

Training on the agenda at Cotton Australia

By Phil Russell, CEO Cotton Australia

Access to skilled and unskilled workers in the cotton industry has long been a source of concern for cotton growers and supply chain businesses. The ongoing drought has had an especially severe impact, with the migration of farm workers to other industries and out of rural areas altogether.

The cotton industry is not alone in what some consider to be a rural crisis caused by a combination of factors. Recent research highlights over 50 per cent of small businesses in the north west of NSW and the Murrumbidgee and 30 per cent of western NSW small businesses are having major difficulty in recruiting and retaining skilled workers.

In response to this ongoing industry issue, Cotton Australia has developed a new initiative called “The Cotton Industry Skills Development Project” which will be piloted in the Gwydir and Namoi Valleys.

Cotton Australia has secured funding from the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training to up-skill the cotton industry’s workforce and encourage young workers to pursue cotton careers.

Worker shortages are an issue in many rural industries, but we can’t wait around and do nothing. We need to be out there actively promoting our industry and providing training opportunities for those already in cotton industry jobs and we need



to be doing it better than our rural counterparts.

With significant losses of farm workers caused by the current drought, we’ll need to focus on both new entrants to the industry and further up-skilling of current staff to meet the industry’s future labour requirements.

We’ll be promoting and training the industry at all levels, from those already on farm with advanced skills right through to high school students with an interest in agriculture.

This is about building and maintaining a solid base of skilled and talented workers who are committed to the industry and want to be with us for the long term.

You only have to look at the finalists of the 2006 Elders Young Achiever of the Year and all the 17 entries we received to see that we have an incredible pool of young talent amongst us. We need to offer people reasons to join us and reasons to stay.

PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP

Led by Cotton Australia Director Joanne Grainger, a project advisory group has been formed with wide representation from the commercial sector, research and development, education and training, peak industry bodies and government.

This group will oversee the formation and trialling of an industry-wide training and development strategy, as well as promoting the project back into all sectors of industry.

Cotton Australia has also appointed training consultant, Niel Jacobsen to manage the project which will be delivered in association with Tocal Agricultural College,

Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School and a number of recruitment agencies.

The program will be broken into three major parts:

- Cotton Advanced — a series of workshops for owners and managers;
- Cotton Basics — a training program aimed at existing workers; and,
- Cotton Seed — a pre-vocational training program for people looking for work and high school students undertaking agriculture.

The project is already gaining momentum, with growers and industry showing an enormous amount of enthusiasm. For example, a group of Year 11 and 12 students at Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School in Tamworth have already started on the ‘Cotton Seed’ program, learning the basics of cotton production. Just recently the group visited the Carrigan family at Boggabri during picking to get some first hand experience in the workplace.

In 2005, the report “How Do We Get People Onto Our Farms” identified the cotton industry had difficulty in attracting and retaining people, with the main reason being a lack of clear career pathways provided for workers. The research showed that the biggest challenge was recruiting suitable people to start in the industry and that there were some skill gaps with existing farm workers and managers.

Workers who have already completed cotton and agricultural training courses will be recognised for their existing skills and have any gaps identified. They will be issued with a “Cotton Basics” card that details the training they’ve completed on the back. This system will allow growers and other employees to easily identify the skills and training of a potential employee.

The industry must take control of the rural skills shortage issue, clearly decide what its needs are and work out how to fill the gaps. This project will go a long way to addressing an issue that affects most cotton growers in some way.

Any grower interested in getting involved in the new “Cotton Industry Skills Development Project” can contact Niel Jacobsen on 02 4325 0424 or check out Cotton Australia’s website at www.cottonaustralia.com.au

