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Editorial...

David Dowling, Editor

Not too long ago, most country people would have been happy just to have a decent phone line – one on which the neighbours weren't a 'party' to all conversations and which didn't go down at the first sign of a storm. We were all excited when mobile phones came in, but there were plenty of black spots (and still are) and we kept the conversations short because we knew the connection was likely to drop out.

Communications in the bush have slowly improved and we can now get an email as long as the attachment is not too big, and even google an answer to the burning question of the day. So, lifestyle-wise, things have improved. But this is only the tip of the iceberg and you may have noticed that the latest buzzword is digital agriculture. Digital agriculture is considered to be the fourth wave of agricultural innovation – after mechanisation, chemistry (fertiliser, pesticides) and precision farming.

Digital agriculture is an umbrella term which covers a wide range of technologies, many of which are already in use. It uses modern technology to collect large amounts of data on soil moisture, crop growth, soil conditions, nutrition and weather etc, then analyses the data and comes up with management solutions. Pretty much what farmers do every day in their heads, but hopefully with greater accuracy.

According to the P2D (Accelerating Precision Agriculture to Decision Agriculture) project, backed by CRDC and others, digital agriculture has the potential to increase the value of agricultural production in Australia by over \$20 billion annually – a 25 per cent increase. The cotton industry would not miss out, with a potential increase of \$394 million annually in the value of the crop – mostly from better irrigation, nutrition and product quality.

But realising this potential will not happen unless a number of issues are resolved. Chief among them is the need for better telecommunications and connectivity infrastructure. We need to have better connectivity on farm to get accurate real-time information from a wide range of sensors and we need fast and reliable connections.

The cotton industry is not waiting for this to happen. Individual growers, groups of growers and the CRDC are building their own networks and solving the connectivity issues. There are several articles in this issue, looking at the overview and also solutions on individual farms and valleys – see stories starting page 22. The cotton industry has some natural advantages in this regard with high value production located in discrete production areas.

And the potential is not just in production systems. Auscott has instigated an exciting new technology to enable traceability back to the farm of every bale of Auscott cotton around the world, even from garments made from that cotton (see article, page 56).

The promising and exciting era of digital agriculture has arrived.

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