

Grower feedback on cotton BMP auditing

By Rachel Holloway and Guy Roth

The auditing process of the Cotton Best Management Practice (BMP) program began in May 1999. Since then about 267 initial compliance audits (first audit) have been conducted on cotton farms. This represents 20 per cent of the cotton growers in the industry and covered 45 per cent of the cotton area grown in 2001-02.

The cotton best management practice program is a voluntary initiative to manage environmental risks on cotton farms. It is a leader in the adoption of best management practices within the agricultural sector.

Number of compliance audits

Figure 1 shows the number of growers who have completed a BMP initial compliance audit in each cotton valley. The number of growers participating in the BMP audit program has nearly doubled in each valley from 2001 to 2002.

The aim of the auditing process is to determine if farm operations are complying with BMP practices. The audit provides an objective assessment for growers on where improvements can be made to ensure they are meeting their environmental legal obligations as well as industry best practices.

Growers are encouraged to have an initial compliance audit to enable them to benchmark their environmental performance. The only preparation required for the initial compliance audit is to have completed the self-assessment worksheets in the BMP manual and any necessary action plans written. Growers do not need everything in place to have the initial compliance audit.

All growers who have had an audit have been surveyed and have provided feedback on the audit program. So it continues to evolve and improve. Just over 50 per cent of growers who are involved in the BMP program responded to the survey on which these findings are based.

Benefits from the audit

Over 90 per cent of respondents felt the audit was of significant benefit, while only one per cent believed the audit was not worthwhile (Figure 2). Some grower com-

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FIGURE 1: Number of initial compliance audits in each valley

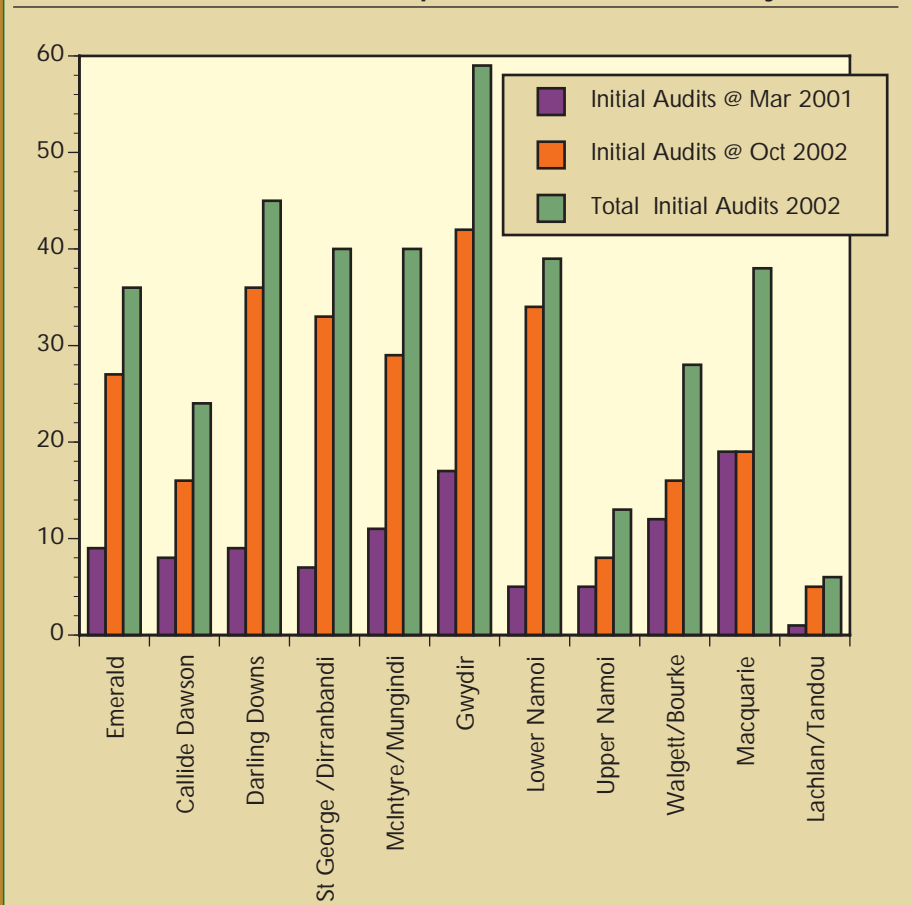
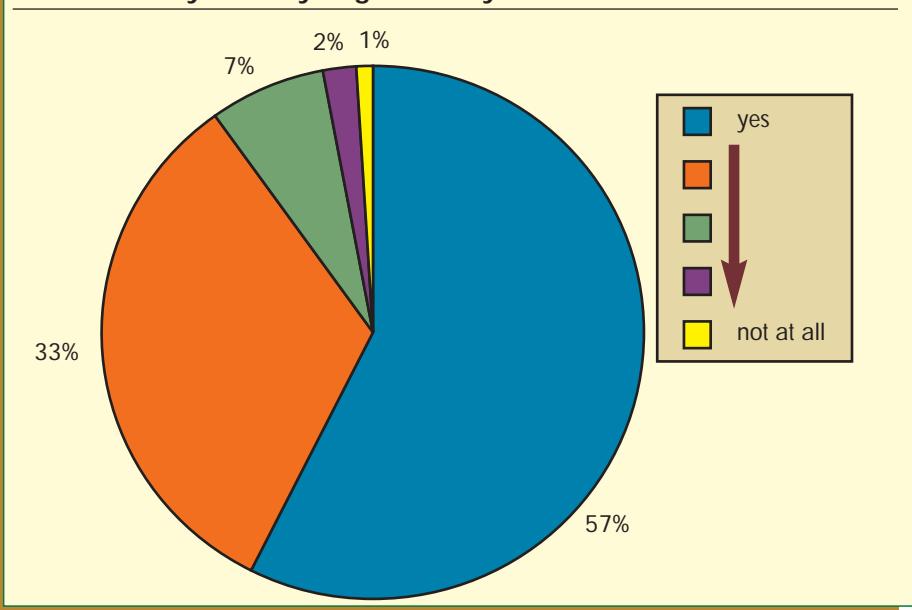


