Australian cotton growers are some of the best in the world, achieving yields well in excess of world averages and also producing some of the best fibre quality cotton. This makes Australian cotton attractive to merchants and spinners around the globe.

The modern Australian cotton industry has grown from humble beginnings with it roots in the Namoi valley of north west New South Wales, to a professional, technologically advanced industry spanning from Central Queensland to the Victorian border.

In recent years, the industry has seen substantial expansion into areas once thought impractical to cotton growing. At present, two thirds of Australian cotton is grown in New South Wales and the remainder grown in Queensland. Through plant breeding and advances in biotechnology, the Australian cotton industry has been expanding into new regions, including south of the Victorian border and north in into the Flinders River in the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Ord Irrigation Scheme in Western Australia.

Dryland cotton currently accounts for approximately 10% of Australia’s cotton production. However, in recent seasons the popularity of cotton as dryland summer crop has seen an increase in the area planted to dryland cotton. Current varieties, improvements in technology and trait advancements have simplified the process for growing dryland cotton, reducing production risks and allowing for greater flexibility in planting windows, pupae busting and refuge requirements. Yield potential is continually increasing with new biotech traits.

Dryland cotton, when examined over the full term of a rotational cycle, has proven to consistently produce the highest gross margin return. With a range of marketing options available, growing dryland cotton makes good business sense.

This booklet is an introductory guide for those new to growing cotton or are interested in discovering more about cotton production. Further information, resources and tools including a gross margin calculator are available at www.acresofopportunity.com.au.
Stored soil moisture is critical factor in the dryland cotton farming system. The decision to plant cotton should be based on the level of stored moisture, not solely on the price of cotton. If the soil profile is not full then the chances of a successful crop are greatly diminished, regardless of the price.

Having an effective fallow period in the lead up to planting (where weeds are controlled, stubble is left standing and rainfall is left to accumulate) will provide the basis for a successful dryland cotton crop.

It’s important to complete ground and field preparation operations well ahead of time. Early fertilisation will facilitate a smooth transition into the planting operation, and allow the maximum amount of time to accumulate moisture into the soil profile.

Planting row configuration will vary depending on the farming operation and geographic location. It’s important to consider that some dryland cotton equipment, especially pickers, have standard two metre wheel spacing, and the picking heads are set up on multiples of 1 metre and 75cm spacing.

Planting is a critical operation in the dryland cotton farming system and every effort should be made to ensure that the seed is given every opportunity to establish.

It’s good farming practice to service all machinery to ensure they are in good condition and to avoid breakdowns. In a dryland cotton farming system, some operations are time sensitive, so there is tangible value in having machinery prepared and running for the planting season by having it serviced early. Having machinery ready to go when planting conditions are right, and having the capacity to cover the ground quickly will minimise the chance of missing the opportunity when it arises.

It is important to investigate cotton ginning and marketing organisations for the processing and marketing of your cotton crop, prior to planting. There are many options available to market your cotton, including the opportunity to forward sell. Remember that you will produce two commodities with each cotton crop – the lint and the seed – both of which can provide lucrative returns if marketed wisely.

If required, it’s important to engage outside assistance to help manage the crop. This can include a crop consultant (agronomist) and contractors for time sensitive farm operations (e.g. planting, picking and spraying). Where possible these should be organised prior to planting.

A good cotton consultant will assist you with the management of the cotton crop, from planting to picking. Their knowledge is in ensuring that the crop is managed without stresses throughout the season. Cotton consultants help with forecasting crop requirements, variety selection, planting, fertiliser requirements, application, insect and weed scouting and control, and crop defoliation. Even the most experienced dryland cotton growers utilise the services of cotton consultants.

**Neighbourhood relationships**

Cotton is particularly sensitive to phenoxy herbicides (2,4-D), suffering growth distortion, fruit loss and delayed maturity from even very small concentrations drifting onto the crop. It is important to talk to your neighbours, particularly those within a couple of kilometres, about your intentions to plant cotton.

CottonMap (www.cottonmap.com.au) allows growers, consultants and spray contractors to plot cotton fields online so you and your neighbours are aware of the location of nearby cotton fields when spraying.

