

# BMP: What's in it for growers and the environment?

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Over the past nine years of BMP evolution, the bulk of industry's understanding of the benefits gained through BMP adoption has been through two industry-wide environmental audits and one BMP evaluation. The first environmental audit in 1991 established the real imperative behind the development of BMP.

The 2003 Audit not only verified the vast improvements that had occurred in the 12 years since but also posed a number of new challenges. Namely; how was the industry going to tackle the difficult issues relating to vegetation, riparian and water management? The Land and Water Management module has been the way BMP has responded to these challenges.

Yet as time goes on, two critical questions are still being asked by a number of growers:



- What's in it for me and my farm; and,
- What real benefits are being delivered to the environment?

## ON-FARM BENEFITS

Cotton Australia and industry researchers associated with the CRC or

CRDC are very conscious that the future of BMP lies in increasing the understanding of the real farming and environmental outcomes delivered through program adoption. It is imperative that BMP must deliver practical farming outcomes. This is its core objective.

Examples of better farming practices through BMP adoption are not hard to find. Improved chemical application practices, better chemical storages, learning how to develop a water budget and better management of riparian zones are just some examples.

But it is important to remember that BMP in many ways is just an overarching umbrella bringing these issues together and helping farmers prioritise areas that could do with improvement. It is only with the support of resource material such as Waterpak, Soilpak, Nutripak, and Weedpak that informed improvements can be made.

## MEASURING ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

The tougher question that many in the industry are now trying to resolve is how we quantify the benefits to the environment.

Cotton Australia is working with our industry researchers on this issue as well. Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) in NSW and natural resource management groups in Queensland play an important role in this process. In both states, the catchment groups are establishing catchment management plans that identify the critical issues of environmental management within their catchment, and determining condition targets that will need to be achieved for the plans to be met.

Environmental condition targets may include such things as water quality data, salinity levels, and vegetation cover or erosion distribution. Broadly speaking, to ensure these targets are achieved, catchment groups are putting in place a strategy encouraging farmers and the community to change practices as well as monitoring the condition of the catchment.

## WORKING WITH CATCHMENT GROUPS

Cotton Australia has been working with NSW CMAs and Queensland catchment groups to demonstrate one clear message. By adopting BMP and other known environmental benchmarking activities, cotton farmers can demonstrate they can manage the environment in a sustainable way.

The industry does not need another, alternative farm planning mechanism imposed on it by government. Support by catchment groups assisting growers to acquire the information and resources on their local catchment will increase the understanding of environmental issues we face and allow growers to tackle these head on.

BMP simply acts as a framework for this process to take place. To sell this message, Cotton Australia is working to clearly demonstrate how BMP adoption can achieve the broad objectives of any catchment plan.

Unfortunately, the current focus on setting benchmarks and targets in many ways misses the real long term issue — what systems and tools need to be put in place to help monitor the environment's



**Farmers have the ability to manage environmental risks.**

condition over a period of time in order to better make appropriate management decisions.

Clearly farmers are the best managers of the environment. Given the right tools and support, they will produce a profitable crop with the least possible environmental impact. So this commits industry to view BMP as a long term prospect. Furthermore, many say it will be the standard system under which we manage the environment on a cotton farm into the future.

BMP has many masters. For a cotton farmer it must inform good farm management decisions, communicate legislative requirements and assist in record keeping.

To the catchment groups it is helping us demonstrate true stewardship of the environment and communicating a farmer's ability to manage environmental risks without the need for government intervention or regulation.

For the industry as a whole, BMP gives us the ability to lobby with confidence, allowing the industry to state its case for security in obtaining access to technology, resources and support from the community and its elected representatives. This confidence in lobbying and representation will only come about if adoption of the program is strong, and for adoption to be strong, real outcomes must be obtained. ☐