

SECTION 4
AREA ROUNDUP

This section brought to you in association with



Darling Downs

By John Marshall, Cotton Seed Distributors Ltd

While there was a significant increase in the area planted to cotton on the Downs this year in comparison with the previous year, it was still well below the average planted area over the past decade. It was the dryland acreage in particular which was behind, a combination of very little available land on long fallow from wheat, attractive sorghum prices and an ideal early planting window for sorghum.

Growing conditions for cotton this season were excellent and yields and fibre quality were generally very good, the only sour note being colour penalties resulting from a prolonged rainfall event around Easter.

Seasonal conditions

While the season was slightly warmer than normal, with Dalby's October 1–April 30 day degrees being two per cent above the long term average, there was a marked reduction in the frequency of hot days (that is, above 35°C). But the number of cold shock days in this period was higher than usual.

The rainfall pattern for the season was very similar to the previous one. Good rainfall was experienced in September, which was the major contributing factor to a (successful) late application by DDCGA to the TIMS committee to move the Bollgard II planting window back from a starting date October 15 to October 1 to maximise the planting opportunities for both dryland and irrigated fields using this early rainfall. November rainfall was twice the average across most of the Downs, which resulted in some flood harvesting size flows in the major streams, but little overland flow.

December, January and early February were drier than average across the whole Downs, and most irrigated fields received two to three waterings during this period. Good rainfall was received during mid February, especially on the northern Downs. The rest of the season was dry and mild, ideal for maturing crops.

The whole of the Downs experienced excellent rain which commenced on Good Friday, April 10. Unfortunately, very little of the crop was picked at that time, and the prolonged week long rainfall event contributed to colour problems in cotton picked during the next month.

Yield and production

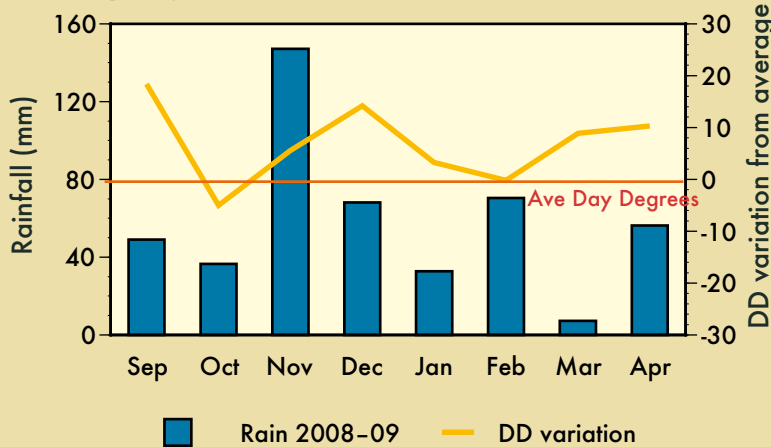
As with the previous season, the mild summer conditions and well spread rainfall events produced excellent growing conditions. While the irrigated yield average across 21,000 hectares was just over eight bales per hectare, there were some farms with a number of fields yielding 13 bales per hectare and better. Factors contributing to the lower average included a proportion of skip row irrigated fields, stretching of irrigations in early February in some areas, hail losses and some yield reduction from late plantings due to cold shock.

The dryland crop got away to an excellent start. But most of the early October plant experienced tough going during January and had shut down by the time the mid February rain arrived. Later planted crops generally performed better, being better placed to take advantage of this rain. The 7000 hectare plant, virtually all of it being skip row, averaged 3.5 bales per hectare. There were a number of fields, especially on the northern Downs which produced six bales per hectare.

