

Central Highlands

The season has basically finished with only a few late crops left to pick. The majority of this year's 4000 hectare crop was picked in about two to three weeks and the gins have just started processing so yields are yet to be confirmed.

Based on growers estimates most crops that have had enough water to finish them will yield between nine to 10 bales per hectare. There has been reports of a crop on the Comet River reaching yields of 14.1 bales per hectare. Those crops that ran a little short of water towards the end will struggle to make eight to 8.5 bales per hectare. Significant rain towards the end of January caused a lot of boll rot and tight lock. In some cases losses have been estimated to be as much as 25 per cent.

This has been a disappointing end to what was shaping up to be a great season with mild temperatures throughout, allowing for an accumulation of heavy boll loads. After cut-out some fields had up 200 bolls per metre.

The rain in January brought the Fairbairn Dam up to 27 per cent which then resulted in Sunwater announcing an allocation of 80 per cent for the rest of the water year (June 30). But at this stage it would seem likely that there will be still no allocation for the new water year so growers will once again have to live off carry-over water for 2008. The carry-over rules will once again enforce a 150,000 megalitre cap which will ensure that most growers will only be entitled to about 50 per cent of their carry-over water.

Since early February it has been good weather for picking which means no more inflows into the dam making the area planted to cotton next season much the same as this year or less depending on the price of grain in relation to cotton.

Nearly all growers in the district have got grain or pulse crops in the ground as a result of extra water being released from Fairbairn Dam. Again the mild season has come into play with some irrigated sorghum crop yielding close to 10 tonnes per hectare which is a very good result for Central Queensland.

Mungbeans, sorghum and corn have been the most popular crops this summer in the absence of cotton. So many growers will continue to have more than enough to keep them occupied harvesting summer grain crops and planting winter crops into June.

Doug Sands
March 29, 2007

Dawson Callide

After the plough out of cotton in January due to lack of water, the Dawson valley is estimated to have grown about 3200 hectares for the 2006-07 season. The Theodore irrigation area finished with 1790 hectares of cotton — well down from the usual average of around 3500 hectares area.

Picking is well underway throughout the Dawson. Some rain and storms during late February and into March have disrupted progress and resulted in 10-15 per cent yield losses due to tight lock and boll rot in some fields. Despite these setbacks there are reports of pleasing yields with crops ranging between 8-11.5 bales per hectare from fields that were able to be fully irrigated.

Some growers opted to plant irrigated skip cotton this season when faced with the uncertain rainfall forecasts for 2006-07. Reported yields from these fields so far suggest comparable results on a green hectare basis with solid plantings and no doubt as gin results come in people will be carefully evaluating this strategy, taking into account irrigation savings, differing tractor diesel costs and so on.

...62▷

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<61...DISTRICT REPORTS

Some heavy local rainfall over the Theodore irrigation area (up to six inches in places) within a week of the expiration of the Bollgard licence fee plough-out date has at least allowed several growers to plant sorghum in place of mulched cotton. Further in-crop rain has been received although the falls to date have done little to increase overall river allocation beyond the end of this season. With the marginal increases in allocation for the remainder of this year, all available water is likely to be put towards growing chickpeas on what would normally be fallow irrigation country, a tempting option given current prices around the \$700 per tonne mark.

With picking soon drawing to a close, the entire area like the rest of the industry is in need of significant flood rainfall in the coming months to secure any increase in allocation for next season. Without a deluge or a significant kick up on cotton price it is likely that the Dawson will see a lot less cotton next season and perhaps more alternate crops like sorghum and summer pulses.

Paul Grundy
March 21, 2007

St George Dirranbandi

The 2006–07 cotton season in the lower Balonne is rapidly drawing to a close. The season has been characterised by small acreage and low water availability. Approximately 3700 hectares were planted in the St George area with about 550 hectares at Dirranbandi. These acreages are well down on the total growing area.

Given the low water situation prior to planting, the Bollgard II planting window was delayed to improve the chances of receiving widespread rainfall during the early part of the season. This unfortunately did not eventuate and some crops planted on the anticipation of receiving good rain and inflows into Beardmore Dam were ploughed out. Total area affected is estimated to be 700 hectares.

Some cotton crops which were grown on very limited water have been picked already and modules delivered to the gin. Most other crops have been or are soon to be defoliated with picking underway on some properties. Just over half the total area planted was fully irrigated and looked good in the field which will hopefully be reflected in yield and quality results. Approximately 25 per cent of the crop was one to two waters short which will negatively impact on yield and quality. More details on ginning results for the season will be available in the next edition.

Favourable growing conditions in terms of temperature and relatively light insect pressure throughout the summer have helped water stressed crops to yield better

than expected. It is estimated that the Beardmore gin will process about 30,000 bales with a small proportion of this coming from outside the St George area. Last season 125,000 bales were ginned and in a big year 360,000 bales would be produced in the St George and Dirranbandi area.

