

Developing BMP principles for northern cotton expansion

By Dan Galligan, Queensland Policy Manager, Cotton Australia

In an exciting step forward for the Australian cotton industry, 12 farmers have 1000 hectares under cotton production in the Burdekin irrigation region in the 2007–08 season. The region is well known for its high reliability water supply. For generations the area surrounding the township of Ayr, just south of Townsville, has been abundant with cane and horticulture.

OVERVIEW

A number of different irrigated crops, including rice, have been trialled by many local growers in the past. The development of the cotton industry has taken place over a number of years and with careful consideration. Farmers are taking on cotton growing mainly as part of a cane rotation.

The growers come from a mix of backgrounds. Some are growers from southern areas who have bought into the region, bringing knowledge and specialist cotton equipment with them while experienced local cane growers have been able to adapt using their understanding of local soils, water availability and climate.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Growers are being supported by a strong foundation of local research. This has been particularly enhanced during 2007 with the relocation of respected industry researcher Dr Paul Grundy from the Qld DPI&F. Since starting this trial work, Paul has focused on nailing down the optimum timing for planting the Burdekin crop. The advances made in GM technology over the years have greatly assisted in dealing with both insect and weeds pests and this has allowed cotton to become a true option for local growers.

Paul's local research has been underpinned by industry coordination through the committee known as NORCOM. Formed under the Australian Cotton Growers Research Association (ACGRA), the committee is supported by representatives from Cotton Australia, CSIRO, Monsanto, and many other service providers.

Central to the role of this committee has been the feedback provided by local farmers who have given their time to raise relevant issues and resource requirements.



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The role of the committee is to coordinate local activities to ensure that growers who choose to grow cotton are provided with access to the best knowledge, and that a structured communication plan is developed to enable the local community and regional stakeholders to be informed.

COTTON AUSTRALIA'S ROLE

Cotton Australia has been active in the region by visiting local growers and making assessments of their requirements in preparation for implementing cotton BMP. It has been a long standing policy of the industry that any new cotton growing development should take place under the principles established through BMP. New growers in the Burdekin region have embraced this concept positively and see BMP as a means of ensuring that things are done well, from the very beginning.

In order to ensure that growers are allowed to grow the crop from a basic agronomy point of view first, Cotton Australia will be implementing BMP in a staged approach, starting with individual practices

of greatest risk. So management of spray applications and treatment of tail water will be a priority. In this region it will also be important to ensure that implementation takes account of other pre-existing programs that may already exist with either the cane or horticulture industries.

Cotton Australia is also testing the local capacity for instigating a growers' association which has received positive support from the ground up. Growers have approached Cotton Australia with a desire to have a forum to discuss issues from their perspective and in a way that allows this to be done in a cohesive way.

The Burdekin region has its own particular set of important issues. To this end Cotton Australia has been liaising with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM body, local cane industry and council representatives to ensure that all parties understand cotton production and the status of development in the region.

The area has some of the most important issues of natural resource management in Australia. So Cotton Australia has ensured these issues are included in the work to establish environmental indicators for the industry and map the BMP program against regional NRM management action targets.

Cotton Australia is designing industry communication to alleviate any concerns the local community may have with the practice of growing cotton as well as ensuring that practices recommended by the BMP program deliver protection to the environmental assets of the region within a context that allows farmers to remain profitable.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Only time will tell to what extent the industry may expand in the Burdekin. A number of resource and development constraints exist including access to ginning and the high cost of transport and other inputs. The region also has a vast capacity for diversity into biofuels and alternative rotations. But the issue of whether to grow cotton or not will remain a choice for farmers who have investments in the region.