

# District Reports

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## Dawson Valley

At present, much of the irrigation area in the Dawson valley is being worked. Soil condition is generally very good following a couple of significant rainfall events over the past month. This working has also served to remove areas of volunteer cotton that has progressed well in the mild conditions. There is an acute awareness of removing these and other potential whitefly hosts.

Several growers have chosen to double crop with winter crop again this year. At present about 20 per cent of the irrigation area is planted to chickpea. All of this country will be turned around to cotton again in spring.

While most growers are either irrigating chickpea or working country, one grower north of Moura has only half finished picking. It seems ironic that a crop that (apparently) had the first squares and flowers in the district would still be being picked in July.

Several Dawson valley growers took the opportunity to travel to the Australian Cotton Trade Show in Moree in May. While most people brought back some good ideas from the event, Gladstone Holmes brought back several broken ribs following an unfortunate incident in a motel bathroom. If it wasn't for the quick thinking of his mates, the injuries may have been a lot worse and even involved drowning.

The Dawson system is currently at about 88 per cent capacity. Although it's too early to be too certain, there will probably be the full area planted next season (about 5000 hectares). Fertilising will probably begin in late July.

There has been an indication from most growers in the Dawson that there will be a preference for a later cotton planting window in 2003 than has been the case in previous years. The reason for this is to increase the likelihood of in-season rain



and utilise the late season heliothis control offered by Bollgard II. This would mean the majority of crops being planted in early October rather than early to mid September.

The Dawson Valley Cotton Growers Association held their annual general meeting in July. Brett Austin was returned as chairman as was Gladstone Holmes as vice chairman, Penny Anderson as treasurer, and Harrod Anderson as secretary.

David Kelly  
July 4, 2003

## Central Highlands

There have been a number of analogies used recently about how dry it is around the area. Unfortunately, most of these are unsuitable to print. Following the 92 mm (3.7 inches) that fell in February during picking, there has been very little follow up. In the period from March to the time of writing there has been a total of 62 mm (2.5 inches) rainfall in Emerald. This has not included any individual events of greater than 25 mm, so generally has done little to replenish subsoil moisture. The rainfall events have generally been sporadic, so some people are better off than others.

The new water year for the Fairbairn dam started on July 1 with the announcement of a 30 per cent allocation for the 2003–04 season. Although it is still too early to make a firm prediction of what this will do to the final cotton area for the region, the best guess would be 5000–10,000 hectares — 25–50 per cent of the previous season's area. The actual level of Fairbairn dam at present is 26 per cent (334,300 ml).

There will be a lot less carry-over water taken into next season compared to previous years. This is firstly a result of a lack of in-season rain in the 2002–03 season, but also the fact that a number of growers have used it to grow winter crops. In the present system with the dam at the current level, growers lose 20 per cent of their carry-over at the end of the water year to account for evaporation.

People are in the process now of ordering seed and selecting varieties for next season. Fibre quality is again playing an enormous part in the decision-making process for variety selection. In the past three seasons, up to 28 per cent of

bales produced locally have had high micronaire. Low strength was also a concern for an increased proportion of bales last season, possibly due to some crops running short of water.

At present there's a bit of fertiliser being applied for country going back into cotton. Most people are preparing more country than they will plant cotton to, so they will be ready to plant if there is a big inflow into the dam anytime between now and November.

David Kelly  
July 9, 2003

## Darling Downs

More rains fall on the Darling Downs! What a great start to another report.

Most areas of the Downs have reported good falls over the past few weeks, prompting some district producers to suggest that this is the best start to a winter season in several years — reflecting their increased optimism for crop prospects generally. Unfortunately again there was little opportunity for water harvesting for those growers desperate to fill ring-tanks.

Cereal and chickpea crops across most districts have established well and generally have sufficient soil moisture now to give confidence for a reasonable harvest — all be it early in the season. Chickpea growers are warned to ensure that their preventative spray programs are on track as reports of ascochyta blight have been received. The recent wet weather has provided ideal conditions for the development of this disease — a problem that can develop and spread rapidly. Growers are also urged to ensure any remaining volunteer plants in their fallows have been destroyed, as these plants can be a source of infection for new crops.

