

SECTION 4
AREA ROUNDUP

This section brought to you in association with



Darling Downs

By John Marshall, Cotton Seed Distributors Ltd

The area planted to cotton on the Darling Downs this season was the smallest since 1988–89. This small area which approximated 18,000 field hectares, was the result of the combination of factors including minimal available irrigation water, poor moisture profiles after a very dry prior summer, low cotton prices and very attractive prices on offer for competing commodities such as sorghum and maize.

Growing conditions turned out to be excellent for those who planted, with irrigated crops and much of the dryland producing some of the best yields ever, and generally very good fibre quality.

Seasonal conditions

This season was one of the mildest experienced on

the Downs in the past 20 years. While the actual day degrees accumulated during the season was only four per cent below average, the number of cold shock days at Dalby was almost twice the average, the number of days with temperature >35°C was only 17 per cent of average, and the average maximum temperature was below the long term average in every month of the growing season.

Above average rain was experienced in Spring. Mid December until early February was quite dry, but most of the area had very good February rainfall, with dry conditions then returning for the remainder of the season. The Spring rainfall produced flows in the Condamine, but very little overland flow while the February rain resulted in streams on the northern Downs flowing.

Yield and production

The mild conditions and well spread rainfall events resulted in excellent conditions for growing cotton. Many irrigated farms averaged over 11.0 bales per hectare, with individual fields reaching 14.0 bales per hectare. Most of the crops were grown with two irrigations in January, and where water was available, a final one in mid March.

Most of the irrigated crop was planted in the last two weeks of October, and the conditions experienced resulted in excellent quality fibre. Some later plantings in early–mid November encountered problems in filling bolls and maturing fibre in April, and suffered lower yields and low micronaire as a consequence. Despite a wetter than average season, very little waterlogging of crops occurred, because of the timing of the rainfall.

Dryland crops ranged in yield from 9.0 bales per hectare in some northern Downs areas, to as low as 2.0 bales per hectare in parts of the central Downs. The latter were on long fallow fields that had accumulated very little profile moisture during the previous very dry summer, and then cutout before the good rainfall arrived in early February.

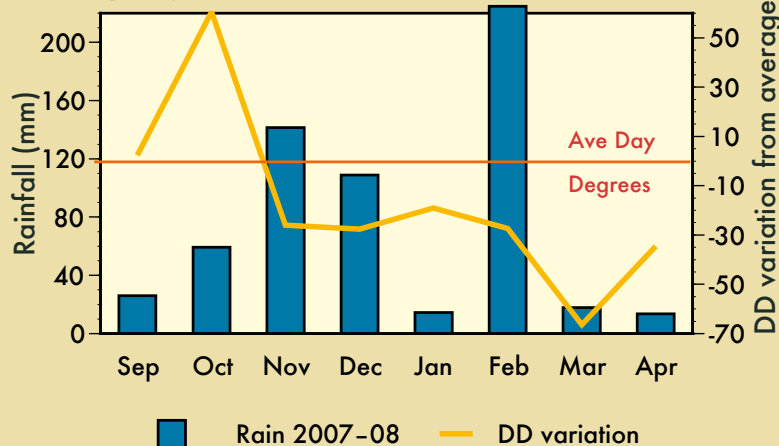
Turnout was lower than in the past couple of seasons, especially in some of the more indeterminate varieties. Values in the 32–34 per cent range were not uncommon, especially in some of the bigger yielding dryland crops on the northern Downs. The irrigated Sicot 70/71 Bollgard family group generally returned turnout values in the 38–39 per cent range.

Micronaire was noticeably lower than in the past couple of seasons. The majority of crops sown at the start of the Bollgard planting window came in above 3.5, which is very acceptable for a season like this, and leaves plenty of room for upward movement in a more normal season. But the very mild conditions and consequent slow development and cold shock days during April caught up with late planted crops, producing some quite low micronaire values.

