Cotton Conference to be held in Brisbane from August 13 to 15.

The security of water allocations and the possible threat of salinity encroachment are issues confronting many growers who farm within the huge Murray Darling catchment.

The Conference opening address by Queensland Premier Peter Beattie at 2 pm on August 13 will set the scene with papers to be presented by Kevin Goss, Deputy Chief Executive of the Murray Darling Basin Commission and Bobbie Brazil, Chair of Land and Water Australia.

The release of salinity hazard maps for the Queensland section of the Murray Darling Basin in early July was accompanied by a controversial proposal to close down Australia's largest privately owned cotton farm, Cubbie Station at Dirranbandi, and divert its stored water to northern NSW environmental flows.

With the Cubbie buy-back rejected by the Federal Government, the State has launched a six-month independent review of its salinity hazard science and warned that all cotton growers in the Lower Balonne will have to share the pain of water cutbacks.

Kevin Goss will discuss at the Conference strategies for sustainable use of the basin's resources with evidence that degradation will worsen under a "business as usual" approach.

There are still major questions to be resolved according to Kevin. These include whether communities can agree on the impost necessary,

whether governments are prepared to invest and regulate hard enough and whether landholders will adopt new practices.

Kevin will discuss the crucial issue of water sharing with the environment and the three scenarios being evaluated to provide extra flows into the Murray River.

With the commission studying the ecological benefits and the economic and social impacts of boosting environmental flows, Kevin believes that now is the time for the cotton industry to enter into dialogue on a sustainable future for the Murray Darling Basin.

Land and Water Australia chair and Darling Downs farmer Bobbie Brazil will discuss the lack of progress in achieving consensus, certainty and closure on the issue of sharing water between agriculture and the environment.

The cotton industry will be challenged to protect its right to use water from the Murray Darling system with science. Bobbie recommends that cotton should actively seek out collaborative research partnerships.

She suggests the certainty that the Torrens title system provides for land ownership could be used as a model for water security.

A wide array of research papers presented over the three days of the conference will showcase scientific advancements being made.

These will include the latest developments in the battle against the crippling plant disease Fusarium wilt.

Queensland Department of Primary Industries scientist Joe Kochman says Fusarium wilt is widely regarded in the industry as one of the most significant threats to sustainable cotton production to have developed in recent years.

The disease continues to spread to new areas, despite a major research, education and awareness campaign being mounted.

While progress is being made against the Fusarium threat, the war continues Joe says.

For conference information and online registration visit the website [www.csd.net.au/acgra](http://www.csd.net.au/acgra)