It’s also critical to decontaminate any spray equipment that has been used for application of phenoxy herbicides, before you start the cotton season. A check needs to be made with all spraying contractors to ensure adequate decontamination has been conducted. All rubber hoses, O-rings, gaskets and seals should be replaced as harmful chemicals can be drawn back into solution by some solvents used in other chemical products.

Nutritional requirements

Cotton requires a good supply of both macro and micro nutrients to produce high yields. Unlike irrigated cotton production, the majority of dryland cotton crops use nil to minimal fertiliser inputs. The amount required is based on the yield potential and residual nutrients in the soil. The tap root of cotton has the ability to explore the soil profile and extract nutrients from levels out of reach to other rotation crops.

Fertiliser should be applied in a timely manner, to ensure availability for plant uptake before periods of peak nutrient demand. Regular soil testing, with accurate interpretation of the results, is valuable when assessing soil nutrient levels prior to planting.

Samples are best taken from May to August, ideally from varying depths of the soil profile. In-crop measurements should be conducted to reassess crop requirements during the season. Nutrient requirements should be budgeted on soil and crop tests, and on crop requirements based on yield potential.

Nutrient use efficiency can be boosted through careful fertiliser application. Your cotton consultant can give you advice on the most appropriate rate, product, timing and application method.

Don’t let nutrition be a yield limiting factor. Careful monitoring and management of nutrient levels is important to ensure yield potential is reached, without inefficient fertiliser application. Without regular monitoring, nutrition deficiencies may not be identified until symptoms appear – which may be too late. At that point, a reduction in yield is likely, despite remedial fertiliser applications.

Placement of fertiliser is very important, as root burn can occur if fertiliser is placed too close to the root system. It’s recommended that nitrogen be applied 10cm to the side of the plant.
PRE-SEASON – BEFORE YOU PLANT

Row configuration

Dryland cotton growers can use planting row configuration to manage their growing costs and maintain yield and fibre quality. Decisions on what row configuration to use in different scenarios are based on:

- In-crop rainfall
- Seasonal outlook
- Soil type
- Planting date
- Commercial experience in your region

There is an important relationship between row configuration, yield potential and fibre quality. As the row configuration widens, there is the potential for lower yields in better seasons, and this difference can be quite large. However, wider configurations yield similar to tighter configurations in harder years, while assisting in maintaining base grade fibre quality.

Therefore, varying row configuration is a method by which yield can be secured and quality discounts minimised. There is also an opportunity to manage variable costs. The combination of these factors reduces the risk of growing dryland cotton.

Discuss with your consultant which row configuration will best suit your farming operation, keeping in mind that row configuration has to match farming and picking machinery.

Select the right variety and seed treatment

Selecting a cotton variety that has the right regional and production type fit is a very important decision. Cotton Seed Distributors have a range of varieties available, which should be selected based on:

1. Yield in your area and production type
2. Disease tolerances
3. Resilience in fibre quality
4. Technology choice
   a) Conventional: cotton is non-GM
   b) Roundup Ready Flex®: can be sprayed “over the top” with Roundup Ready® Herbicide with PLANTSHIELD® by Monsanto and/or Roundup Ready® PL Herbicide with PLANTSHIELD® Technology up until the crop is at 22 nodes. This technology has revolutionised cotton production by reducing the need for residual herbicides, in-crop chipping, cultivation and shielded lay by applications.
   c) Bollgard® 3: is the latest generation technology that offers excellent control of Helicoverpa, the main cotton pest within Australia. It offers three modes of action for control and reduces the need for broad spectrum insecticide sprays. Bollgard 3 has simplified crop management by widening the cotton planting window, reducing refuge requirements and offering more flexible pupae busting requirements.

5. Other traits such as determinacy, leaf shape and season length should also be considered.
**PRE-SEASON – BEFORE YOU PLANT**

Your consultant or CSD Extension and Development Agronomist (www.csd.net.au/contact) will be able to assist you in making an educated decision on what variety and technology mix will suit your specific situation. The relevant CSD Grower and Monsanto Technology Use Agreements (TUA) need to be completed prior to ordering and receiving seed on farm. Cotton planting seed within Australia cannot be purchased without both these agreements in place as a requirement of the government regulations. The agreements can be obtained from your local cotton seed supplier, who will have further information on how to order seed. There are some accreditation processes which are required to ensure growers are aware of the crop management plans for biotech traits.