Another problem that has emerged is the high level of ergot in the regions' late sorghum crops. To add to this worry, reports of in-crop mice damage have been received for the central Downs area.

Field inspections and farm visits for the Darling Downs Cotton Grower Awards judging have now been completed, and final assessments and considerations undertaken in readiness for the winners' announcement at the Darling Downs Cotton Grower Inc. Awards Dinner. The dinner will be held in late August. Sneaked comments

from the judges indicate that the crops entered for the 2003–04 competition were of a high standard with some impressive yields despite the difficult season. Good luck to all the contestants in this year's competition.

With soil moisture levels improving over many districts of the Downs, there is a growing confidence amongst growers for a reasonable planting of dryland cotton for season 2003–04. What I would really like to report in the next issue, is that our region has had significant flows of water into the district storages — enough to secure our cotton production in our irrigation areas and that normal production levels on the Downs are guaranteed. But at this stage of the year I have been advised not to hold my breath waiting in anticipation.

Greg Salmon  
July 15, 2003

## Macintyre Valley

Ground preparation in the Macintyre Valley is well underway and nearly finished. The rain over the past few days will allow those optimistic growers out there to continue with any other ground work needed. Nitrogen will start to be put down — some growers will be putting a base rate of nitrogen down while others are waiting to see what happens with the weather. Some hard decisions will need to be made in a months time in regards to putting down starter fertiliser.

There is a range of scenarios amongst growers at the moment. Many growers across the valley who have some water have used this on winter cereals rather than lose the water to evaporation. Some growers are also irrigating their chickpeas. There are other growers with dryland cereals on irrigation country while some growers are trying to conserve as much moisture as possible so they have the potential to plant dryland cotton next season. At this stage we are still facing very little irrigation for next season — we may see some crops go in as dryland on a full moisture profile and hope to get a flow in the river which will allow some later irrigations. We may also see a lot of sorghum go in.

A major issue for many people (growers and those who service the industry) is the retention of staff. Problems may occur when it does rain and experienced workers are needed quickly.

An end-of-season research review was held on

June 17 with a strong attendance by growers and consultants. Thanks to the researchers who presented results of trials they have done in our valley this season and to the local speakers.

Congratulations to local grower Alex Sullivan of "Mullala" Boggabilla, who won the Cotton Achiever of the year award at the recent awards night held at the Gold Coast.

The annual Macintyre Valley awards dinner is coming up again, this year on July 19. I look forward to reporting the winners from the local crop competitions in the next report.

Anne Sullivan  
July 3, 2003

## St George

An average of three inches of rain around the St George area in the past week has been a welcome delight. Although there will be no water harvesting, this rain has been very timely for growers who have planted a winter crop. There is quite a bit of wheat planted in cotton country around St George, which is being partially irrigated and hopes to utilise the winter rain. The forecast is optimistic although at this stage there is very little irrigation water available for next season

Other growers are busy considering ground preparation and fertiliser application for the 2003–04 season. Many decisions are being made in regards to the rate of fertiliser being applied, considering water forecasts.

With the recent rain, growers will be considering a spring trap crop in the next few weeks. This will continue the Area Wide Management approach a lot of St George growers fostered last season. Hopefully some further rain will make this possible.

Rebecca Smith  
July 3, 2003

## Mungindi

The Mungindi region has seen a little more rainfall over the winter period this season compared to last year. There has been a total of 220 mm of rainfall with 150 mm of this falling from April until now.

The general rainfall that fell at the beginning of July allowed a lot of growers to plant dryland

wheat, chickpeas and barley. Some farms have up to 50 per cent of the total farm area planted to these crops.

The limited water situation within the Mungindi region will mean there will be serious reductions in area in the 2003–04 cotton season. Once again there will be a large focus on varieties that are stronger in limited water situations.