Length was generally excellent, except in some

Dalby 2007–08 seasonal climate

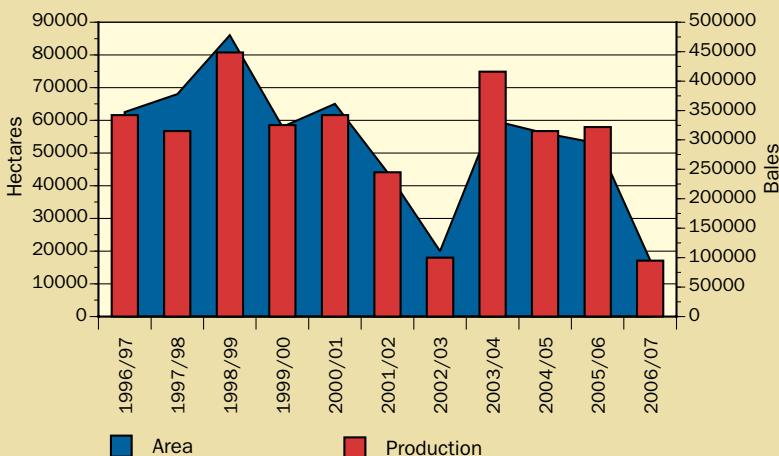
Total Day Degrees: 2386 (-138); Total rain: 606 mm (+110)



	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Total
Cold shock	19	8	1	0	0	0	3	22	53 (+15)
Hot shock	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2 (-10)

*Average day degrees from 1957 to 2008. Source: CSIRO Plant Industry.

Darling Downs: Area and production



Darling Downs cotton area



dryland crops on the central Downs in particular, that had cut out before relief February rains arrived. Despite the late season, defoliation was generally quite successful, with leaf grades very acceptable, and colour holding well because of the dry finish.

Overall, a crop was produced of around 100,000 bales. Most of the dryland and some of the irrigated grown in skip row configuration, which makes an average yield value a bit meaningless. It was certainly a big improvement on what was shaping up at the end of January.

Disease

Most crops got away to a good start, with little seedling disease or sucking insect pressure. But November was quite wet, and combined with cooler temperatures, Fusarium wilt became quite pronounced. Fortunately, with the small planting, many fields with a heavy inoculum level were not under cotton. Also, there has been a continuing use of higher F. rank varieties. The annual disease survey and various Fusarium trials revealed a very high incidence of the disease in a few locations. Most other diseases were very minor, with little premature senescence or boll rot evident at the season's end.

Insect pressure

There were some interesting issues during the season from an insect perspective. Despite a quite small winter crop planting, many fields especially on the central Downs experienced thrip damage. Control in some instances was quite mediocre. Speciation at the end of the season from samples collected showed that there was a much higher proportion of western flower thrip than usually seen early season.

Their presence may have been related to favourable hosts resulting from the good early Spring conditions. Mirids created problems as well in some areas, requiring two or three insecticide applications for control.

In the middle of the season, consultants detected very high populations of cotton stainers in many fields. Monitoring and damage assessment was difficult. While many fields were sprayed for them, they probably caused more yield loss than originally thought — the damage not being evident until unopened locks became obvious during picking. Whitefly populations were also quite high in some locations, despite the very mild season. Very low levels of predators seem to have been a contributing factor.

Heliopsis control in Bollgard fields was very good, and very low levels of this pest late season seem to have been a result of widespread use of virus on sorghum crops mid season and very high levels of Trichogramma wasp.

General issues

Once again, lack of water is the overriding factor as we enter a new season. While there is a bit more water in ring tanks along the river, and on the creek systems north of Dalby, the overland flow tanks across the central Downs remain bone dry and irrigators' groundwater allocations continue to be reduced. There is more irrigated wheat planted this season than usual, and alternative summer crops, especially corn, are competing for what water growers have.

On the plus side, the excellent performance of new Bollgard Flex varieties last season offers both yield and management advantages. A bit more of a jump in price, and a good wet summer will see a big swing back to cotton. Dryland cotton continues to struggle because of lack of ground cover to assist with profile moisture replenishment, and prices which do not provide much higher returns than dryland sorghum.

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