FIGURE 2: Do you feel you gained any benefit from the audit?



ments on the benefits of the audit program include:

- “It makes you aware of your obligations;”
- “It focused on the issues we have overlooked;” and,
- “It gave us the push to do things we have been putting off.”

Conduct of the audit

All respondents agreed the audit was professionally and confidentially conducted, demonstrating the confidence of growers in the legitimacy of the audit (Figure 3).

The Cotton Research and Development Corporation has trained 16 environmental auditors to conduct BMP audits for the industry. There are 12 BMP auditors registered at present. Industry auditors have been trained to the highest standard of environmental auditing — the course is recognised by the Quality Society of Australasia and the International Environmental Auditors Association (EARA).

The vast majority (87 per cent) of growers felt more at ease with the BMP audit process once it had been conducted (Figure 4).

Audit frequency

There was a difference in opinions within the industry on how often audits should be conducted. The overall majority (56 per cent) felt an audit every two years was appropriate (Figure 5). In response to this feedback and other discussions the period between BMP audits has changed from 14–18 months to two years.

GROWER COMMENTS

- “It helped with things I need to record.”
- “I think we are better farmers because of it.”
- “We have proved to ourselves that we are doing the right thing.”



FIGURE 3: Did the auditors conduct the audit professionally and confidentially?

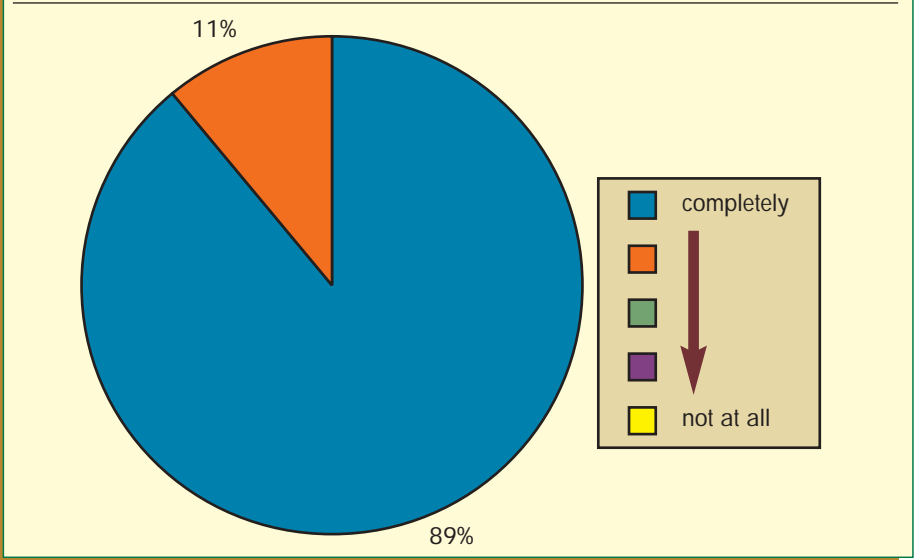


Figure 4: Do you feel more at ease with the audit process now that an audit has been conducted?

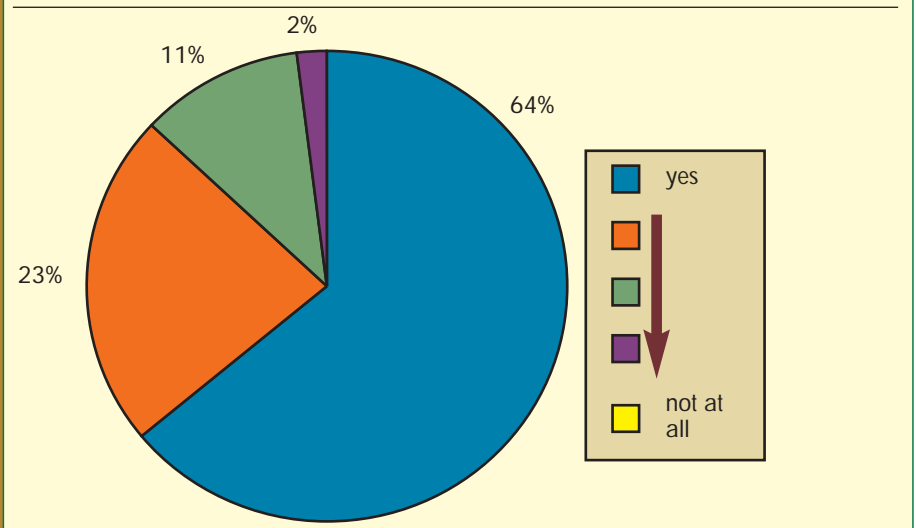


Figure 5: How often do you think BMP audits should be conducted?