There are many pests and diseases which impact on cotton crops. Seed treatments are available to give some early season protection against disease and insects. A small amount of refuge area to be planted as part of the Australian cotton industry’s Resistance Management Plan (RMP). The required area will vary depending on the amount of cotton grown and the technology choice selected. The aim of a refuge crop is to generate significant numbers of Helicoverpa spp. which haven’t been exposed to Bollgard 3.

The types and requirements for the refuge crop can be found in the table below, and a refuge calculator tool can be found at: [http://bollgard3.com.au/grower-resources/calculators/cotton-refuge-transition/](http://bollgard3.com.au/grower-resources/calculators/cotton-refuge-transition/)

**Table 2. Bollgard 3 refuge options. Source: Bollgard 3 Resistance Management Plan.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>% of Bollgard II</th>
<th>% of Bollgard 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>Sprayed cotton refuge an area of irrigated non Bollgard 3 cotton, which can be conventionally managed for Helicoverpa spp. and other pests</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>OR Unsprayed cotton refuge an area of irrigated non Bollgard 3 cotton, which will not be treated for any reason with any product that controls Helicoverpa spp.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigeon Pea</td>
<td>Unsprayed pigeon peas which will not be treated for any reason with any products which control Helicoverpa spp. The pigeon pea crop is managed to ensure several cycles of flowering throughout the cotton season.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Subject to approved management plan by Monsanto.

**PLANTING AND ESTABLISHMENT**

Precision planters are the predominant type of planter units used to plant cotton, allowing for accurate and uniform seed placement. While cotton has the ability to compensate for gaps or unevenness in the plant stand, a uniform plant establishment will contribute in easing crop management throughout the season. In dryland cotton with wider row configurations the plants have less ability to fill in the gaps and therefore yield potential can be reduced.

A successful planting operation is influenced by a number of factors:

**Planter maintenance:**

Ensure the planter is well maintained and ready to go well before planting time. Breakdowns in the field can rob time and allow planting moisture to disappear.

**Planter depth:**

Ideal depth depends on the method of establishment and the soil conditions. A simple rule of thumb is to use the “knuckle” method as a quick and easy measurement tool in the field.

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**STUBBLE**

High levels of stubble can also impact establishment. While cereal stubble improves moisture levels and fallow efficiency it can also prevent good soil seed contact and obstruct emergence. Trash whippers may be necessary to remove stubble from the plant line. Some growers even adjust cereal row spacing to allow cotton to be planted between the rows or use a strip till system prior to planting.

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High soil temperatures

There has been a lot of research into the effects of cool temperatures on seedling establishment. As the planting window for Bollgard 3 cotton is widened, so too is the possibility of planting into summer temperatures in Central Queensland, western south west Queensland and north west New South Wales. High temperatures can reduce seedling establishment and in extreme conditions, can kill the seed and seedling.

Seed density

Some cotton varieties have lower seed density which means that when conditions are less than ideal, the variety will have lower seedling vigour and in turn, establishment.

When planting varieties with lower seed densities, growers should take extra care and attention to detail with both land preparation and planting operations to ensure adequate establishment is achieved.

Plant populations

The overall aim is to establish a healthy and uniform plant population of 6-10 plants per linear metre.

The number of seeds dropped is determined by several factors:

1. Soil type and seed bed condition
2. Germination percentages of seed
3. Seedling mortality through disease or insects
4. Temperature conditions

Establishing a cotton crop is a critical operation. It sets the standard for the entire season, influencing crop growth, development and management. If establishment is unsuccessful, it is difficult to manage and costly to rectify.

Plant once and do it right. Emergence is expected to occur within 7-14 days depending on factors such as planting depth, soil temperature and forecast. A faster rate of emergence is desirable, as the cotton plant emerges and starts to generate its own energy from sunlight. Cool temperatures will diminish root and shoot growth, reduce water and nutrient uptake and make seedlings more susceptible to attack from seedling disease and early season insect pests.

