

Young Leaders on New Beginnings for the Cotton Industry

Firstly let me say that at 34, how pleased I am to still be classed as young, especially when in a group of people such as Annabelle Wiseman and Daniel Skerman who are in their early twenties. Fortunately I have a few comrades in my age bracket such as Sean Fresser and Rod Gordon all of whom, like me are still young enough to be playing rugby but “old” enough or lets use the word mature enough to know better.

As far as the “leader” part goes I think true leaders don’t really perceive themselves as that, they are generally the people who get in and get the job done for the betterment of the community, industry or even country. Therefore because they are actively concerned with improving their industry or community these titles tend to fit them.

When I first received the brief from Brendon, “Young Leaders on New Beginnings for the Cotton Industry” my first thoughts were, why did I say yes. Obviously the three of us here today or the rest of the future young leaders group cannot give you straight up easy solutions that will instantly solve all of the challenges cotton faces now or in the near future. But as a team we can work together to ensure the success of the industry.

Future Cotton Leaders Program:

There are no easy solutions, we all know this. Though if we didn’t believe in the cotton industry we wouldn’t be here today regardless of how good the surfing and scenery at the coast might be. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the CRDC and Cotton Australia on establishing the “Future Cotton Leaders Program” and Jo Eady for facilitating and mentoring us during the past 18 months. It is these type of programs which will ensure that a great mix of people from all sector’s i.e. growers, agronomists, ginnors, classers & researchers will continue to work together to build a stronger industry on the foundations already laid down. I wish the participants of the 2009 program all the very best.

Crop Diversification:

The current “food shortage” will not just be a temporary issue and will continue as the world’s population increases. This, whilst being a travesty for China, India and many Asian countries if reliable production cannot be found will offer many opportunities for our industry. Forecasts suggest that as diets improve in these countries the need for agricultural land to be devoted to food or fuel crops away from fibre crops will only increase. Thus, it is a great opportunity for us as an industry to continue to focus on producing the highest yielding and highest quality cotton in the world.

Currently in Northern China, desertification – land degradation caused primarily by human activities – is wiping out close to a million acres of grassland a year. Striving to feed 20 percent of the world’s population, the Chinese have overgrazed, over

farmed and created new deserts in the process. In the last 60 years the country's 425 million farmers have lost one-fifth of their arable land (National Geographic 2008).

From a local perspective I believe as food demand outstrips supply more "cooler" areas will shift to food production. We are already seeing this occur on the Darling Downs and I would expect this also to happen in areas such as Narrabri and Gunnedah. However I would suggest that warmer and more western areas such as Emerald, St George, Dirranbandi, Mungindi, Warren and Bourke will tend to have a bright future with cotton. A number of factors such as heat, consistent water supply, distance to market (fuel and the associated carbon footprint) and labour will dictate the crops we grow. During normal summers "softer" food crops tend to suffer in the 40°C extremes whereas cotton is perhaps better adapted. Also as Annabelle mentioned as labour becomes tighter these far western regions would struggle to compete for even unskilled labour to harvest food crops. As one grower commented how do you find people for picking when backpackers are being paid \$35 an hour on construction sites such as the Brisbane tunnels and new gateway bridge. New technologies such as the cotton baler / harvester from John Deere and Case ensure that our industry will be able to achieve more with less staff.

As with all sectors of the industry crop consultants are also struggling to remain profitable whilst retaining and attracting quality staff. The future will see growers and their consultants working together even more closely. As staff become more scarce and technology begins to fill this void there will be substantially less layers of management. GM crops will need to be utilized more effectively as growers and consultants become more time poor though one would hope that this does not encourage price gouging. Consultants will diversify as has been occurring over the past 5 years as farms become more of a mixed enterprise. This will require continual upskilling and greater knowledge for a number of crops ranging from cotton, onions, lucerne, wheat, chickpeas, sorghum, corn and the list goes on.

Unfortunately or fortunately this means that growers will be even more reliant on their consultants as part of their farming team. This is unfortunate from the perspective that should a consultant leave the industry through choice or accident then a large amount of cropping knowledge from that farm and team has been lost.

Cotton Consultants Australia is similar to most local grower associations in that we are struggling to attract new members and maintain existing one's. Thus the association is now instigating a major overhaul of our structure and is also diversifying into providing our members with knowledge of a greater range of crops. These alternate crops will perhaps provide for a more balanced use of machinery, staff, water and soil. For example if staff are limited it may be easier and more efficient to utilize your team with 40% of a farm dedicated to winter crops, thus leaving 60% of the farm to cotton and summer crops.

As with growers, consultants are now finding that they need to do more with less e.g. staff and time. GM technologies such as Bollgard II, Liberty Link and Roundup

Ready have certainly helped with this but have also generated their own set of new challenges which will need to be addressed. Cotton stainers and surviving larvae have been but two of these during the past season.

Due to these constant new challenges ensuring open communication between agronomists in different valleys will become even more paramount. As the number of growers decline so too will the number of consultants, therefore a network or forum such as the CCA will play an even more important role in the exchange of ideas and solutions for each season's challenges. I encourage all agronomists here today to join the CCA as the knowledge you will gain from researchers and the experience from other consultants will be invaluable.

Past Cotton Leaders:

Although the industry is certainly suffering at the moment and has as one grower put it, lost its "pizzazz" I believe the industry is in for better times in the not too distant future.

I believe that to look to the future of the industry you only have to look at the past. The determination and drive of past "leaders" has ensured that we have survived such issues as low prices, low yields, Helix, Endosulfan, low prices, droughts, floods, low prices, Fusarium, water cutbacks, oh and have I mentioned low prices. The current drought and low prices are certainly not making this an enjoyable experience for anyone. Though sure enough if we can knuckle down, tighten our belts, diversify and most importantly become very good friends with our bank managers I am sure we will come out the other side to enjoy plentiful water supplies and cotton at \$600 a bale.

As can be seen around us, the current and previous leaders of the cotton industry have done a great job of ensuring our industry is a viable one. The teams of people at the CSIRO, CRDC, CSD, ACGRA, CRC, CCA and Cotton Australia should be congratulated on their leadership through the numerous challenges the industry has faced to date. In no way are we the younger generation asking you guys to jump in your caravans and tour Australia (even if you could afford the fuel). Rather we are saying we are here to learn and when the time is right we're ready to face the challenges with your help and guidance. We are committed to the cotton industry no matter what shape or form that will take in the future.