A whitefly research update and information session was held in St George late in the season. Results from ongoing Bt resistance monitoring by Sharon Downes (CSIRO Entomology) and mirid survey work conducted by Mary Whitehouse (CSIRO Entomology) will become available in coming months.

Veronica Chapman
March 23, 2007

Darling Downs

With the end of the growing period in sight it is timely to review some aspects of last season. It was a very favourable growing season in terms of temperatures with a couple of cold shocks early on but mild conditions throughout and good temperatures to finish.

Pest activity has been minimal this season and the low insect pressure has resulted in high fruit retention, with many Bollgard crops retaining up to 80 per cent of fruit. Conventional varieties also retained more fruit than usual leading to an earlier finish to the season.

Defoliation has commenced on most dryland and some early irrigated crops. The area treated with defoliant will increase rapidly from now on as irrigated crops reach maturity. Ideal weather conditions have meant that defoliants are applied at half rate and defoliation is occurring rapidly. Picking is expected to start around Easter.

Above average temperatures in February and March should lead to good quality fibre. But fibre length could be of some concern in those dryland crops that received very little or no rain.

Rainfall has been extremely disappointing in most areas though sporadic storms in some southern and eastern areas provided a fair season for rain grown crops.

Irrigators also did it tough this year with many growers running out of water. While many irrigated crops are predicted to be at or above average yield, rain grown crops are very variable with many below par. But most cotton crops will produce some yield which cannot be said for many of the dryland grain crops which failed this summer.

Predicted bale production for the Darling Downs for the 2006–07 cotton season is just 75,000–85,000 bales, a significant reduction from the 310,000 bales produced in the 2005–06 season (a 75 per cent reduction).

The Rural Water Use Efficiency (RWUE3) demonstration trial at Nandi is coming to a close. This trial looked at three watering regimes in three Bollgard varieties and

should provide some interesting results. The trial will be defoliated within the next few weeks and a field day will be held at this site in April.

Kate Charleston
March 26, 2007

Border Rivers

Insect pressure has remained low with Bollgard crops being treated on average one to two times. Conventional crops have experienced a relatively low pressure season in relation to heliothis, averaging five to nine sprays. The higher end of the scale was largely due to some local pressure coming out of neighbouring sorghum fields.

The warm, dry conditions have contributed to excellent defoliations this season. The leaf is dropping nicely and cotton is fluffing out well. This will lead to a good clean pick.

Currently 85–90 per cent of fields have been treated for their first pass defoliation and 60 per cent of those fields have had their second pass. Remaining crops are fields replanted in November and fields that have endured a hail event.

Picking has commenced on the dryland fields and fields that were irrigated under limited amount of available water. On these fields quality problems with short staple length will be a concern and downgrades probable. The fully irrigated fields look to be good crops with a 10 bale per hectare crop potential.

There has been great variability between fields this season. The impact of cooler conditions in November and December has brought different reports. On limited water or dryland situation it has enabled the stretching of irrigations and a reduced water use in a period which usually brings hot conditions with high water use. In a fully irrigated system the impact on the crop is thought to be minimal. But the late plantings or replanted fields had a tough time getting started which may ultimately effect their yield potential. The saying that no season is the same rings true this season.

Rod Gordon and Emma Carrigan
March 26, 2007

Gwydir Valley

There is a wide range in the maturity of cotton crops around the Gwydir due to the wide planting window. Picking of dryland and early maturing crops commenced in early March. There have been some quality issues with some dryland crops with reports of short fibre length. Defoliation of the majority of crops is underway or about to commence. There are still some crops that are a couple of weeks from first defoliation having just received their last irrigation. Reports on defoliation are indicating that leaf is coming off very well in those crops that were not moisture stressed.

The Gwydir Valley Cotton Field Day was held in early March. There were a number of speakers on the day. CSIRO researchers with the Cotton CRC, James Nielsen and Stephen Yeates, discussed their recent research on irrigation requirements for Bollgard II and conventional cotton and the impact of climate and soil type on plant water stress.

Local cotton consultant, Rob Holmes and cotton grower, Peter Winter, discussed their management experience with the one in–one out row configuration. NSW DPI Water Use Efficiency Officer, Janelle Montgomery, discussed water usage comparisons between the one in–one out configuration and conventionally planted cotton.

Judging for the Gwydir Valley Cotton Crop Competition was completed in mid March. There were 20 entries for the irrigated crop competition and five entries for the dryland crop competition and final results will be announced once ginned yields have been received.

Julie O'Halloran
March 26, 2007

Namoi Valley

We have had very good late season conditions. We did experience heavy isolated storms in late February early March that caused some boll rot and tight lock, but conditions have been dry and warm since then. Defoliation began in mid March for crops that were short of water. High temperatures have assisted in rapid leaf drop and boll opening.