It is important to monitor the soil temperature and air temperature to find an appropriate planting window. It had been an Australian cotton industry guideline that cotton planting should not begin before soil temperatures reach 14°C or above at 10cm depth, at 8.00am. In some regions, it can be difficult to obtain such temperatures in early October and therefore a forecast for a rising air temperature is utilised in conjunction with soil temperatures, in order to time planting to provide seed with the best chance of emergence. There may be a FastStart soil temperature monitor station located near you (csd.net.au/soil_temperatures). Always be sure to check the soil temperature before you plant.

Table 3. The effect of temperature on cotton seedling survival and growth rate.
(Source: Constable and Shaw, 1988).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum soil temperature at 10cm</th>
<th>Seeds emerging and survival</th>
<th>Days to complete emergence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10°C</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14°C</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18°C</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Insect pests

Cotton, like most field crops, can be attacked by a range of insect pests during the season. For this reason, it is very important to employ an experienced crop consultant/agronomist to regularly monitor the crop and help you make pest management decisions.

While there are numerous products registered for the control of various cotton pests; many insecticides, if used at the wrong time, can cause more problems than they solve by disrupting the balance of natural pest enemies (beneficials), which can subsequently flare secondary pests, requiring further, harsher control.

### Pest Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pest</th>
<th>Crop stage</th>
<th>Where found</th>
<th>Does Bollgard 3 control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helicoverpa spp. (Heliothis)</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Attacks fruit and terminal buds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver leaf whitefly (Bemisia tabacci)</td>
<td>All season but mainly concentrated late season</td>
<td>Underside of leaves, secretes honeydew</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton aphid (Aphis gossypii)</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Underside of leaves, secretes honeydew</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-spotted spider mites (Tetranychus urticae)</td>
<td>All season but mainly concentrated in late season</td>
<td>Underside of leaves</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil pests - True wireworm (Agrypnus sp.)</td>
<td>Planting and emergence</td>
<td>Underneath feeding on emerging seedlings</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False wireworm (Corocephalum spp., Pterohelaeus spp.)</td>
<td>Black field earwig (Nala lividipes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black field earwig (Nala lividipes)</td>
<td>Symphyla (Hanseniella spp.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrips (various species)</td>
<td>Emergence until squaring (are also a beneficial insect)</td>
<td>'Rases' leaves of young seedling</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green mirid (Creontiades dilutus)</td>
<td>Flowering and boll fill</td>
<td>Attacks fruit and terminal buds</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green vegetable bug (Nezara viridula)</td>
<td>Flowering and boll fill</td>
<td>Attacks fruit and terminal buds</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solenopsis mealybug (Phenacoccus solenopsis)</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Underside of leaves or grouped on stems</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you want to know more about pest management in cotton:
Disease pathogens
In dryland cotton production systems, the risk of disease is not as prevalent as it is in irrigated production systems. However, this is not to discount the impact of disease if conditions are right. A disease occurs when a pathogen is exposed to a susceptible host variety and the environment is favourable for an infection to take place. A disease can be controlled by excluding or eliminating the pathogen, growing a resistant variety or by modifying the environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Crop stage</th>
<th>Crop symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seedling diseases</td>
<td>Germination and emergence</td>
<td>Pre-emergent seed rot, post-emergent damping off, slow early season growth, lesions on roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black root rot</td>
<td>Emergence</td>
<td>Stunted, slow early season growth, blackening of the roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verticillium wilt</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Yellow mottling of the leaves, stem vascular discoloration, plant death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusarium wilt</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Yellow mottling of the leaves, stem vascular discoloration, plant death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternaria Leaf Spot</td>
<td>After canopy closure</td>
<td>Brown or grey spots on leaves and bolls with purple margins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boll rot, seed rot and tight boll</td>
<td>After boll opening</td>
<td>Rotting of the boll or cotton not fluffing once opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Bunchy Top</td>
<td>All season</td>
<td>Pale green angular patches on leaves, small or short leaves, internodes and bolls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only fungicides registered for use on cotton in Australia are seed treatments for the control of the seedling disease complex that causes pre- and post-emergent ‘damping off’ of seedlings. All cotton seed in Australia is supplied with a standard fungicide seed treatment.

