

# COTTON: PART OF THE SOCIAL FABRIC?

**AUTHOR** Tanya Howard

**ORGANISATION** Australian Centre for Agriculture and Law, University of New England

17<sup>th</sup> **australian COTTON** conference  
Our Fibre. Our Focus. Our Future

**Prepared by CRDC on behalf of the 17th Australian Cotton Conference**

[www.australiancottonconference.com.au](http://www.australiancottonconference.com.au)

## Further Information

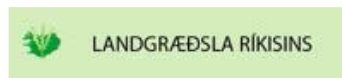
Tanya Howard  
+61 2 6773 3282 or  
+61 4 1700 2084  
[www.une.edu.au/aglaw](http://www.une.edu.au/aglaw)

## Acknowledgements

Cotton Research and Development Corporation and Australian Research Council Industry Linkage "Next Generation rural landscape governance"



**Australian Government**  
**Cotton Research and Development Corporation**



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities**

Imagine a future where cotton farms are run by sophisticated machines. Computerised systems monitor crop conditions; aerial drones collect real time information about your crop; pickers, gins and classers are operated by only a few people, in a 24 hour cycle dedicated to economic efficiency. Sounds like a productivity paradise! There's only one thing missing. ... viable and thriving cotton communities in rural and regional Australia.

The Australian cotton industry has faced concern about environmental impacts by embracing regulation, best practice and innovation. The industry has shown it can increase profitability and productivity while capturing a social license to operate. Future trends suggest a more competitive global marketplace ahead, as man-made fibres combine with nano-technology to challenge Australia's "pure fibre" focus. If the industry continues to focus on economic gain, rural communities and economies will start to suffer. This research asks how can we maintain the social fabric of cotton communities?

Recently I attended a cotton industry tour hosted by the CRDC. As a social researcher I am always interested in how people talk about their experiences, what their views are, and what they think about the future. Many of the individuals that talked to our tour groups were proud of the cotton industry, and of their contribution to the rural economy. They told stories of innovation and risk-taking as part of their success, and

how important good scientific research was to improving their business. They also talked about economic productivity, and the need to reduce costs through labour-saving technologies. We heard about the new technology in the USA that will eventually replace cotton classers; we saw new pickers that could also bail, eliminating another step in the production process.

As we talked to corporate operations and family businesses, I began to question the impact these efficiencies might have on the local community over time. If machines can replace low skilled workers, where will these people go for seasonal work? If cotton classers are replaced by visual technology, what happens to the expertise and knowledge of these workers? If large-scale operations can afford to invest in new machinery, how will family owned farms compete?

All of these questions are relevant to those who care about the future of rural and regional Australia. What happens to rural towns when jobs disappear? If low skilled workers and young people can't find jobs, they either move away or become another welfare statistic. Family farms can't compete against the economies of scale of large corporations, and come under increasing financial pressure.

The cotton industry is a proud contributor to rural communities, but it is possible that a one-eyed focus on economic productivity may start to unravel the social fabric, as families and young people move away, to other industries, or to

bigger cities.

Australia is at a cross-roads. The 'Lucky Country' has always relied on the high value of natural resources and raw materials to generate wealth. Australia's cotton industry exports fibre, it doesn't process, and this makes sense in a marketplace with high labour costs. However, there is an opportunity to change this model and start thinking about how to add value to the product. This will allow the cotton industry to play to its strengths, using innovation and technology to create new fibres that can compete against man-made products in a global marketplace. By moving away from an export efficiency model, the cotton industry can position itself for the challenges of the future, and also deliver employment possibilities for cotton communities.

## Summary

These challenges suggest the need for research with cotton growers, distributors and participants in the production cycle, to understand what people think the future holds for the industry, and it's cotton communities. Combining social perspectives with economic and community development, this research can work with the industry to plan for both the challenges of the marketplace, and the challenge of maintaining community viability. While scientific research helps the cotton industry to achieve better production, social research can help the industry develop a plan for the future that strengthens the social fabric with cotton fibre.