

district reports

Central Highlands

The ginning is all but over for another season in the Central Highlands with final yields being higher than expected. A handful of growers have had farm averages closer to 11 bales per hectare this year and most of the quality has been excellent. It has been amazing what a cooler growing season can do for production levels. The only problem was that there was not enough of it.

The current price of cotton seed for stock feed has climbed to record highs and has given most growers a small cash bonus on each bale produced. A combination of high yields, no discounts and high cotton seed prices means the gross margin on most fully irrigated crops this season will be a lot better than expected. This has produced a little bit of positivity in the industry locally, but with zero allocations for next year, that positivity has not lasted long. The number of growers committed to planting cotton next season can be counted on one hand and even some of them are not sure of their decision.

Over the past four weeks growers have been busily planting wheat and chickpeas into as many paddocks as they can find — even paddocks that have had cotton in them this year have been turned around in a big hurry to put winter crop back in. This has been done in order to make best use of the water they have left before June 30, when they will lose more than half of it. Shortages in planting seed supply for chickpeas have once again been a big issue this year. Let's hope the price for chickpeas will again prove to be lucrative.

Rainfall has been almost non-existent since the last magazine issue. There have been some isolated storms that have benefited a handful of dryland growers, but there has been nothing in the Fairbairn catchment since February which means dam levels will continue to retreat back to what we had last spring.

Starting another season off with zero allocation has prompted a number of growers to look closer at later planting dates for cotton. This is despite the farming systems trial at the AACC Emerald campus having proved again this year that the earlier planting dates have the highest yield potential. Trial plans for next season at the AACC site will include a more intensive look at later planting dates and how best they can be managed to obtain an economic yield and therefore a comparative gross margin, to other irrigated crops planted at the same time.

Without significant levels of medium priority water in the Fairbairn Dam, cotton ceases to be a viable cropping option unless it can be planted closer to the traditional wet months of December, January and February. On limited water cotton has a far higher production risk

than other crops. For example this season some cotton that was planted in September ran short of water before significant rain arrived in mid December causing large yield penalties, but sorghum planted in December on rainfall required just one irrigation to achieve 6.5 tonnes per hectare.

Lets hope the dam will fill up soon and make all these issues irrelevant.

Doug Sands
June 4, 2007

Dawson Callide

As I sit at my laptop, it is difficult to think of something meaningful to report that does not come back to a lack of water. The main bright spot in the Dawson at present, now that picking is mostly well out of the way, is the sowing of chickpeas to make use of the remaining allocations from the Dawson River. With prices for chickpeas at record highs while cotton plumbs the depths of record lows it is easy to see why chickpeas will be the order of the day considering next season's uncertain price and water allocation outlook.

Fibre quality this year has been pleasing with most crops that received adequate water meeting all base grade characteristics. Yields were also generally good with many reports of nine to 12 bales per hectare for those crops that were well watered.

The outlook for the coming season is about as uncertain as anyone in the Dawson can remember. Several growers have indicated that they will not be planting cotton this season due to the double whammy of a lack of water in storage combined with the low bale price. A general sentiment being expressed is that greater returns can be made from growing sorghum and mungbeans in the coming season unless significant rainfall occurs or the bale price tracks back up to the \$400 mark. It seems now that not only do we need a flood, but also a significant price improvement to go with it.

Paul Grundy
May 22, 2007

Darling Downs

Picking of this season's crop across the region is almost complete and the continued dry conditions have ensured minimal disruption to harvest schedules.

Regional gin turnouts have been similar to other years with little trash in the cotton and turnouts figures from 35 to 40 per cent with most in the 37 to 38 per cent range. Lint quality has been good for irrigated crops but

there is some short fibre in those crops that did not receive enough water.

Average irrigated yields have ranged from 11.2 to 12.1 bales per hectare with some yields exceeding 13 bales per hectare reported. Irrigators who ran out of water midway through the season paid the penalty with reduced yields and fibre quality. Average dryland yields were well down and this was not unexpected considering the very dry conditions. Dryland yields ranged from 2.0 to 3.8 bales per hectare.

Overall the season has been one of the harshest experienced by Darling Downs cotton growers in terms of available water. On the other hand, it was a season of low insect pressures in which conventional cotton needed few pesticide applications.

The dry conditions have left many fields in rough conditions and most growers will have to wait for rain before they commence pupae busting. With no stored moisture in the soil profile and no water in farm storages, the chance for winter cropping remains very slim at this stage. The prospects for next season's cotton production also looks grim without flood rains falling across our region. Let's hope those flooding rains are not too far away.

Kate Charleston
June 1, 2007

Gwydir Valley

Picking in the Gwydir Valley was completed with the harvest of some late crops in the past couple of weeks. Recent reports from ginners indicate that ginning is approximately 75–80 per cent complete. A couple of gins have finished up while others still have a month or so of ginning to complete.

