



Cotton looks sweet in the Burdekin

By David Dowling

What would you say to over 100,000 hectares of developed irrigation country in the northern half of Australia with a fully guaranteed water supply, good infrastructure and in close proximity to major international ports and airports. The perfect cotton growing area or too good to be true?

Perhaps we'll know a bit more after this year's 'dry season' trials in the Burdekin Irrigation Area of north Queensland.

Given the well publicised problems of the Australian sugar industry, it was not surprising that the cane growers in the Burdekin — one of Australia's biggest and most efficient sugar producing areas — started looking at cotton and other crops as potential alternatives to sugar.

A group of growers approached Queensland Cotton to investigate the potential of cotton during the dry season in a similar way to other trials in recent years in the Ord, at Katherine and at Broome.

Queensland Cotton's Don Cooper is supervising the two 12 hectare trials and says there was a lot of consultation with the local community before they were planted. "We spoke to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), the local Shire and Chamber of Commerce, the DNR and even the Canegrowers organisation," he says. "Without exception, they have been very supportive."

"Everyone realises that the sugar industry cannot survive at current prices unless changes are made. It must find other uses for the cane such as ethanol or growers must look at other crops."

INTERESTED GROWERS

There were 13 local growers who expressed interest in growing cotton and all of them underwent the Bollgard accreditation course. The two growers chosen to host the trials had a demonstrated ability to

ABOVE: Planting the cotton trials attracted a lot of interest.

return their tailwater and agreed to do the trial under cotton BMP — and have undergone initial BMP accreditation.

"Organisations such as the GBRMPA are pretty excited about the trials because they emphasise the importance of retaining tailwater and using the cotton BMP program which is a leader in Australian agriculture," says Don.

Queensland Cotton leased the land from the growers to keep control of the trials and remove any commercial pressure. The trials were planted on May 11-12 with a combination of CSD and Deltapine Bollgard RR varieties and a refuge of 189 RR. Planting was about a month later than desired because they had to wait for regulatory approval to use Bollgard in the area.

"The feeling is we should have the beds

22 ▷



Planting the first cotton trial.



The cotton emerged in about four days.



The trial properties have good tailwater return systems.

Thirteen local growers expressed interest in growing cotton.

◁ 20...COTTON IN BURDEKIN

formed and be ready to plant as soon as possible after the wet season," says Don. In most years this would be in early April.

The trials were planted into a soil temperature of 22°C, emerged within four days and have shown good early vigour. The testing time will be when the colder weather hits and its possible effect on yield, micronaire and staple length.

COLD SHOCKS

The Burdekin has more cold shock days than Katherine where fibre quality problems have appeared in some cooler seasons. Planting date could prove to be a vital management factor if cotton is to succeed in the Burdekin.

Because of the cooler weather, the growing season may need to be longer than other 'winter' growing areas such as the Ord. But the Burdekin has the advantage of a generally later start to the wet season which could allow crop development right through to December.

COMPETITION FOR SUGAR

One of the trial growers is Lindsay Hall who sees cotton as one possibility to provide some competition for the beleaguered

sugar industry which has been almost a monoculture in the Burdekin for many years, apart from some areas of horticulture crops.

"We don't know a lot about growing cotton yet," says Lindsay, "so we are leaving it up to people like consultant Simon Struss and Queensland Cotton's Jamie Cox. But we are one of the larger farms in the area and our country has good drainage and water recycling systems.

"The most efficient cane growers can just keep their head above water at current prices," suggests Lindsay, "and most growers are losing money. On the figures we have seen, we could certainly make more money from cotton yielding 7.3 bales per hectare, even if sugar prices rose somewhat."

PACKAGE BUYS TIME

There is a common perception that the recent sugar industry rescue package was a case of buying votes in sensitive sugar seats and subsidising inefficient producers to remain in the industry.

But the cane growers of the Burdekin know that the package just buys them time to find a better way to produce sugar cane or find something else to do.

The huge growth in the Brazilian sugar

industry in recent years and their ability to switch quickly between sugar and ethanol, is likely to keep a cap on world prices for some time.

So Australian growers need to find alternative or multiple uses for their production. The most common suggestions are using the cane to produce ethanol or to use the bagasse byproduct for co-generation of electricity.

Unfortunately, the way the industry is structured means that growers will find it difficult to benefit from any of these 'value-added' uses of sugar cane. Mills have traditionally bought cane from growers and paid them a set rate based on the sugar content of the cane. The profit from any value-added use of the cane goes to the mill.

Growers can now negotiate these arrangements, but, unfortunately, all the mills in the Burdekin are owned by the same company which makes negotiation difficult.

So another viable broadacre crop such as cotton could have many benefits for sugar producers.

The Australian Cottongrower will follow the progress of the Burdekin trials and hopefully have an update in each issue through to the end of the year.



Lay-flat fluming is used to irrigate the cotton trials.