

This article was written as an assignment for the Cotton Production Course at the University of New England. For more information on the course, please contact John Stanley on 02 6773 3758.

# Are you growing mushrooms on the side?

By Lyndon Mulligan

**B**ad tarps and tarping practices are costing cotton farmers dollars every cotton season. Losses from an average wether damaged module range from \$80 to \$660. As Andrew Geddes, General Manager for North West Ginning — Moree explains “It is disturbing for a ginner to see a good module wrecked by rain with mushrooms protruding from the sides.”

Growers need to adopt a disciplined approach to reduce unnecessary and avoidable losses. Losses fortunately can be limited or even ameliorated with a disciplined approach to tarp maintenance and module tarping. Yearly tarp maintenance, the doming of modules, the avoidance of ropes over the tops of modules and the ginning of wet modules immediately, all reduce costly weather damage.

The visual evidence of water-damaged modules is usually the appearance of mouldy and discoloured patches of cotton on the outside of the module. These stained patches sometimes have strong and pungent odours and mushroom growth. Sometimes the evidence is not uncovered until the module is in the loading bay prior to ginning with the tarp off.



**A weather damaged module — complete with mushrooms.**

## The cost

Leaky tarps, torn tarps and bad tarping practices cause the greatest loss for growers, as they allow water to enter easily into the middle of the module. The number of entry points and the frequency of precipitation determine the amount of damage per module.

In an average module of 25 bales, if there are two entry points, growers can

expect approximately five bales or 20 per cent to be downgraded to either light spot or spotted. In extreme cases cotton colour can also be downgraded to light grey or grey.

According to Namoi Cotton’s David Hunter, “current discounts range from light spot strict middling at \$16 per bale to spotted strict middling at \$85 per bale.” But the discounts really kick in with a drop in grade.

“The discount for light spotted middling is \$50 per bale up to \$132 per bale for spotted middling,” said David. Further reductions in colour grades multiply the discounts. So it is vital to understand the financial ramifications of using damaged or torn tarps. Growers should regularly check their ginning results to ascertain their level of weather damage.

## Tarping problems

Every year weather damage occurs to modules regardless of the amount of rain or dew. While the ginning crews can tidy up some modules, growers need to instigate some simple practices which can help them reduce their losses.

Modules which have been tarped with cotton rope tied over the top have the highest risk of weather damage. Water is

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**A module with ropes tied over the top just beginning to show weather damage.**

siphoned into the module as the run-off is funnelled down the rope.

“Every year the most damage, even in dry years, seen in the gin yard is in modules with ropes tied over the top,” says Andrew Geddes. “This usually happens in big years when growers run out of tarps and are forced to use other materials.”

**Tarping solutions**

Tarps can be damaged during tarping, storage and/or module transportation. Yearly tarp maintenance cannot be underestimated. All tarps need to be examined over a light table and inspected for holes, tears or de-layering.

Tarps worth repairing can then be mended and stored in a vermin proof container. Tarps not worth repairing should be thrown out. This is usually unpalatable for many growers, but all tarps have use-by dates, and a point is reached where potential damage will be greater than the cost of a new tarp.

Tarps with welded seams down the middle are becoming a new problem. As these tarps age, the welded seam can de-



**Performing yearly tarp maintenance.**

layer and allow pooled water on top of the module to get inside.

The most obvious solution is to educate module builder operators to build modules which are domed in the middle. Doming facilitates faster water runoff and reduces internal damage by preventing pooling.

An event which always surprises ginners is when a tarp is removed and a black mouldy top is revealed on the module. This usually occurs when cotton has been picked wet or a module has become wet in the rain and then tarped.

“Growers need to make sure that wet modules are allowed to dry out by taking the tarp off them,” says Andrew. “The module should be reported and taken to the gin so it can be ginned immediately. Ginners are more than happy to do this.”

Failure to dry out the module early can make the module difficult to gin. Damp modules also increase the likelihood of downgraded cotton.

**A final note...**

Growers can save themselves considerable money by assessing their exposure to weather damaged modules and by adopting a discipline approach to tarping. Grades should be observed regularly and visits made to the gin yard to see any damage first hand. After all, cotton growers strive to produce a good quality cotton product and would probably prefer not to have mushrooms as a sideline.



**Typical vermin damage — showing the need for doming modules.**

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