Yields have been very good where water was not limiting with yields of 12 bales per hectare and above. Dryland crops have generally been low yielding between 1.0–1.7 bales per hectare. Quality this season has been excellent with the majority of the crop base grade or better. There has been a small amount of high micronaire, probably around five per cent. There have not been any issues with length or strengths from fully irrigated crops. But dryland or irrigated cotton that ran short of water have had some short staple with 33s and 34s. Turnouts have been fantastic, averaging about 38.5 per cent across varieties. Turnouts from dryland and short water crops were obviously lower at about 36 per cent.

Approximately 70 per cent of winter crop in the region has been planted including chickpeas, wheat, barley, oats, faba beans and some canola. Many of these crops are up and out of the ground. Sporadic rainfall, while very welcome, has interrupted efforts to get winter crops planted.

Julie O'Halloran
June 5, 2007

Namoi Valley

Picking is finished for another year and ginning should be completed by the end of June. Yields for irrigated crops will average about 3.5 bales per acre and dryland crops will finish up close to 0.9 bale per acre. Fibre quality has generally been good and most of the crop has exceeded base grade. Although high mic and short fibre were a problem for some growers. Short fibre was a common problem in dryland crops.

Despite very good growing conditions for most of the season only a few growers were able to grow above average yields. Many growers did not have enough water to take advantage of the season. A few farms in the valley did achieve exceptional yields. A farm average of five bales per acre was recorded by a few growers.

Irrigation scheduling to minimise stress appears to be common factor in these crops. Insect pests were the lowest I can remember and did not impact on yields. The few non Bollgard crops grown have yielded equal to or better than adjacent Bollgard crops. Growers should be wary of the same low insect pressure occurring again this season.

Good falls of rain in late May and June have boosted winter crop prospects but have yet to improve dam levels. Narrabri received over 100 mm of rain in early June with much lighter falls west of Wee Waa. Large areas of wheat and chickpeas are being planted throughout the valley. Irrigators are also planting large areas of winter crop.

Without any improvement in dam levels the Namoi Valley will plant the smallest area of cotton since 1975, about 17,000 hectares. Ground water will be used to grow the entire crop.

I hope the good rainfall we received in June continues and makes it to the catchment next time.

Robert Eveleigh
June 10, 2007

Macquarie Valley

It can still rain! After almost 100 mm of recent rain in parts of the region the Macquarie River has had some reasonable flows. Most of this rain fell downstream of Burrendong Dam's catchment but there were some inflows to take the dam to over four per cent of capacity. The Talbragar River had very good flows right from its headwaters over near Coolah. There was a limited supplementary extraction event from the Macquarie River over the past week. This was in line with the water sharing plan.

Reasonable rain in May in many places allowed the winter crop planting to proceed. There are good levels of subsoil moisture and it appears that the weather pattern may have changed for the better.

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The cotton season is all but over with ginning to be completed soon. There have been some very good yields despite the critical lack of water for many growers. Some in crop rainfall during the summer has helped many crops through to some respectable yields. There have been some cases of high micronaire levels. This is somewhat hard to explain given the reasonably mild summer with only a few periods of extreme temperatures. Early fruit retention levels were very high in many crops and there were good conditions at the peak fibre thickening stages. These factors may have combined to push the micronaire levels higher.

Yields in the Macquarie have averaged around 10 bales per hectare. This continues the very good trend and it augers well for when the valley returns to a full water scenario.

Some growers were able to grow commercial sized fields of Roundup Ready Flex, which gave them the opportunity to try the new technology. With a full release and more varieties this coming season many more growers will be able to try it in their own farming systems. Liberty Link cotton will also be available as another tool for weed control.



ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR

The little crawler is a Platypus 28, manufactured by Clifford Howard during his period in the UK, when he established the firm of Rotary Hoes Ltd at Horndon, Essex. This particularly well restored tractor is owned by David Perry, and is one of only 10 equipped with a Standard four cylinder 28 hp diesel engine. (Photo IMJ)



With the forecast of a La Niña event, fingers are crossed for a good winter cropping period combined with above average inflows into the major river water storages. The old saying that it always rains after a dry spell is proving correct once again!

Craig McDonald
June 15, 2007

Hillston

Picking continues in the south with a few remaining late planted fields left to go. Despite water issues, yields this year have been exceptional. The average yield is tipped to be near to 10.8 bales per hectare, with a range of nine to 14.5 bales. Many fields have been breaking the 11 bale mark while 12 bales has been achieved by several new and existing growers.

The interesting point to note is that the exceptional yields have been reached right across the southern cotton growing area, making cotton an option in areas considered strictly rice or corn. Thanks to technology improvements in varieties and pest control the potential cotton area to be grown in the south is set to match that grown in northern NSW when prices improve and rivers are filled.

So far, good rainfall has been falling on the plains setting up for a good winter cropping season. But our catchments are lagging behind with the next real opportunity to fill dams being spring as snow melts and storms inundate the slopes from Crookwell to Tumut.

Pat McGuinness, CGS Hillston
June 15, 2007

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