

What do people really think of the cotton industry?

By Philip Russell, Chief Executive Officer, Cotton Australia

Research findings (see Background) show there has been significant improvement in perceptions towards the industry since 1998, particularly in cotton communities. Cotton communities were seen as valuing the industry's significant economic and social contributions, as well as taking notice of environmental changes brought about through the high adoption of R&D on-farm. Another reason for this improvement in community perception is the ongoing effort and contribution made by Cotton Grower Associations to their local communities through support of local charities, sporting associations and other community organisations.

Other key research findings specific to cotton communities

- Provision of employment is a main reason behind some people's positive attitude towards cotton, as are cotton's contribution to the Australian economy, improved agricultural practices and industry support for local towns and regions;
- Cotton communities have experienced a large positive shift in opinions in the



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past five years with 39 per cent of respondents reporting improved perceptions;

- Concern over high water use by agriculture has decreased in all cotton towns since 1998;
- Concern for chemical use has dropped dramatically since 1998 in every cotton town;
- Direct interaction with the cotton industry influences people's perceptions of the industry positively; and,

- BMP uptake is a key factor behind improved community perceptions. The towns with the most positive attitudes towards the industry were also the ones with higher awareness levels of BMP.

Key messages for the industry

The following key take out messages arose from the research findings:

- The time and money invested by the industry and growers into local communities through sponsorships, community relations and media management, is paying off;
- The industry's communication activities should focus on cotton communities, and to a lesser extent regional centres, rather than cities, at least for the time being;
- People living in cotton communities wish to be informed about positive industry developments, particularly in regards to research;
- The community wants to hear directly from growers and industry members. Greater community involvement with the cotton industry increases their knowledge about cotton and leads to positive shifts in attitude;
- BMP is a very useful communication tool for the cotton industry to have when communicating with the general community. Increased BMP uptake translates into higher public acceptance of the cotton industry; and,
- The report found the community has a long memory and unless an issue is dealt with properly at the time, it can still affect perceptions well into the future. Therefore, issues need to be addressed openly and directly if and when they arise. Industry should also remain vigilant and plan for any potential issues and threats on the horizon.

BACKGROUND

In 2004–05, Cotton Australia and the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CRDC) co-funded the most comprehensive community research project ever conducted by the cotton industry. The project's aim was to test attitudes, knowledge and perceptions of people living in cotton communities, regional centres, Sydney and Brisbane.

The "Attitudinal Research in Cotton Communities and Opinion Centres" research project was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved eight focus groups and interviews with 40 industry personnel and opinion makers to better understand current and past issues. This was followed by a phone survey of 2400 people to gauge current attitudes, knowledge and perceptions towards the cotton industry, whether they had changed over time and if so, what had caused the change.

Cotton Australia's Communication Response Strategy

Cotton Australia, CRDC and CCCRC convened earlier in the year to discuss the research report's key messages and findings. Each member of the 'Community Research Working Group' then undertook to use the research to help direct their own future research, policy and communication activities.

Following this meeting, Cotton Australia developed its 'Communication Response Strategy'. The first phase of this strategy focused on sharing the research report's findings and key recommendations with growers and the broader industry via our regular newsletter, the Cotton Reel, and other resources.

The second phase was a Public Affairs strategy designed to increase the number of positive stories that appear in the media on the cotton industry. A series of comprehensive, in-depth articles is being developed for distribution to regional media. Each article uses relevant local data from the research report on topics of most concern or interest to local communities.

CONCLUSION

The research showed there had been significant improvements in perceptions since the last comparable study in 1998. It also showed that people in cotton communities want to see and hear about our industry from other locals. Cotton growers and industry personnel are therefore the industry's best placed advocates.