

achieve strategic outcomes for the industry, and to leverage higher returns for our investments. This underpins our investment strategy, with CRDC partnering in over 80 per cent of RD&E projects conducted in the cotton sector. As of 2016–17, 40 per cent of CRDC investments are in cross-sectoral RD&E, up from 25 per cent in 2015–16.

Cotton Futures – investing in blue-sky, transformational cotton RD&E

Cotton Futures provides a clear framework for CRDC to invest in long-term, transformational innovations to ensure the industry remains profitable, sustainable and competitive in the future. In 2016–17, CRDC invested in 25 innovative blue-sky projects under the three Cotton Futures themes:

- Profitable futures (Farmers program);
- Sustainable futures (Industry program); and,
- Competitive futures (Customers program).

These projects include new or ongoing research into precision to decision agriculture, agri-intelligence, industry resilience, developing chemicals from cotton biomass, and creating nanofibrous coatings for cotton fabrics.

CottonInfo – continuation of program to connect growers with CRDC-led R&D

2016–17 marked four years of the industry's joint extension program, CottonInfo, supported by CRDC, Cotton Australia and CSD Ltd. It also marked the formal announcement of the continuation of the program to 2021.

For more information on all of these achievements and highlights, download your copy of our 2016–17 Annual Report or the Annual Report Grower Summary from www.crdc.com.au/publications

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Two persistent industry problems

■ By Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia

TWO important issues have been top-of-mind for the Cotton Australia team in recent months – telecommunications and spray drift.

We know that poor telecommunications – whether mobile blackspots or slow-yet-expensive data connections – are a persistent problem for growers, who could be so much more efficient with access to modern, adequate communications services.

The organisation has dedicated significant resources to the issue in the past year, becoming a founding member of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), which seeks to end the data drought and champion better communications services for consumers and small businesses living in regional, rural and remote areas.

The RRRCC has mobilised 21 agriculture and community organisations – including the Country Womens' Association, Isolated Children's Parents' Association and the National Rural Health Alliance. It has called for important fixes to telecommunications in the bush, such as:

- A technologically-neutral universal service obligation;
- Updated customer service guarantees and reliability measures for voice and data services;
- Long-term public funding for open access mobile network expansion; and,
- Fair and equitable access to Sky Muster that matches the requirements of rural users.

We have pointed out to both legislators and regulators that farmers rely on telecommunications activity to run modern businesses just as much as metropolitan users do. The lack of connectivity severely hampers growers' ability to use sophisticated, web-connected machinery anywhere near its potential.

Rural telecommunications users recently welcomed the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) decision not to declare a wholesale domestic mobile roaming service.

Domestic mobile roaming is where telecommunications companies can direct their customers' mobile phone transmissions through another company's towers and equipment. Telecommunication companies are already free to come to commercial arrangements with each other to share towers, but the ACCC had been considering whether it should make roaming mandatory.



Michael Murray.

The ACCC announced its draft decision on the issue in May. At the time, Cotton Australia argued that increased competition was important, but we pointed out that the telecommunications industry has bigger fish to fry when it comes to mobile services in rural and regional areas.

Cotton Australia agrees with the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) that it is more crucial to bolster the regional network and improve basic telecommunications services, which lag those available in metropolitan areas.

But having argued against wholesale domestic roaming, the telcos – and particularly Telstra and Optus – must now step up and deliver greater investment in telecommunications infrastructure in rural and regional Australia.

To its credit, the ACCC has released an issues paper which maps out actions for improving mobile coverage in rural and regional areas. These include measures to increase transparency of network coverage and quality, and measures to reduce the cost of upgrading and improving mobile networks.

It is now incumbent on the telcos and the Federal Government to work hard to improve telecommunications infrastructure in the bush, and Cotton Australia will keep advocating on this important issue on behalf of growers.

Spray drift

A very different issue, but no less important, is that of off-target spray drift.

The likelihood of more rain following the dry winter in parts of NSW and Queensland has pushed the threat of off-target spray drift for the new cotton season to very high levels.

While spray drift is a risk in every cotton district each season,

increased fallow and anticipated rain have combined to make the threat of damage acute in the Macintyre and Border Rivers Valley, the Gwydir Valley and on the Darling Downs. The Southern Valleys of NSW are also at risk due to the ongoing expansion of the cotton industry there.

Cotton Australia has always taken the view that it is imperative for all industries to work together, and farmers to work individually with their neighbours, to combat the threat of off-target spray drift. No-one wants a repeat of the 2015–16 season, in which spray drift damage to 20 per cent of the national cotton crop was reported, with an estimated \$20+ million in damage caused. It was the worst season for spray drift in living memory, and its impacts are still felt today.

Cotton Australia reiterates its call for all farmers, no matter what crop they are growing, to access tools to protect their crops from spray drift and apply pesticides responsibly to prevent damage to surrounding farms.

The vast majority of Australian cotton growers map their fields using online tools such as CottonMap to ensure all farmers in their area can check the location of nearby cotton farms and avoid unacceptable spray drift damage.

At the start of each season we also ask people to be mindful of weather conditions, particularly temperature inversions, and to check CottonMap to identify nearby cotton farms before applying weed control. We also remind cotton growers, farm managers, consultants, agronomists and contractors to input their cotton fields into CottonMap to help protect their crop.

CottonMap is a collaboration between Cotton Australia, Nufarm Australia Limited, the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CRDC) and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

Farmers should use this checklist when preparing to use Group I herbicides, particularly 2,4-D products:

- Read and follow label instructions – it is a legal requirement;
- Monitor weather conditions before, during and after spray application;
- Use a nozzle that produces coarse or larger droplets;
- Check www.CottonMap.com.au for cotton fields that could be potentially impacted by your 2,4-D spray;
- Notify your neighbours – even during reasonable conditions for spraying, some spray droplets could travel up to 20 km or more if the spray equipment is not used correctly, and more than 70 km in some instances of unfavourable conditions, such as during surface temperature inversions or night-time spraying;
- Minimise boom height when spraying; and,
- Ensure spray contractors are fully trained and accredited.

When using insecticides, farmers are also encouraged to check the BeeConnected website – www.BeeConnected.org.au – made available by CroLife Australia to connect with registered beekeepers, enabling two-way communication on the location of hives and crop protection product activities.

There is plenty of material available to growers and spray contractors to help prepare for spraying – a Summer Weed Control Best Practice Guide and a video explaining the risk of temperature inversions are both available from the Cotton Australia website: www.cottonaustralia.com.au

More information on spray drift is available at the following sites:

- CottonMap website: www.cottonmap.com.au
- Spraywise Decisions website: www.spraywisedecisions.com.au
- Grains Research and Development Corporation website: www.grdc.com.au

Working together, we can all achieve a safe, productive and profitable season.