

Australian Cotton Industry Best Management Practices Program

New Beginnings for BMP

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Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that the future of the Australian Cotton Industry is inextricably linked to parameters of ‘permissible practice’ as defined by the broader community. The Australian Cotton Industry’s Best Management Practices (BMP) Program is a proactive initiative designed to help maintain this ‘social licence’ to farm.

By establishing a structured, auditable process for cotton growers to demonstrate on-ground practice change leading to improved environmental and farm performance outcomes, the BMP Program has been extremely successful in addressing community and regulatory concerns over the past decade.

With new issues and challenges arising, the industry is currently going through a process to review the current BMP Program to ensure it meets current grower and industry needs. A new strategic plan for the BMP Program has been developed and will be rolled out under the management of Louise Adcock with the guidance of the ACIC BMP Steering Committee. The latter is comprised of Bob Bell, Glenn Fresser, Leith Bouilly, Joe Robinson, Adam Kay and Stuart Higgins.

In setting the new strategic direction for the BMP Program, the committee has taken account of existing resources including extensive past and present stakeholder feedback. The committee have valued this feedback, acting inclusively and decisively to create a high-impact future direction for the Program.

By adopting and embracing this new BMP Program, cotton growers will develop greater resilience to face the inevitable changes ahead of them. They will assess and document the variables in growing their crops. They will be better equipped to make production decisions based on knowledge. They will have improved capacity to weigh up conflicting issues. For this it is anticipated they will be recognised and respected by the broader community for meeting or exceeding industry and community expectations.

BMP – New Beginnings

It is recognised that the BMP Program has achieved enormous gains for the industry in regards to pesticide use and management. However, the industry has acknowledged the need for the BMP Program to evolve to meet today's needs of growers and the industry. As a result positive steps forward have been made in revising the program's strategic direction, framework and content as a result of comprehensive feedback received from growers.

Over the past year, the ACIC BMP Committee has revised the strategic intent of the program to direct the review process. A summary of the vision, mission and key goals are outlined below;

'The Cotton BMP Program is enhancing our social license to farm. We recognise that our social licence is granted by the wider community when growers collectively demonstrate that they are efficient, innovative and professional, responsible environmental stewards producing quality cotton'.

The purpose of the BMP Program is to support and assist growers by

- Providing practical processes and practices to assist the implementation of legislative requirements
- Providing information and tools for cotton production within a farming system to improve production practices that minimise costs and maximise profitability, and
- Building resilience through providing the best available information to inform risk and change management

The BMP Program is also underpinned by the following principles:

Leadership:	We strive to be proactive, innovative, responsive and committed
Independent:	We achieve by promoting sound science, credible and rigorous performance data
Quality Relationships:	We work in strong partnerships through collaboration and communication with key stakeholders and other interested parties
Credibility:	We demonstrate our performance through tangible actions
Grower based:	We are grower-based to ensure the program is practical, relevant and adds value to the business of cotton production
Industry Driven:	We are driven by industry self regulation

The ACIC BMP Committee also identified the goals for the next phase of the BMP Program;

Goal 1: Cotton growers value the improvement of farm performance through the adoption of Best Management Practices

Goal 2: BMP participants have developed and adopted farm management plans and strategies that minimize the risks to their farm businesses, the community in which they operated and the industry generally

Goal 3: Increase awareness, understanding and support among stakeholders and communities by demonstrating outcomes and benefits of the Australian Cotton industry.

Goal 4: The BMP Program is a collaborative initiative which is owned by its industry stakeholders.

The BMP Program will continue to focus on providing a cohesive approach to raising the bar for industry performance and will build on the reputation of being progressive, innovative and efficient. To assist this process, a set of long term industry and landscape targets will be developed. Establishment of such targets will allow the industry to articulate what the industry is striving for, and provide the capacity to communicate the progress of the industry towards those targets to external and internal audiences.

As part of the review process, the framework that underpins the program has been redesigned to achieve the following:

- Be a cohesive industry framework that provides a strategic pathway for economic and environmental improvement
- That provides the capacity to retrospectively recognise the positive actions already implemented by growers
- Build the capacity of growers to deal with emerging issues
- Will allow growers to assess their farm performance against industry agreed standards, and assess key areas for improvements
- A grower can choose any element of the program to assist their farm business performance
- Supports growers by providing streamlined processes and tools that focus on making practical business sense
- Will be multi levelled and focus on a key business elements not just cotton specific actions
- Has the opportunity to gain BMP Certification
- Includes a shared delivery model that incorporates extension staff and consultants in delivering the program
- Encompasses a risk assessment tool
- Will generate outcomes that are used to communicate to varying audiences
- Will link to regional and catchment targets

From its original purpose, the BMP Program has evolved to address broader natural resource management issues (Land and Water Management Module). This module recently has seen a landmark agreement with the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Water that formally recognises BMP certification as an alternative for cotton growers who have been asked to develop a statutory Land and Water

Management Plan (LWMP). The development of a LWMP is a requirement enshrined in the Queensland Water Act.

The next phase of the BMP Program will see it further evolve to focus on the key elements which underpin a farming business today. The program will be based on issues more relevant to a farming business today including water, soil, chemicals and IPM, carbon and energy, bio-security, technologies, natural assets and human resources. This approach will allow for the shift of farming businesses to a multiple commodity base and increased focus on both production and environmental outcomes.

