

Cost cutting focus at the Beltwide

By Stuart Gordon

The theme of this year's Beltwide Cotton Conferences was "Equipping for Excellence" with major topics including cost reduction, irrigation efficiency and the status of the US Farm Bill. Over 3,000 largely US cotton industry people attended this year's Conferences in down-town New Orleans, which is still suffering very much from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina over 16 months ago.

The lead Cotton Production Conference included leading growers from across the US cotton belt, speaking on approaches to reduce production costs. The potential to offset fuel costs by converting cottonseed oil (to bio-diesel) and cotton trash into energy for cash, or as an offset to production costs was discussed, as was the real potential of corn (for ethanol) to replace cotton in certain areas in 2007.

Water efficiency also featured highly (water costs) as did reduced tillage systems, as ways to reduce fuel costs, save time and improve soil stability. The call to improve the quality of US cotton against competing growths from Brazil, Australia, Africa and Central Asia was also raised.

Mike Johanns, the Secretary for Agriculture, spoke on the status of the Farm Bill and described competition facing US ag-



Opening of the 2007 Beltwide Conference.

riculture as "intense" and that despite the inclination to want to tell the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to "take a hike," US policies on agricultural support would now be set "in relation to world trade" and be WTO compliant. The about turn comes as nearly 80 per cent of the 2006 US cotton

crop is sold into the international marketplace.

Deficiency payment mechanisms like the Step 2 loan policy would jeopardise this market as a result of retaliatory actions by the WTO and signatory countries. Secretary Johanns noted that in his travels through US cotton growing areas over the past year there had been less call for deficiency payments from cotton grower groups. While the next farm bill is still undecided, Secretary Johanns hinted that directions would include:

- Elimination of programs and policies that run afoul of WTO guidelines. In other words, farm subsidies as they exist today.
- Approaches that distribute federal resources more evenly to farmers outside of the historic program crops.
- More funding emphasis on conservation, market development, research and other areas not connected to traditional farm payments. More than once during his address Secretary Johanns cited the control of the boll weevil and the development of permanent press finish to cotton trousers as examples of worthwhile federal funding.

New technical developments included the unveiling of the Case International 'Module



Jackson Square in New Orleans.

Express', a six row picker with a stretched chassis to accommodate an eight feet tall by eight feet wide by 16 feet long module weighing between 4,000 lb (1700 kg) and 12,000 lb (5100 kg). John Deere revealed their 15 inch row picker that could be fitted with either a stripper or spindle head. They cited earliness and reduced fuel and water costs as reasons for cropping narrow and ultra-narrow row cotton.

The adoption by China of the USDA cotton classing system model continues unabated. James Knowlton of the USDA AMS in Memphis related the dramatic change in Chinese classing practice and the growth of the China Fibre Inspection Bureau.

In 2004 there were 24 HVI lines being used in China and only 14 gins operating as per US gins with regards to bale production and sampling (that is, producing 500

lb bales and sampling these on two sides for classing). At the end of 2006, 149 HVI lines were being used and over 300 gins had adopted US gin practices.

Proceedings of papers presented at this year's Beltwide Cotton Conferences will be available on-line at www.cotton.org/beltwide in March. Next year's Conferences will be held at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville between January 8-11, 2008.

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PH: 07 4636 9100
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Brian Moran
0427 722 925
Dan Ryan
0427 700 779
Brian Campbell
0427 293 653