



Siratac Plus - Why

As most of you are aware, the Siratac Cotton Management Advisor computer program is being rewritten. There will be those amongst you who are unaware as to why this is being done.

The main reason for all this effort is that the existing Siratac is running out of puff. The constant demand for changes in Siratac to reflect changes in the industry is causing Siratac to strain at the edges.

In addition, looking not to far into the future, one can see requirements that are not easily provided by Siratac, including a modern intelligent interfaces, improved graphics, flexible access to grower data, ad hoc reporting etc.

Although some people may argue, and some do, that the cost of providing these types of requirements exceeds their usefulness, in all other industries the easy and fast access to information has assumed a major position in maintaining profitability and competitiveness. Individuals may argue that they do not need this type of information, and again this is difficult to counter. Although individuals may not want this information, the industry as a whole, through spokesmen for various sectors and members of Siratac Ltd., have expressed a wish for it. Complementing this is a report produced by Terry Naughtin from Colly Farms, which circulated through the industry, and lately a report produced by Maurie Fay, President of the Consultants Association, describing "Cotton On", both describing an environment in which information is readily available,

information which present Siratac can not provide.

Siratac Plus - Where Are We ?

Siratac has been under redevelopment since the beginning of 1986. During this time we have completely pulled it apart, analysed the bits and are now in the final stages of putting some of it back together again.

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With the combined resources of the Divisions of Plant Industry and Information Technology and Digital Equipment Corporation, we are using the most advanced techniques and tools to ensure that the redeveloped version will be able to meet the requirements of the Cotton Industry in the foreseeable future. This does not mean that from day one, you will be able to view all of your data from any angle graphed in colour or get the latest cotton prices from the New York markets, but at least a firm foundation has been built on which Siratac Plus can grow and be utilized in a larger information system to meet your requirements.

The main change from the users point of view is in the interface, the way you interact with the computer system. Out goes the line by line, chug chug interface with Siratac, and in comes a modern interface utilizing graphics wherever possible and buttons to indicate what you want to do instead of laboriously typing in commands and names. Hidden behind the scenes will be details about connecting through to the central computer facility, the tedious logging on sequence etc. If you wish to only enter some data, then you do not need to run the pest management adviser, you merely sit at your computer, and without connecting to the central computing facility, type in your data as simple as filling in a form. Then when you decide, you may transmit that data to the central computer.

You are in total control of your information.

When you want some information from the computer, the first release of Siratac Plus will duplicate the reports now available in Siratac. However, the software chosen will allow the Siratac Plus systems people to implement new reports, graphs etc. much more quickly than now. In addition, a simple *ad-hoc* reporting facility will be available from day one, based on the Teamdata product supplied on Vax computers.

Redeveloping Siratac to the extent that we are doing, will give Siratac Plus users a more sophisticated computer environment than other computer users have available. For example, it will be possible to take data from the Siratac Plus database, and insert it into spreadsheet systems, more sophisticated graphing systems, wordprocessing systems etc.

Behind the scenes, we are utilizing the advances made in the computer industry to manufacture the solid base required for any larger information system. Siratac Plus combines expertise from such diverse areas as artificial intelligence, relational databases, structured programming techniques, software engineering, data dictionary technology, and fourth generation languages. Combining such diverse products enables Siratac Plus

to take the best facilities from each, and ensures that Siratac Plus will be able to benefit from future advances made in any of these areas.

So what is the catch.

Well, there is a catch. In order to provide you with all this power, we can not stay with much of the existing equipment, especially if it can not support graphic capabilities.

Think of it using a farming analogy. When tractors were invented, some farmers were using bullocks. There was no way that the new mechanized technology could be harnessed to any bullocks, so they had to go, if the farmer wanted the advantages offered by the tractors. In the end, all farmers used tractors to remain competitive and profitable.

Similarly, if you want the advantages of Siratac Plus and the new age, then you must bring your computer equipment in line with what will be required by Siratac Plus. Initially, Siratac Plus will run only on Macintosh computers. Siratac Ltd. are looking at producing an IBM compatible interface if demand exists. However, initially it will be available only on Macintoshes.

Why did we pick the Macintosh? Well, if you compare aspects such as friendliness, ruggedness, and future, then the Macintosh is up there with the best, *not the rest but the best*. In fact it is my opinion, that the Macintosh leads the field in the price range. Another consideration was that out of all the existing Siratac users, the Macintosh formed the largest group of computers. Still another is the cost to Siratac Ltd. of training to become familiar with the computer. Siratac Ltd. has considerable experience in using Macintosh's, so it seems irrational to pick a computer with which there is little or no expertise.

For those of you who have invested in other computers, the current Siratac will be available for a short time, but you should be aware that to support the running of two versions of the Siratac system is expensive, an expense the industry may be unwilling or unable to support.

The most important catch is *cost*. To redevelop Siratac is costing a lot of money from various organisations, both within and outside the cotton industry. However, these organisations agree that the cost is justified, to meet the future demands from an industry under constant pressure of balancing a high technological component for productivity and product quality against environmental concerns voiced from within society.

Siratac Plus - the Future

What does the future hold. Well apart from boldly venturing where no man has gone before to the four corners of the universe, I think that the future is bright.

The Cotton Industry is demanding more from its investment in information technology, and there are moves to meet these demands. The matter of how much these demands cost and where the money coming from is also being addressed, but to be fair, there are no easy answers.

Siratac Plus will take a pivotal place in meeting these demands, and is being built on a sound footing to accommodate these requirements. As the need for information grows, Siratac Plus has the capability to grow with it to a point where the industry is served by an organisation rivaling some of those now being discussed. One immediate demand is in the area of farm management. The Siratac Plus team are already looking at what data structures would be required to support simple farm management in the form of a farm diary.

In adopting the Macintosh computer as the interface into Siratac Plus, the whole range of the available software that runs on Macintosh's is now available to you. Siratac Plus has taken this into consideration, and if you wish to use another graphic package, or a spreadsheet, or a three dimensional plotting package, then the data will be able to be stripped from the mainframe in a suitable format for loading into those packages.

Those of you that follow the computer news will have heard that Apple, the makers of the Macintosh, and Digital Equipment Corporation, the makers of the Vax computers, are collaborating to such an extent, that very soon, a Macintosh will be able to access data on a Vax computer without going through laborious methods to extract the data that must be adhered to now. The Macintosh will be able to automatically access all of your data stored on the Vax. This will not be necessarily true of other computers.

Siratac Plus will enable you to utilize the full power of the computer on your desk, instead of using a dumb terminal. This will come at little cost to you, having bought the Macintosh first of course.

So all up, this is the opportunity for the cotton community to leap into the 21st century ahead of most others.