

Setting the record straight on cotton's water use

By Phil Russell, CEO, Cotton Australia

The ongoing drought has brought water shortages to top of mind for urban Australians who normally do not see this as a priority issue. As a result, the past few months have seen a dramatic increase in the amount of negative media coverage of the cotton industry in relation to water, with the bulk of the coverage made up of emotional responses published in letters to the editor, opinion pieces and columns and broadcast via callers to talkback radio.

There have also been several politicians and public identities who have publicly denounced the cotton industry, generating media coverage as a result. Much of the negative coverage is generated through talkback radio in Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane, making it difficult to respond in 'real time' and thus missing valuable opportunities.

COTTON AUSTRALIA'S WATER ADVOCACY STRATEGY

In response to the increasing public coverage of drought and water issues, Cotton Australia has ramped up its media and advocacy activities by briefing journalists, setting up editorial opportunities and being more proactive in the media as well as responding where appropriate.

Meetings with key journalists have been very positive, with Cotton Australia putting the industry's side of the water story along with data and real examples of the impact of the drought to back it up. Cotton Australia representatives have been quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald twice, The Land, the Melbourne Age, ABC Radio and on 2UE Rural Radio, and there are further opportunities with the Herald, the Today Show and the Courier Mail.

Cotton Australia has now finalised a set of key messages for industry spokespeople to use as well as fact sheets and backgrounders, and is working with the CRDC to develop an online cotton and water news bureau. This will be a clearing house for all research, background papers, speeches, media releases, policies and fact sheets on water and will be promoted widely to the media.

Cotton Australia has refocused its public affairs strategy to proactively address the recent negative media coverage of cotton



and water. With media monitored daily, Cotton Australia's strategy will focus on presenting facts and story lines to key journalists and opinion leaders as well as mobilising industry advocates to respond to current public opinion through the media.

There will be a continuation of Cotton Australia's current strategy of working behind the scenes with journalists and other opinion leaders, responding to negative coverage on behalf of growers as well as increased coordination between Cotton Australia, the CRDC, Cotton CRC and the newly formed ACIC Water Committee.

The ACIC Water Committee, with Bruce Finney as Chairman, includes a charter to, among other things, "ensure that there is an appropriate industry communications campaign that balances public debate and promotes the industry's long term access to and sustainable use of water." The full support of ACIC and its members will be critical to the success of the cotton and water campaign.

The engagement of third parties (such as on-side politicians and industry researchers) to assist in proactively presenting the case for cotton will also be a key factor in swaying public opinion. Recently, the ABC Country Hour interviewed John Pigram, an adjunct professor at the University of New England, and a Fellow of the International Water Resources Association, about Australia's water policy, and how it's been evolving. Here's part of what he had to say:

"The most efficient water users in Australia at present, you might be sur-

prised to hear me say this, are the cotton irrigators. Why? Because cotton is a very expensive crop to grow, water is an essential input, and if they don't make it go as far as they can, they won't be able to grow a crop of cotton.

"But my further point would be if cotton irrigators are the most efficient, then cotton irrigators should be given oversight of the uses of water for the environment... Cotton irrigators are not against diversion of water to the environment. What they are against is the use of that environmental water not to achieve the objectives for which it is allocated. If they were in charge, I'm sure it would be used to achieve those objectives."

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

Changing public opinion in the current environment is extremely challenging, but it is clear that the negative opinion being expressed through the media must be met with alternative public opinion from the people who make up our industry, and who have real stories to tell. Cotton Australia's meetings with a number of rural journalists from major news sources over the past few weeks, confirms our own analysis — the real debate is taking place on talkback radio and in the letters to the editor pages.

Radio stations and newspapers are in search of passionate personal opinions from growers to tell the other side of the story. We've been advised by many well placed media representatives that the voices of people whose livelihoods are directly affected by the drought and the water debate carry real weight and these legitimate views need to be heard.

To this end, I urge all growers to continue to alert Cotton Australia if you see or hear negative media coverage, by immediately contacting Brooke Summers on (02) 9380 2555 or email brooke@stepcommunication.com.

Even better, if you can, call the radio station yourself to put forward your side of the story, as the opportunity may be missed otherwise. Acting together is the best way to positively protect growers' and the broader industry's interest.