Picking of the early crops has been as expected but fully irrigated crops look very good and should yield above average. A valley average for irrigated crops of about 3.7 bales per acre is expected. Dryland crops are variable but will struggle to make one bale per acre over all.

As of late March fully irrigated crops have had at least one pass of defoliant and picking will be in full swing by easter. The good growing conditions and near perfect temperatures received late season has matured the crop quite evenly and the top bolls are opening rapidly. We expect good fibre properties from the crop this year. Some of the early classing results are confirming the excellent grades and fibre quality.

Insects have remained fairly quiet right to the end of the season. For heliothis in particular it has been the lightest year I can ever remember. We have had a few green veggie bugs and mirids late season but mites and aphids have been very light. White fly have been present particularly in late crops but populations have not increased significantly. Growers who have grown conventional crops this season, have produced the crop very cost effectively and maybe tempted to grow more conventional in 2007. But the severe drought is probably the major reason heliothis pressure has been low. This may not be the case next summer.

...64▷

<63...DISTRICT REPORTS

Verticillium has been very obvious this season. Some crops have significant levels of infection. Cool temperatures in December allowed the infection to establish early but the disease did not progress much further until the end of the season. Yet another year passes without a confirmed case of Fusarium in the lower Namoi.

Water supplies for next season remain abysmal. Keepit and Split Rock are just small pools and will require well above average falls before any allocations are possible. Ground water will be the only source of irrigation water for next season at this stage.

As picking gets into full swing lets hope for fine weather for the next month. But more importantly a very wet winter is well overdue.

Robert Eveleigh
March 28, 2007

Macquarie Valley

The 2007-08 season has been one of contrasts in the Macquarie Valley. We have experienced a milder summer with fewer extremes in temperatures compared to last season. The Silo database is currently unavailable to get the latest day degree report but it was tracking slightly behind last years and above the long term average up until a few weeks ago. Conversely we have experienced a season with a worse water scenario. There continues to be no general security allocations. Burrendong dam is currently around three per cent of capacity and significant inflows will be required before any allowances are granted.

All of the cotton grown in the region (around 14,000 hectares) was grown on bore water and/or carryover

from previous seasons. Some crops were at least one watering short, which will limit their potential. Scattered storm activity late in the season helped secure enough water to get through for others.

Despite the ongoing and crippling water situation there are some magnificent crops around. These crops have fruited very well and were helped by the milder growing conditions. Defoliation has commenced and picking will be under way in late March.

Insect pressure has generally been light to moderate with conventional crops requiring around six heliothis sprays. There has been some aphid activity and cotton bunched top has been identified.

There have been two half-day field days organised, one covering the Warren area and another the Narrromine region to look at crops, irrigation systems and different row configurations. Entries in the local cotton crop competition have been excellent in both number and their quality. These crops will be judged on many criteria including yield and fibre quality so results will not be available until after ginning and classing.

Weed control in crop and in fallows has been an issue with scattered storm activity causing continuing germinations of summer weeds. Yellow vine has been particularly bad. Planting of winter crops is now underway with good subsoil moisture present in some areas.

The Macquarie valley is looking forward to a mild, and after picking, wetter autumn and winter period to replenish dry water supply systems. Lets hope the cotton area is increased for the 2007-08 season aided by full dams and a more sustainable cotton price.

Craig McDonald
March 15, 2007

ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR

This apology for a tractor is a 1948 Newman. It was fitted with a quirky 567 c.c. Victor Coventry single cylinder engine that would have been more suited to driving a sewing machine. Best forgotten!



Advertiser's Index

Agriculture-Appointments ... 2	Irrimate 21
Apperson 55	John Deere..... 27
Aquatech 18	Mace 31
AgGuide 26	Monsanto 39
Agrilink 30	Moree Picker Parts..... 61
Barcoo 22	Moree Real Estate..... 12
Bayer 13	Namoi Cotton..... 37
Belt-Wide 28	Neils Parts 38
Cargill Cotton 34	North West Ginning..... 41
Charlton 53	Paul Reinhart 34
Comm Broking Services 38	Precision Cropping..... 24
Cotton Grower Services ... IFC	Queensland Cotton..... 35
Cotton Outlook IBC	SMK Consultants..... 2
Countryco 12	Study Tours..... 47
CSD 5	Sumitomo OBC
Deltapine 43	Trade Show 36
drumMUSTER 3	Ultimate Agri-Products 19
Ellis Equipment..... 7	Valmont..... 17
Excel Ag 11	Volvo Penta Oceania 9
gps-Ag 23	Watertrak..... 4
Incitec Pivot 25	Workforce Partners 15