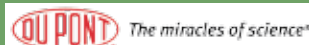


New era in cotton industry training

By Mark Hickman, National Cotton Industry Training Co-ordinator

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Australia's recent drought, competition for biophysical resources (land and water) and the increasing regional competition from alternative employers are all contributing towards reductions in local labour and management skills. A 2007 Cotton CRC study at Wee Waa showed some significant shifts in labour and management skills from this regional community.

The cotton industry has developed various training strategies that address this declining skill base. It has concentrated on developing programs that focus on skill set development rather than training for full qualifications.

Australian cotton industry activities to address rural skill shortages

The Australian Cotton industry has tried to incorporate some of the findings associated with labour and skilling reports to form a strategic approach towards addressing these pressing issues. The strategy includes:

- The development and promotion of career pathways with a science focus in secondary and ter-

tiary education. The Cotton CRC has employed a schools coordinator and provided continual support for the cotton postgraduate course offered at the University of New England.

- The development and implementation of vocational programs within secondary schools. For example, Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School at Tamworth is currently offering a Certificate II in Agriculture (specialising in cotton production) to year 10 students. In the industry, this award is better known as Cotton Basic which was

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Individuals who help implement BMP can now receive formal qualifications.



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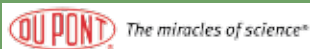
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developed from a Cotton Australia pilot project funded by the Department of Education Science and Training. The aim is to expand this Certificate into Queensland schools.

- Implementation of ‘hands on’, grower focused short courses which are developed with industry researchers and aligned to national VET competencies. The Cotton CRC Integrated Pest Management Short Course and the Cotton CRC/CSIRO Field to Fabric short course are two examples.
- Finally, industry intelligence on industry skill needs is provided to the Agrifood Industry Skills Council. The cotton industry has a close working relationship with this body which ensures funding opportunities are identified and agricultural training packages contain information that reflects skill sets to meet the changing demands of cotton employers.

These activities are continually evolving and the following two examples highlight this evolution. Both examples demonstrate how the recommendations made at the state and federal level are incorporated into innovative extension and training approaches.

The Certified BMP Farm Manager Award

This new industry award developed from a Queensland FarmBis Target Industry Initiative project, administered by CRDC and implemented by myself as National Cotton Training Coordinator. Under the Australian Cotton BMP program when a farm is successfully audited, a BMP accreditation is awarded to the farm. No accreditation has been awarded to the individual for achieving that BMP status.

Cotton growers, managers and farm workers who have been involved in the implementation on farm of Cotton Best Management Practices (BMP) can now apply to have this effort formally recognised with a vocational qualification. Through a simple interview and farm visit these skills can be recognised formally via the new industry award and current vocational education and training qualification.

The project has aligned the content of the BMP manual with a variety of units from the relevant, nationally recognised training packages.

The Certified BMP Farm Manager industry award has formal endorsement by the ACIC BMP Committee and has the full support from the cotton industry.

In short, this means that individuals who have been instrumental in introducing BMP to a BMP Certified cotton farm operation can now be qualified as a “Certified BMP Farm Manager”. This is equivalent to a Diploma of Agriculture specialising in cotton production.

What are the benefits?

The Certified BMP Farm Manager qualification recognises management skills and directly rewards

the individual for implementing farming practices in order to achieve BMP Certification.

It is a marketable asset, and recipients will be recognised by future employers, within and outside the cotton industry, as having achieved both a Diploma of Agriculture and BMP accreditation.

The award is not automatically granted to anyone that achieves BMP accreditation for their farm. Individuals are required to have contributed significantly towards the farm achieving the BMP status.

The assessment is done on farm, by a registered training organisation (RTO) assessor using a cotton specific recognition of prior learning (RPL) process.

Cotton and grains irrigation management workshop series

The development of this workshop series was a key outcome for a project funded by the National Program for Sustainable Irrigation called ‘Knowledge Management in Cotton and Grains Irrigation: Phase II’. This project employed a knowledge management broker (David Wigginton), to implement the findings from Phase I of the same project.

The wording of “training” was not used in reference to this extension activity, to avoid the perception that it involves a classroom learning environment. Rather, the workshop model evolved into delivering in a field day style — three hours of field activity that address a specific aspect of irrigation management in detail. Participants walk away from these workshops with practical information they can implement in their enterprise.

Each of the eight workshops is specific in terms of topics addressed and therefore, able to be delivered independently of other workshops in the series. But attendance at numerous workshops is also designed to build on the information within the workshop series.

The topics covered by the series are:

- Benchmarking and water budgeting;
- Scheduling level I and II;
- Pump selection;
- Surface irrigation performance evaluation;
- Storage and distribution systems;
- Metering; and,
- Selection of irrigation systems.

These workshops are delivered as part of the normal cotton extension activities conducted by the Cotton CRC Water Team.

The workshops are designed to provide a high level of practical skills to growers, farm managers and consultants. But they can also provide a pathway to more formal qualifications such as:

- A Certificate IV in irrigation;
- An Irrigation Australia Limited Certified Irrigation Manager (cotton); or,
- A Certificate IV in Agriculture (cotton or grains).

These two examples demonstrate how the Australian cotton industry is at the forefront of blending vocational training with traditional extension activities.

