

Burdekin cotton on top of the pack

The Burdekin region in Queensland's north could be poised to be a source of premium quality cotton following two seasons of excellent research and commercial results.

Speaking on CSD's Web on Wednesday broadcast, Cotton Catchment Communities CRC scientist Dr Paul Grundy said despite difficult growing conditions of the past two seasons resulting in lower than desirable yields, the quality of the cotton has been outstanding.

"Yields haven't been anything to get excited about, but the quality to come out of the Burdekin is really impressive. In our first year about 75 per cent of the bales were a premium grade of cotton – they had that 'holy grail' of a very long staple, excellent strength and good micronaire characteristics.

"This year about 30 per cent of the cotton fitted the same category, but importantly there was no cotton discounted for quality problems, which is really encouraging for this area.

"You don't have really hot or cold days during flowering – so if we can get the yield equations sorted out we've got something very special in the Burdekin," Paul said.

Attracting attention

Queensland Cotton marketing services officer Alistair Mace has been involved in marketing the Burdekin cotton in the past two seasons and says the outstanding quality has attracted the attention of their mill customers.

"We had mill customers in Asia enquiring specifically whether they can purchase Burdekin cotton again which is really encouraging for the future, but for these sorts of relationships to work we need consistency of supply.

"We would love to draw a consistent supply of this good quality Burdekin cotton, but for this to happen, the agronomic side needs to be sorted out to give growers the confidence to use cotton as a rotation in the dominant cane farming system.

"We see the immediate potential for cotton in the Burdekin is working as a supplementary crop to sugar cane – not a competitor.

"The real opportunity for progress is to have a production package ready to take advantage of the periods of fallow in the cane system, which in turn will see improvements to the cane crop.

"The bonus for these growers will hope-



Paul Grundy.

fully be a high quality, high value rotation," he said.

According to Alistair Mace, the past two seasons have seen the district produce excellent colour and low levels of leaf.

"In 2009, 96 per cent of the crop was in the premium 11 and 21 colour range. It was not quite as long and strong as the 2008 crop, but still above base grade levels.

"The 2008 crop was something special though with a complete set of optimal length, strength and micronaire as well as 21 colour not seen anywhere else in Australia for that season, highlighting the exceptional standard of the Burdekin crop.

"In 2008, two thirds of the bales from the Burdekin were in the 38 or greater length range, and again, while 2009 wasn't quite as good, we were still very pleased with it.

"Staple strength is another important parameter and in the 2008 season, three quarters of the cotton was above 30 grams per tex and a fair chunk in the exceptional 32 to 34 range. In 2009, it was not as consistently strong, but like the length everything was above base," he said.

CSD extension and development agronomist John Marshall agrees, the climatic conditions in the Burdekin lend themselves to producing good quality cotton.

"In the traditional southern growing areas, the important stages of fibre development occur in January to March – a time when we can have some of our most extreme weather conditions.

"For a January planted crop in the subtropics, this fibre development occurs in May and June – generally a time of very stable conditions and ideal for cotton production.

"CSD sees a great opportunity with this and in the 2010 season we will be trialling a new premium quality Bollgard II Roundup Ready Flex variety – tentatively named CSX326 which has outstanding length and strength, combined with a competitive yield.

"The combination of a premium variety and a region proven to make good quality cotton could produce something outstanding," John said.

Rotation benefit

Paul Grundy said another encouraging benefit from a cotton rotation in the Burdekin was improved yields in subsequent cane crops.

"We're just starting to see some cane crops come through after cotton and those growers are quite pleased with the tonnage they're getting from those areas, given that the crops were planted late compared to the traditional planting window for the Burdekin.

"What's been really pleasing is that the tonnages of this late plant cane has nearly matched the early cane so when you put it in perspective of tonnes produced versus the time in the ground, these areas are producing more cane.

"What we're really curious to see over the next couple of years is what the first and second ratoons cut because the pattern in the Burdekin is that you get a big cut the first year then after that you get a very rapid decline. The experience with other break crops is that the rapid decline is nowhere near as bad, so what we're interested to see is whether we also pick up tonnage in the following seasons," he said.

Between 700 and 800 hectares of cotton has been planted commercially in the Burdekin in both the past two seasons by between five and 10 growers.

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