

Conference caters to all family members

ACCORDING to conference organisers, registrations for the industry's showcase event from August 10-12 have been very strong. However, many growers have indicated they're attending, but haven't actually registered.

To make sure you don't miss out on accommodation options and to help with planning, register as soon as possible at www.australiancottonconference.com.au

A reminder also, that the Cotton Conference is a family event, with free child-minding available through the Dupont Kids Club for the duration of the conference. So pack the kids up and head to the Gold Coast for top-class cotton information, networking and social events. The program has been finalised, with an impressive line-up of speakers covering an enormous array of topics that will help you be a better farmer and business owner.

Is yield king or queen?

An alternative perspective will be put forward at the Cotton Conference.

Boggabri cotton grower and Cotton Australia director Andrew Watson has been closely analysing farm data in an attempt to maximise profitability – and the results are different to what growers may think. Rather than maximising yield, which is traditionally seen as the main aim, Andrew focuses on minimising input costs, and this has provided the best gross margins by far in his irrigated cotton system.

Andrew's crops generally yield about 10.7 bales per hectare, below the golden mark of 14 bales/ha, but his profitability is far higher when focused on reducing costs across the farm.

"The biggest change in our farming system has been that we don't spray for pests at all, and haven't for three years. We grow all Bollgard II varieties and have found that the populations of ben-

eficial insects in our crops are doing the work of controlling pests for us – enough to make spraying not worthwhile from a financial perspective," he said. "We have fewer passes with the equipment, so operator costs are reduced and we're not paying for expensive pesticides."

Andrew's innovative approach to cotton production also sees less fertiliser and wider gear used, and less water applied more often – all with the aim of bringing input costs down.

"We use very little Pix. Our nitrogen rate is 165 units, compared to an industry average of 200-250, and we have less trouble defoliating because our cotton plants are less vigorous. All of this adds up to much lower input costs, and the bit we lose in yield we well and truly gain in dollars," he said.

"A really interesting comparison is that last time we won a crop competition, five years ago, we used 230kg of nitrogen, four litres of a potassium blend, and 3.7 litres of Pix per hectare, all to achieve a yield of only one bale per hectare more than our current average."

Andrew is part of a comparative analysis group with nine growers from the Namoi Valley. Two years of data has been collected, which Andrew will share at the Australian Cotton Conference in his presentation on day one in the Farming Systems for the Future session.

Women in cotton

According to WinCott chairwoman and cotton grower Barb Grey, day three of the Australian Cotton Conference will be especially interesting to all women in the cotton industry.

A line-up of talented and interesting speakers and topics such as business ethics, leadership, the future of education and the health of farm families are sure to encourage the large number of women involved in cotton to attend.

"The position of Australia's women in executive decision-making positions is very much the hot topic, especially given the recent rise of women into prominent leadership positions."

"WinCott's focus is on the personal and professional development of women in the industry, and we want to encourage the many switched-on women who care about the industry and their communities to actively participate," Barb said. "The conference is a three-day feast of opportunity, with the final day particularly catering to topics that women might be interested in."

Jane Walton, a skilled lawyer, ethicist, teacher, presenter, and an expert in corporate governance, board performance and organisational culture (and also a founding director of the St James Ethics Centre), will present a fascinating insight into business ethics and leadership. Clinical Associate Professor Sue Brumby from the National Centre for Farmer Health will look at the health of cotton families.

"Inspirational Jo Eady will lead a panel session with selected future cotton leaders and industry identities to provoke us in our thinking about the essence of leadership. Liz Alexander from Blue Dog AgriBusiness has just completed comprehensive grassroots research and will present her perspectives on what motivates and inhibits community people to engage with their local groups," Barb said.

"WinCott is also really keen to spread the word that while still male dominated, the cotton industry is very female friendly."

Dryland focus

Cotton prices at the magic \$500/bale mark have enticed dryland farmers from northern NSW through Central Queensland to revisit the concept of moving at least a portion of their acreage away from grain production

this summer. Even with conservative yield estimates, Gross Margin models are returning more than \$500/ha for dryland cotton – which is well above the line-ball profitability available from sorghum production at current grain prices. And with new seed varieties and agronomic techniques, the risk associated with dryland cotton production has decreased markedly in recent years.

According to Australian Cotton Conference chairman Cleave Rogan, this was attracting a large number of new growers to the cotton industry.

"The conference committee has recognised this interest, and has included a range of relevant topics for new and returning growers in our program this year," Mr Rogan said.

CSIRO cotton breeder Dr Warwick Stiller will deliver a presentation on 'Cotton Varieties for Limited Water Situations', and he believed returning growers would find it much less stressful to grow dryland cotton in the current production environment.

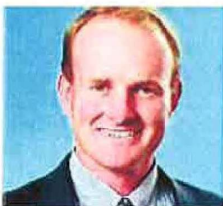
"It's fair to say there will be far fewer cost blow-outs and less night work," Dr Stiller said.

He said the key changes had revolved around the massive uptake in transgenic varieties in the past 10 years, and the wide variety of row configurations now being used in dryland farming systems.

"Ten to 15 years ago, many dryland crops were grown in single skip and even solid configurations. In recent

years, growers have moved to wider configurations, predominantly double skip, but even out to super singles and wider to stabilise yields and minimise the technology licence fees and staple length discounts."

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Andrew Watson