Much of the early picked irrigated cotton achieved a premium, with excellent fibre length,

Dalby 2008–09 seasonal climate

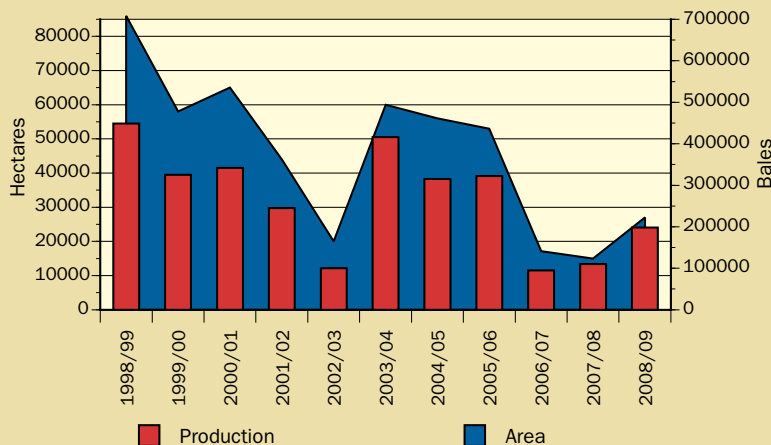
Total Day Degrees: 2618 (+55); Total rain: 468 mm (-61)



	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Total
Cold shock	13	10	2	2	0	0	1	10	38 (-1)
Hot shock	0	0	1	5	2	1	2	0	11 (-1)

*Average day degrees from 1957 to 2009. Source: CSIRO Plant Industry.

Darling Downs: Area and production



Darling Downs cotton area



mid range micronaire and 21-1&2 grades. But all this changed after Easter. The threat of continuing inclement weather forced many growers to pick fields earlier than they would have wished. In fact, it was four weeks post rain in many instances before 31 colour began to re-appear in classing reports. Almost all the dryland cotton was excellent for length and micronaire, a reflection of row configuration and variety choice. Later crops suffered the same colour and leaf problems as the irrigated crops.

The total Downs crop came in just below 200,000 bales. Turnout was one to two per cent better than last season across most varieties. A large proportion of the crop was from the Sicot 70/71 BRF varieties.

Disease

Fusarium was generally of a lower incidence than usual, with the earlier planted crops getting away to a pretty good start. November was wet and experienced below average temperature. Some individual fields, especially those watered up in late October, were subjected to quite severe disease pressure, and varietal F. rank differences became very obvious. Late season incidence was quite low.

Other diseases were quite minor. There were a couple of incidences on the northern Downs of sudden wilt, caused by a population explosion of a fusarium spp in patches in fields, often in association with a mid season irrigation. A high yielding dryland crop, on short fallow from sorghum, exhibited leaf scald, a premature senescence condition brought on by an interaction between nutrient shortage and rapid change in weather conditions. No boll rot was detected on the Downs late season.

Insect pressure

Early season sucking pests were almost non-existent. Mirids also were noticeable by their absence early season, with the result that many crops at flowering

were running with retention levels above 90 per cent. The Downs was subjected to extremely heavy heliothis pressure during January. While there was the occasional survivor in many crops, a spray was required in only a few instances when the threshold was reached. High usage of virus on sorghum crops during January and the presence of predators such as Trichogramma at quite high levels, meant very little late season heliothis activity. Late season secondary pests such as cotton stainer, green vegetable bug and silver leaf whitefly did not require treatment in most crops.

General issues

Fleabane is an increasing problem, both in dryland and irrigated fields. Programs to get on top of it require careful planning and are quite expensive. Some degree of aggressive cultivation is generally required.

Some parts of the Downs, in particular the Central Downs, continue to miss out on overland flows to fill soil profiles and allow pumping into ring tanks. It is now more than six years since the area started a season with the majority of irrigators with adequate water in their storages. But there is the potential for a larger dryland planting this season, due to better moisture profiles in some parts, an increasing awareness of the fit for dryland cotton in a cereal grains rotation, the more competitive gross margin for dryland cotton vs sorghum due to green hectare and end point royalty considerations and the reduced number of field operations associated with growing the Bollgard II

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