

Cotton Research Roundup...



An update on the Cotton Research and Development Corporation's latest investments, innovations and impact from Executive Director, Dr Ian Taylor.



Ross and Nigel Burnett. (PHOTO: Melanie Jenson)

IN this edition of *The Cottongrower* research roundup, I bring you an update on the cotton industry's PLANET. PEOPLE. Paddock sustainability framework and progress towards the sustainability targets.

As cotton growers have known for decades, 'sustainability' is just good business. We often talk about the statistics that compared to 1992, growing a bale of irrigated cotton now takes 48 per cent less water and 97 per cent less insecticide. This is obviously good for the business bottom line, but growing cotton

with less water and fewer insecticides also helps preserve the environment for the next generation of cotton growers and protect the industry's licence to operate. It's a win-win.

Win-win outcomes are what the nine PLANET. PEOPLE. Paddock sustainability framework targets are aiming to achieve. That's because sustainability is not a random list of nice things to do. It manages what is important to customers and other people outside the industry, and to the industry as a whole. If we do it well, we improve in the areas we know are important to the people our industry relies on, and we gain real benefits as well.

In other words, sustainability isn't just about doing the right thing. It's also about creating value now, and handing the next generation thriving farms and a successful industry.

Creating value for cotton

More and more, sustainability is a must-have for customers of food and fibre; it's just part of doing business. Levi Strauss, Country Road, IKEA and most other major brands feature sustainability on their website home page. For customers, showing we manage what is important to them and their consumers helps keep Australian cotton a fibre of choice. With other fibres strongly promoting their own sustainability, this creates value by keeping markets, or opening new markets, for cotton.

It also reduces the risk of social licence impacts. PLANET. PEOPLE. Paddock involves talking to customers and others outside the industry about what they expect of Australian cotton. It makes sense that if we talk often and honestly to the people we rely on – like customers, potential workers, or regulators – we will be more alert to risks (and opportunities). By showing we manage what is important to them, we are more likely to have those people want to buy Australian cotton, or want to work for us, or want to support us.

Creating value for cotton growers

By talking to people inside and outside the industry, we have identified nine areas we know are most important to all stakeholders.

We are now setting five-year targets (for 2024 and 2029) for these nine areas (see table page 8).

While the targets are important to people outside the industry, achieving them also has the potential for direct benefits to growers and the industry. This table outlines what the emerging five-year targets look like, and some of the ways they may create



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Cotton can co-exist happily with native vegetation.

(PHOTO: Ruth Redfern)

Sustainable production is a must-have for cotton customers.

(PHOTO: Melanie Jensen)

value for growers. (Note: the targets are drafts, and will be finalised in the coming months).

PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK.

Of course, these benefits can only be gained if the industry is serious about sustainability, has a plan to keep improving, and is transparent.

PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK. is our framework to do this.

Importantly for the industry, PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK aims to manage what’s important and communicate progress on Australian cotton’s sustainability, without putting extra time or cost on growers.

Proven programs such as *myBMP*, CottonInfo and focused R&D will continue to drive industry improvement across all farm operations. If monitoring of sustainability progress shows any of the target areas need to improve, more effort will be applied through these programs.

PLANET	PEOPLE	PADDOCK
<p>#1. WATER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: 12.5% increase in water use efficiency. • Potential value: increased climate resilience and reduced input costs. Water costs were 20% of average expenses in 2018-19. <p>#2. PESTICIDES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: 5% reduction in environmental impact. • Potential value: reduced input costs. Chemical costs were 7% of average expenses in 2018-19. <p>#3. CARBON FOOTPRINT</p> <p>#4. BIODIVERSITY</p> <p>#5. SOIL HEALTH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: Common metrics for these are being developed with other farm sectors. Targets will be set when these are in place. • Potential value (carbon footprint): increased soil health, reduced input costs. Fertiliser, electricity and fuel were 19% of average expenses in 2018-19. • Potential value (biodiversity): reduced input costs from less insecticides. • Potential value (soil health): increased productivity, increased farm value, increased climate resilience. 	<p>#6. WORKPLACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: Zero fatalities. • Draft 5-year target: 30% reduction in serious injuries. • Potential value: reduced time and cost from injuries. Injury claims were \$3.4 million in 2018*. • Draft target: Training and diversity targets will be informed by national agriculture and cotton industry workplace strategies being developed in 2021. • Potential value: increased ability to find and keep workers, and train for the skills of the future. <p>#7. WELLBEING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: A coordinated cotton community wellbeing strategy developed with other industry, government and community stakeholders by 2024. • Potential value: increased quality of life. <p><small>*The median annual cost of cotton farm injury claims in the three years to 2018.</small></p>	<p>#8. PRODUCTIVITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: 12.5% increase in irrigated cotton yield. • Potential value: increased innovation; quality and yield maintained without increasing environmental impacts. <p>#9 PROFITABILITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft 5-year target: Rate of return for farms growing cotton is sufficient to support financially resilient businesses. • Potential value: Ability to reinvest in the business, increased financial resilience.



Better energy use efficiency is a win-win result.
(PHOTO: Ruth Redfern)

What you told us

More than 350 stakeholders inside and outside the industry provided feedback on draft targets in stakeholder consultation to develop the PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK Sustainability Framework.

Responses showed stakeholders are broadly supportive of the draft targets. In addition to this broad endorsement of targets, a number of other themes were evident in the stakeholder responses:

- The draft targets are bold, but they should be. Falling short of an ambitious target is viewed by most as better than easily

reaching an easy target, as long as there is a genuine intent to reach the target and people are kept informed of actions being taken.

- Context is important. Data should be reported at regional level where feasible, as well as at industry scale. Complex topics like water and pesticide use and the methodologies for measuring data also need to be clearly explained so people understand the issues, and how progress is being measured.
- Collaborate. There are many opportunities to leverage work inside and outside the industry, and to coordinate with others to avoid duplication – other researchers, other sectors, and other countries or industries. The industry is doing this already, and will continue to do so.
- Be credible. The data behind targets, and the plan to achieve them, need to be credible. If we don't yet have the right data to set targets and measure progress, we should wait. This is what we are doing. We are currently working with other industries in these areas, and will finalise cotton industry targets when this work is done.

What happens next?

As mentioned, some sustainability topics - like carbon account, biodiversity and soil health - need common metrics and data collection methodologies to be agreed with other broadacre agriculture sectors before targets can be set. Because these are complex areas involving several industries, this work (being driven by the Sustainability Working Group – CRDC, Cotton Australia, CottonInfo, the Australian Cotton Shippers Association, and a grower representative) is taking time to get right. We will officially launch the cotton industry targets when this work is finalised, which will be several months yet.

In the meantime, we are not waiting for targets to be launched to act. The industry has been improving its sustainability performance for 30 years, and will continue to do so through existing industry programs such as myBMP, CottonInfo and focused R&D investments.

Growers are simply asked to continue to use these critical programs, and if needed, to rise to the challenge of improving performance in areas that benefit them and the entire industry.

For more on cotton's sustainability journey, the PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK framework, or the draft targets, please visit us at www.crdc.com.au/for-growers/sustainability.

Until next time – Ian.

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