The pathogen
If pathogens are not present in an area - then don’t introduce them! Several of the worst diseases of cotton are caused by pathogens that can be carried in dirt and crop residues attached to vehicles and machinery. Always practice good farm hygiene. Insist that vehicles and machinery, and even boots, are cleaned before leaving a farm – so that they are clean when arriving at the next farm. “COME CLEAN - GO CLEAN”.

The host
All Australian cotton varieties are completely resistant to bacterial blight and have some high tolerances to Fusarium wilt, Verticillium wilt and Alternaria leaf spot. Nematodes and many of the fungal pathogens can also attack cotton. Seed treatments are available that can ‘turn on’ the cotton plant’s natural defence mechanisms and provide increased resistance to some pathogens.

Crop nutrition is also important. Cotton plants that are deficient in Potassium are very susceptible to Alternaria leaf spot.

The environment
The environment can be manipulated by adjusting the planting date so that, boll opening and cotton picking occur at the driest time of the year and fibre damage and down-grading are minimised. Good crop management to prevent tall rank growth can significantly reduce the incidence of boll rot that thrive in the humid environment of a dense canopy.

Wet weather is usually a significant factor in disease development. There are several leaf pathogens that can infect cotton and cause various leaf spots, and even defoliation, when a maturing crop is exposed to an extended period of wet weather.

Weed control
Summer weeds are aggressive competitors to young cotton seedlings, robbing moisture, nutrients and light. It is therefore important to start the season from a clean fallow and to control early season weeds. Consideration should be given to any herbicide plant back restrictions, as some may require rainfall to assist with the breakdown of these chemicals. Roundup Ready Flex has revolutionised weed control in the Australian cotton industry, however, the technology is but one tool and should be used as part of an overall integrated weed management system. This is particularly the case in high weed density situations. Use residual and inter-row cultivation or manual weeding where required. Using alternate modes of action has the additional benefit of minimising the risk of herbicide resistance.

For further information visit the WeedSmart website. WeedSmart is an industry-led initiative to enhance on-farm practices and promote long term sustainability of herbicide use. www.weedsmart.org.au

Utilise your consultant/agronomist to monitor crop growth and progress, as well as insect pests and disease, and to prescribe methods of control, if required. A consultant/agronomist can provide a fresh set of eyes and also will have an understanding of where the crop should be up to based on their knowledge of other crops in the district. Critical aspects which your consultant can assist with are growth rates, plant height, management and fruit retention.

Cotton is a responsive crop to manage, so growers are able to monitor and manipulate the cotton plant to maximise yield and ease of management. As mentioned earlier, the rate of growth of a cotton crop is determined by temperature and thus depending on the temperature, follows a specific pattern. Due to this predictability, it allows for management and monitoring to influence crop growth and development. Using the relationship between the rate of development and temperature, a measure of crop progress is described as Day Degrees.

When the temperature is below 12°C, the cotton plant processes cease, and the plant experiences what is termed as cold shock, where the cotton plant’s development is retarded. To ensure good early season growth, it is vital to limit the number of cold shock events to which young cotton seedlings are exposed.

Aim to have the crop achieve the following key parameters (developed from CSD’s Ambassador Network).

### Establishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soil temperature</th>
<th>Forecast temperature</th>
<th>Established plants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14°C at 8.00am</td>
<td>Rising</td>
<td>6-10 plants/m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### First flower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nodes</th>
<th>NAWF</th>
<th>1st Position retention - north</th>
<th>Vegetative growth rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>5-6cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Cut-out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nodes</th>
<th>Squaring nodes</th>
<th>Plant height</th>
<th>Bolls/m</th>
<th>Vegetative growth rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100-105cm</td>
<td>180+</td>
<td>5-6cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Plant growth regulation

Utilise plant growth regulators to manage excessive growth. Excessive rank growth is inefficient, and can lead to boll rots, increase defoliation costs and reduced penetration of insecticides and fungicides.

Generally, there are two times when growth regulation is applied in cotton.

1. In the lead up to flowering to ensure a balance between the reproductive and vegetative growths. Applications at this time to correct excessive growth have shown improvements in yield.

2. At cut-out to shut any excessive growth late in the season down. The main purpose is to even the crop up and to concentrate the plant in filling the later set bolls.

