

# COTTON AUSTRALIA

## **Auditing the Audit**

by

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The Environmental Audit of the Australian cotton industry was a bold initiative at a period in time when the industry was under severe pressure from well organised environmental lobby groups.

One course of action could have been to "bury the head in the sand" based on the premise that the pressures would subside when the environmental fad lost momentum.

This was not a course the industry regarded as tenable despite concerns within the industry that it would leave it even more vulnerable to attack. The audit was performed.

The auditors chose to perform a "Scoping Audit", that is a broad view across the industry to look at the structure, initiatives and impact of the industry on its environment as a whole. This is significantly different to on-site auditing where all input/outputs are monitored by chemical or physical analysis.

The Audit was completed and released in October, 1991. It is now opportune to review the initial impact of the audit.

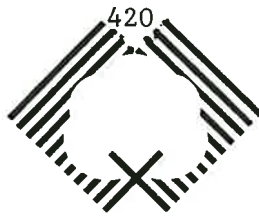
### **1. The audit has not -**

- a** Changed criticism of the industry although at the time of release both the Total Environment Centre and Greenpeace cautiously welcomed the report but stated that 'it did not go far enough'. Since then both groups have studiously failed to acknowledge the existence of the environmental audit.
- b** Changed the course of strict environmental legislation that will impact on the cotton industry in both Queensland and New South Wales. Some within the industry believed the audit was designed specifically to attack the industry. The legislation sets community standards for all activities. It is interesting to note that both Queensland and NSW legislation contains provision for requiring environmental audits to be undertaken.
- c** Changed to a major extent the perception of the industry by other rural producers and the broad community.
- d** Solved some problems within the industry.

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**The audit has:**

- a provided a factual base document which has been used effectively to counter allegations made against the industry. The document has been lodged with key parliamentary personnel and senior officers within government departments.

It is apparent that the audit is being accessed by these sectors to address allegations that the cotton industry is environmentally damaging. Because it is factual and independent, the audit is far more credible with the general community. This acceptance base is rapidly growing with the placement of the document into libraries, schools and other public domains;

- b focussed the strengths and weaknesses of the industry into a single document which is now a blueprint for progress. While many of the programs were already in place to address issues of concern, this has given them new impetus. The highly successful forum at the IAA workshop on storm runoff, the prioritising of research endeavours at the meeting held recently by the Cotton Research and Development Corporation and the Land and Water Research and Development Corporation are examples of how the audit has complemented these endeavours;

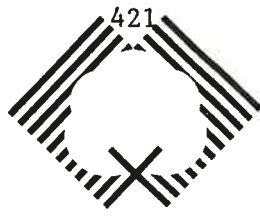
- c has demonstrated to the policy makers in government both at a political and instrumentality level, that this industry is progressive and is willing to adapt to changing community standards. This has, in turn, led to involvement with areas of government previously inaccessible as they consider our expertise will assist with formulation and adoption of policies;

- d had a major impact within the industry;

The intensity of adverse media over the years impacted on growers and it was quite apparent a 'siege' mentality prevailed. The fact that the industry has been assessed independently and positively has caused a subtle but firm change of attitude within the industry. As one who services the industry this change is very apparent. Growers express concern over the impact their actions might have on the industry rather than on themselves. Collective thinking is always a strength.

The post audit meetings conducted in Queensland by Stuart Gordon, in association with the local grower associations have progressed beyond the recommendations of the audit. This is an indication that the audit has been a catalyst that allows the industry to adopt to the changing community standards for agriculture in the future.

While possibly there will not be a need for such an industry wide audit in the future, there will arise situations where in depth auditing may have to be performed in a particular area of environmental sensitivity. Already one corporate grower has taken this initiative with the major benefit of improved management of its resources. However it would be in the industry's interests to continue with performance audits.



### **Was the audit worthwhile ?**

The above balance is a short term appraisal only. The audit is not a "quick fix" to be discarded as complete. Therefore it is possibly unfair to judge the implications of the audit after such a short time. I believe the strength of the audit will come in the longer term when the issues the audit did not cover are constructively addressed. The package of initiatives put in train either before the audit or as a result of the audit, will allow compliance with environmental legislation; will change the perception of the general community and solve matters within the industry. As for the critics, when these issues are addressed, allegations that are made now will be shown to be without substance.