Those growers that have minimal amounts of storage water are considering planting areas of sorghum, which will either be watered up alone or may have one in-crop irrigation.

There are limited areas of irrigated wheat and chickpeas which look impressive at the moment.

The Mungindi Cotton Growers Association Charity Golf Day will be held in early September. It will be a great day out for growers and agronomists despite the current seasonal conditions.

Bernadette Harvey  
July 24, 2003

## Lower Namoi

It has been a fairly mild winter so far. Light but regular rainfall has caused interruptions to field preparation, particularly in the eastern half of the valley. Only about 40 per cent of the valley will be planted this season without significant rainfall in the catchment. Most of the cotton planted this season will be grown using ground water and locally harvested surface water.

Fertiliser application will continue over the next few months and pre-emergent herbicides will also be applied. Pupae busting and tillage operations are generally complete. Winter vegetation has been growing well in the eastern half of the valley and critical weeds such as marshmallow have been growing well. These weeds may well become a source of cotton pests in the spring.

Winter rotation crops are progressing well. Wheat and bean crops are in an advanced stage of growth. Continued rain should see very good yields from these crops.

Dryland areas are likely to increase significantly on last year's drought affected planting. With declining sorghum prices, many dryland growers will plant a cotton crop this year. Cash prices for lint and seed in the coming season are

reasonable given the higher Australian dollar.

A drive around most farm workshops makes it clear that planting time is not far away as planters receive a once over. It's certainly not long till planting time.

Overall prospects for the 2003 plant in the Lower Namoi are not good given the lack of river water. The drought may be beginning to end for dryland farmers, but for irrigators it will not end until Keepit and Split Rock fill.

Robert Eveleigh  
July 28, 2003

## Macquarie Valley

With little to talk about on the cotton front, let's focus on the winter crops. The Macquarie has been fortunate to receive timely showers. These have kept crops going despite little sub soil moisture.

Cereal area is up dramatically this year. Many cotton growers have substituted winter crops into cotton areas. The Warren district has the largest area of good looking wheat in the state. There have been no major disease or insect problems so far. Yields are expected to be above average at this stage.

The Warren district also has the state's largest canola planting. A record 20,000 hectares have been planted this year — three times the long term average. Mild autumn temperatures saw crops flower very early. This means crops could run out of moisture later. But yield expectations at the moment are high.

Pulse plantings are down this year. The major crop is chickpeas grown in the cotton rotation. Disease management, due to frequent light showers, has been critical. Plenty of fungicide has been used and yields just below average are expected.

The late July frosts will impact all winter crops — we just have to wait and see. More big rain — at least 50 mm — will be needed to carry crops through August and September.

Apart from that, massive rain is needed to fill the dam to raise the allocation from zero to something worthwhile. More waiting and watching the sky!

Kirrily Rourke and Leigh Jenkins  
July 29, 2003

## Gwydir Valley

Growers in the Gwydir Valley have been preparing country over the past couple of months. Most have been putting down nitrogen and some starter fertiliser has also been going out.

Winter rainfall across the Gwydir has been patchy. Winter crops in the Gwydir are very variable. Many are surviving on minimal soil moisture and will need follow up rainfall in the near future to survive. Other areas have received good rainfall but are experiencing some disease problems such as ascochyta on chickpeas. Those crops in areas with higher rainfall have had rapid growth and with recent frosts there is the potential for frost damage. There has also been some incidence of barley lodging following windy conditions.

At this stage there is zero irrigation allocation for the 2003–04 season. Growers with small amounts of carryover or river flow insufficient for summer cropping and likely to be lost to evaporation if stored have used this on cereal (barley, wheat) or chickpea crops.

In many cases this water has not been sufficient to fully irrigate winter crops. Dryland cotton is an option being considered by growers with good soil moisture profiles, particularly as sorghum prices have dropped.

Hopefully there will be river flows during the season to allow for some irrigation of these crops. The proportion of different dryland summer crops will depend on market prices, cashflow and risk management.

Julie O'Halloran  
29 July 2003