Application of growth regulators to dryland cotton must be carefully considered. Moisture stress can increase the impact of Mepiquat on cotton plants.
FLOWERING TO CUT OUT IS A CRITICAL TIME

Critically, the period from flowering to cut out is when up to 90% of the crop yield is set. It is, therefore, paramount to ensure that the plant/crop grows actively and is healthy through this period. Depending on the regional season length, a major aim throughout this period is to extend the flowering period for as long as possible. Crops approaching cut-out too rapidly are stressed and cannot support the fruit load.

A crop’s Nodes Above White Flower (NAWF) will generally decrease to a point where it ‘cuts out’ (four NAWF). This is when there are not enough resources to continue producing additional nodes because the ‘boll load’ is taking most of the plant’s photosynthate. The aim is to extend the period till the crop reaches four NAWF for as long as possible within season length constraints. There are limitations; the season length will determine the Day Degrees required in filling later bolls.

The longer the flowering period, the more potential to set more bolls, so the yield potential increases. Studies have shown a positive trend of increased boll numbers as the flowering period is extended. To extend the flowering period it is important to host a ‘happy plant’ through good crop management. The key is to keep the plant happy through minimisation of:

- Moisture stress,
- Nutritional stress
- Weeds, insects and disease

Crop monitoring through this period should include tracking crop water use and irrigation scheduling, monitoring of nutritional requirements through petiole testing, and ensuring fruit retention and accumulated numbers are tracking to the desired target.

HARVEST/PICKING

Do not defoliate too early – time defoliation to ensure the crop and fibre is mature. Defoliation too early can lead to immature cotton fibres, which can cause problems in the dyeing of the fabric later in the processing chain. Your consultant can assist with the timing of the defoliation operation through varying methods:

1. 4 Nodes Above Cracked Boll (NACB).
   Physiologically, the last harvestable boll is mature when the boll four nodes down have begun to open up (cracked).
2. When the crop reaches 60% open. This is determined through simply counting the number of open bolls compared to the total number of bolls.
3. Cutting bolls and looking for mature seeds:
   Bolls should be firm to cut even with a sharp knife; the contents of the seed should be fully formed and the seed coat turned from translucent to tan or black.

Defoliation of moisture stressed crops can be difficult and take much longer than expected.

Growers looking to utilise the services of a picking contractor should consult Cotton Australia’s ‘Pick N Match’ service, which helps bring growers and contractors together.


Pick on time and without delay. Cotton has the ability to weather some adverse climatic conditions but can be prone to downgrades in fibre quality. Soil compaction is an issue associated with wet picking, due to the size of the machinery. Impacts can be minimised by timing the last irrigation to assist with drying the soil profile down, as well as not re-entering the field too early post rainfall.

Do not pick if seed cotton moisture is greater than 12%. This can cause ginning fibre quality issues which could lead to discount penalties of your cotton. Some signs that cotton is too wet to pick are:

1. If moisture is evident on your vehicle
2. If you can feel moisture at all on the bolls
3. Seeds inside the lint do not crack if bitten
4. You are experiencing picker head door blockages or throwing cotton out the front
5. It is after 9.00pm - good picking conditions are rare in the late evening

The aim is to have good quality cotton from the gin, free of downgrades and to have the highest turn out possible. This is achieved through a proper defoliation and picking under the right conditions.

Consider using a stripper rather than a picker when yields are low and the cotton bolls are tight.

Harvest is a good time in the Australian cotton industry, but it is also a time when long hours, tight schedules and heavy machinery mix. Safety is paramount, so it is important to ensure procedures and protocols are put in place to minimise the risk of injury. All staff, including contractors, should be made aware of procedures, especially with tall and unshielding machinery.
Ensure your cotton crop is destroyed post-picking. As a perennial crop, cotton can regrow into ratoon plants post defoliation/picking, and can act as a:

1. Weed, robbing moisture and nutrients
2. A bridge to host insect pests and diseases
3. Resistance build up
4. Be costly to control

Conduct a pupae busting operation, if required under your resistance management plan. This pass can be used for additional purposes such as planting another crop or remedial action to repair soil constraints such as compaction, or to place immobile nutrients such as potassium and phosphorus deep into the soil profile.