It is critical that the program is practical, makes business sense and valuable to growers. The BMP Program is designed for growers in a number of ways;

- by providing the opportunity to assess what a farm business does well, and what can be improved by assessing individual farm performance against industry agreed standards
- by synthesising complex legislative and policy requirements to allow efficient on farm application
- will be a one stop shop for relevant links to information, latest research and development, tools and support for Best Management Practices
- provide a process for identifying latest best management practices from research, and facilitating a process of accessing assistance to implement them at a farm level.

The BMP Program will become multi levelled, providing growers with a higher degree of flexibility within the program. The program's will have a simplified entry level and the standards become more challenging as a grower progresses through the levels. It will provide the opportunity to retrospectively recognise growers who have been proactive, while providing a pathway of tools, expertise and resources to assist other growers to improve their business priorities.

Below outlines what a farm business has achieved at the completion of each level.

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| Level 4: | excelled in farm performance & is recognized for innovation, sound business management |
| Level 3 | has improved performance beyond BMP certification level (based on business priorities) |
| Level 2: | achieved all revised or new standards to a BMP certification level |
| Level 1: | met all legislation, policy and industry developed standards for focus areas |

The second level of the program will include new and revised current 'BMP standards'. It will include the QLD Land and Water Management plan agreement. At the end of the second level, growers will be eligible for certification if they so choose. The third level would include more challenging targets as BMP is based on continuous improvements not just to 'achieve certification' It's about assisting growers who wish to continue to raise the performance bar and will be able to focus on the areas that 'best' fit their business priorities. The fourth level will be designed to capture innovation and excellence in farming

practices and sound decision making. It will be aimed at recognizing those that are trialling or adopting new technologies and practices.

To maintain integrity, third party auditing will be maintained and will require a grower to have met all standards in Level One and Level Two. This underpins the credibility of the program in demonstrating a consistent overall standard for external audiences, advocacy and potential market opportunities.

The revised model of the BMP Program will primarily become an assessment tool rather than providing a high level of detail that is provided with the current program. However, each standard and practice will have links to appropriate tools and resources to support a grower if they need further information and identify who is the appropriate person to contact for technical expertise.

Standards will become outcome based, that will identify the practices grower has implemented to achieve that outcome. These practices will change as new practices evolve, however it allows the standards to remain relevant over a longer period of time. This removes the need to be prescriptive and provides greater opportunities to report on what practices are being adopted for research and extension efforts across the industry.

Every element of the program will be evaluated against its practicality, cost benefit, capacity to benefit decision making and adds value to a farm business. The BMP Program should be sold as a way to assist growers to achieve practices more efficiently.

The BMP Program is an industry program and the review process has focussed on strengthening relationships and support for the program across the industry. The program will more strongly focus on the practices which provide better opportunities to link extension and research into the program. The program will also aim to align and recognise standard farm business practices across such programs as the “Grains BMP”

The industry has also clearly articulated its desire for the BMP Program to move to an electronic version, rather than a paper based manual. A web based tool prototype has been developed to allow growers to complete the self assessment process on line, be a ‘one stop shop’ for the latest research and development information, tools, resources, information and support. A farm business operator will also be able to view their BMP status at any time. It will also provide the industry with a better mechanism to collect valuable collated information to promote the industry and demonstrate the value of research adoption. The electronic version will also provide a more streamlined administration capacity making it a more valuable and cost effective mechanism for the industry.

The remaining levels of the program will be developed in collaboration with industry stakeholders and growers over the next six months. It is imperative that the program is tested thoroughly with growers to ensure that it is practical and relevant before broader industry release. The trial phase will encompass the electronic tool, and the revised program content. The trial phase will include working with small groups across the cotton growing regions. It is anticipated that the trial phase will commence early next year. A transition process will allow growers to easily convert to the new BMP program.

BMP Program Past Success

The BMP Program has achieved significant success over the decade that it has been in place. Government and Non government organisations place much value on the existence of the program, from the perspective of managing its resources and capacity to identify and address industry risks. Over the past few years, a number of independent reviews have identified benefits – below is a snapshot.

On-Farm Environmental Outcomes (Macarthur Agribusiness, 2004)

BMP directly and/or indirectly has had a significant beneficial environmental outcome on-farm. The most readily identifiable benefits are associated with the Integrated Pest Management Module and the Application of Pesticide Module. The result has been a reduction in total sprays, a reduction in the occasions when sprays have not reached the target pest and/or weed, and a reduction in the number of odor and spray drift complaints about spraying practices on-farm.

Impact of Stakeholders (Macarthur Agribusiness, 2004)

BMP has generally had a positive impact on the business of industry and external stakeholders. The BMP process and the L&WM module are considered to be effective, well developed tools for reviewing and planning changes to activities on farm. It effectively addresses most key NRM issues of relevance to cotton growing regions and as such presents a tool that has the potential to deliver NRM and profitability outcomes.

The key drivers for uptake of the L&WM module are: (Hassall's and Associates, 2006)

1. To use it as an alternative to developing a statutory LWMP in Queensland.
2. Being seen to be doing the right thing by the industry.
3. It is a natural progression as part of the BMP process.

Changes in Farm Practices (Macarthur Agribusiness, 2004)

Our grower survey shows there has been a significant beneficial change in cotton farm practices since the BMP Manual was introduced in 1997. The change is evident across all modules that are currently in operation within the industry, namely Application of Pesticides; Storage and Handling of Pesticides; Integrated Pest Management; Farm Design and Management; Farm Hygiene; and Storage & Handling of Petrochemicals.

References

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