

Best Management Practices (BMP) The Growers View

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It is no doubt BMP is the next major challenge facing the cotton industry. We are under increasing scrutiny from governments, their departments and our own communities. Particularly on chemical use and drum disposal, water, farm design, and occupational health and safety. This is an opportunity to answer our critics and to demonstrate to governments we are doing the right thing. BMP will assist us to control our own destiny. It is becoming increasingly difficult to comply with a barrage of regulatory paper work. We need to do it on our terms, where there are real tangible benefits.

Like all cotton grower associations we have been delegated the task of implementing BMP with back up resources from the CRDC, ACGRA and more recently Cotton Australia. The main challenge is to motivate growers to be enthusiastic and committed to the process. Growers in the Macquarie, with a few exceptions, accept that BMP is the way forward. The most common complaint I hear is the amount of paperwork involved. This may be an over reaction but, unfortunately unavoidable in today's society.

Soon after the BMP launch in December 1997, the *Macquarie River Food and Fibre* (MRFF) endorsed the document for all its members (all irrigators). This enabled the CGA to approach the six major irrigation schemes individually, to help workshop and implement BMP. This was a great advantage to a number of the schemes who were wrestling with their own management plans. It has allowed local groups to form who regularly socialise in the same circles. This is the stimulus needed to motivate growers to become involved. We believe promoting BMP through the irrigation schemes and riparian groups develops ownership amongst its members, (including other irrigators) so that a more defined peer group pressure can help with its adoption.

Valley wide, the irrigation schemes control 40% of water entitlements which is delivered to 60% cotton growers. The balance of cotton growers are farming in Riparian Zones where there is a perception of higher environmental sensitivity. These growers by and large

are acutely aware of the need for "*due diligence*" within their operations and understand the importance of BMP. During the implementation phase of BMP we have formed two riparian working groups (upper and lower Macquarie) to help oversee adoption in these areas. This simple structure will help us effectively co-ordinate BMP.

At the moment we are on the starting blocks, without someone to start the race. The majority of us have been "*workshopped*" through the Manual which is now sitting on our filing cabinets! I believe we urgently need trained personnel or quality assurance consultants to assist with implementation in each cotton growing region. They may be industry funded or self employed. Preferably, self employed and industry trained. Growers need to be able to sit down with someone for a half or full day to progressively work through the manual. Many of our agronomy consultants feel they are too busy to become involved in such a time consuming process. Other consultants are happy to be involved but realise more human resources are needed, with costs incurred accordingly. Most growers are willing to pay for hired help but are unable to source any appropriate organisation or personnel. Since picking we have lost momentum. In hindsight it is simply because of a lack of strategic planning. Too much emphasis was placed on the promotion and delivery of the BMP manual.

It is very important for *all irrigators* to have access to BMP as they are our closest allies. They have identical, environmental, political and community issues and similar activities without the current stigma attached to cotton. Presented in the correct manner, BMP will reinforce our relationship with those irrigators in other industries. To leave them out will inevitably force a reluctant change to those irrigators at a later date. Ultimately I am suggesting BMP will be a future condition on water licences upon re-newal into the next stage of water reform. I believe it will avoid any mandatory stipulation by any government authority to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Land and Water Management plan on our farming operations and management practices.

I have witnessed an existing cotton farm in the Lower Macquarie that was forced to submit an EIS by Department Land and Water Conservation (DLWC) on two separate occasions. The first for an existing development and a second for adjacent development some years later on the same farm. It is an extravagant waste of time, resources and money with few tangible benefits to the growers' operation or business functions. In contrast BMP provides growers with a uniform platform, and a blueprint for continuous farm appraisal for years to come.

There has been some debate on should all growers receive a copy of the manual regardless of their intentions. We need to concentrate on those who are willing and committed to the process first, to lead the industry. At the same time, we need to provide equal opportunity for all growers to join the BMP programme. Some growers will simply take longer than others to achieve full accreditation. However, I believe it is important that growers willingly register for workshops as some indication of commitment to themselves and the industry.

Our service operators and contractors need to be involved, particularly ground rig operators. Chemical use is our most sensitive issue. At present there are no codes of practice, chemical user's or operator certificate or ground rig associations where issues can be raised and dealt with.

Any quality assurance programme needs a vigorous accreditation process. BMP is no exception, the next logical progression is for cotton BMP to be aligned and meshed into ISO standardisation. It is very hard to argue against an international framework outside the confines of Government. At present we are still debating the accreditation process. Maybe ISO is a real option.

In future editions it would be helpful if there was a simple model farm complete with action plans for those growers who feel they need to follow examples. An occupational health and safety module is also needed along with a computer disc version to make it more user friendly.

The ACGRA and CRDC developed the manual to its present form. The framework and structure of the manual is excellent and those involved should be congratulated. The time, effort and resources must have been enormous. The new format allows each farm to set its own realistic objectives. The first draft was like the "*Ten Commandments*" and in many instances was stating the obvious. This final version, in a relatively simplistic, way has defined a way of tackling a multitude of issues surrounding the growing of cotton. It enables individual organisations or farms to set their own priorities in fixing those problem areas in their own time frame and financial resources.

The cotton industry is in the process of major change, from the 20/30 years of rapid development to one of sustainable production. It is now time to analyse our farming

production techniques and prioritize problem areas. Attention is drawn to those areas that are constantly overlooked which may have potential health, safety or environmental risk.

If we look at the '*big picture*', implementation of BMP means we have control of our agenda and quality assurance etc at a farm level. The next tier of process is the regional environmental planning. Macquarie 2100 is developing a land and water management plan which we have a high level of input. Total Catchment Management (TCM) is also attempting to integrate regional plans. This process is working from the ground up, where we all can have considerable involvement, sending strong messages to government although domination of committees by non stake holders and bureaucrats is always a concern. Conversely, the Government with its ruthless tenacity is trying to impinge on our livelihoods through such things as..... SEPP 46, Native Vegetation, Property Management Plans, Water rights, Native Title, Clean water Act to name a few. BMP may well be the catalyst to help curtail some of these other underlying draconian processes presented by Government. This is a window of opportunity where we can take the leading role through BMP to satisfy the authorities (ie. NPWLS, DLWC, and EPA) under our terms, our process and our time frames. It is imperative that we as an industry, retain ownership and control to ensure long lasting benefits to us the growers. Other industries and government bodies may adopt these principles but ownership must remain within the cotton industry/.

As a final message, I urge *all* growers to take up the challenge and *adopt* BMP. I have no doubt it will make us all better farm managers and operators. From this simple framework of risk assessment will develop a solid platform for action plans and an actively progressive farm policy. It is up to us as individuals to embrace this concept and ensure this self regulatory approach is successful.