

## **Community Strategy**

**Gary Punch, Chief Executive  
Cotton Australia**

In his paper to you, Mike Logan, our youngest Cotton Australia Board Director, said to you, "unless we have the support of the local communities, we are doomed to extinction".

To that I would like to add that unless we effectively police ourselves as an industry through complete adoption and adherence to best management practice, then environmental agencies, water regulatory bodies and ultimately some consumers led by green activists, will all combine to convert this industry from the profitable, economic driver of much of the bush in NSW and QLD to a marginal one.

When I joined cotton 18 months ago, I found a great, self-sufficient industry that was producing export income and employing Australians without the aid of Government handouts or the self indulgency of a government bureaucracy selling the product to the world markets. And all this achieved in less than four decades!

Any industry with that record should be more popular than Peter Beattie in Inala. Instead it seems in some sectors the cotton industry is as popular as Pauline Hanson at a Chinese New Year's Party. To boot, in early 1997, it was apparent that the industry strategic plan warned of the danger of a siege mentality developing, was not there for no good reason.

In eighteen months, I believe we now have begun the reversal of those symptoms, but more importantly we now have in place a total strategy which has as its objective the preservation and enhancement of a sound economic, social, technological and political environment for the production of cotton.

Cotton Australia's strategic approach is to act not just at a local level or just state and national level, but at all three. And much more.

We have developed a communication plan and an advertising plan, which together are aimed at conveying the truth about cotton, and very importantly about how hard cotton growers are trying to cure the perceived ills or the real problems depending on how you see it, associated with growing it.

Our communication strategy is aimed at local regional media and simultaneously at beginning the turnaround in the entrenched prejudice that exists in some sectors of the national media. Its guiding principle is, and must remain unapologetically and uncompromisingly – openness and honesty. The days are gone where any industry in this country can entertain covering up incidents or not admit past problems, if it wants to talk about its real present efforts and future plans.

The media is too smart and too well connected, and the credibility of Cotton Australia, its staff and ultimately you its stakeholders is too important to be anything but open and honest.

We are approaching this with the view of building credibility at all levels of the media over time. The long and sustained nature of the media coverage in the last several decades about cotton cannot be reversed overnight. Indeed to try to do so would be counterproductive.

By building this credibility over time we want to show journalists just what active environmentalists the vast majority of cotton farmers are.

Our advertising strategy is similarly framed. It's aimed at the long, hard slog of winning long term credibility. It too recognises that for cotton there is no instant fix.

Both our communications and advertising strategies rely on more and better activity on the ground, in the local regions by the CGA's. That's why this year we have introduced funding arrangements for CGA's, to work with our increased field staff on actively building that neighbourhood credibility.

That credibility, when it is all boiled down is about farming practices in respect of water and chemical use. It's about application, it's about quantities and it's about care.

But most of all, it is really about individual responsibility. It is about each and every cotton farmer, farm worker, consultant and aerial applicator disciplining themselves to farm in the light of best practice. It is then for Cotton Australia and the CGA's to retell that story locally and nationally.

But let's acknowledge the bottom line. If all the above – growers, farm workers, consultants and aerial applicators – do not accept this individual responsibility, that is, if they do not “live the image”, then the image and the efforts and resources put into it, will not only be poured down the drain, but they will antagonise the very people receiving these messages.

It takes just one grower or one aerial applicator doing one thing wrong to put us in every newspaper in the country.

At the time of writing, Cotton Australia is working on the details of an advertising campaign that will be very different to those of the past, and given time and most importantly the above adherence to individual responsibility, it will be far more effective.

The next key tenant of this approach is local involvement. Cotton Australia's communications and advertising programs are designed to fill what are essentially negative perceptions created by an information gap.

As any politician will tell you, the greatest influence on a voter is peer opinion – not the media, not pamphlets, not T.V. advertisements. While all these are useful and as you can see will be used by us, a central focus of how Cotton Australia is refocussing its activities is by working at that local, if you like “peer”, level.

I mentioned earlier that we have already moved to resource all Cotton Growers' Associations to be able to run effective locally based locally run and locally supported communication and community activities.

Alongside this, we are aggressively supporting the creation of Food and Fibre groups. Our objective here is to communicate locally with other water user groups in our common interest. That common interest appears to be helping us bridge that information gap, while manifesting our genuine “all of valley approach” to help protect and promote the common interest of irrigation, graziers and the environment.

At a state and national level we are also placing a greater level of importance and more resources on being a more active part of the broader agricultural sector.

A more thorough and closer working relationship with both QLD and NSW Irrigators Council is essential in this year of water reform. Cotton Australia has also deliberately moved to increase its activity within the Queensland Farmers Federation forum and moved to cement closer ties with NSW Farmers Association.

At a national level, Cotton Australia has taken a second seat at NFF. This reflects the growing maturity and greater importance of our industry in national agri-policies.

At the same time as these new strategies are coming about we are continuing to use the tried and true means adopted in the past to convey our message to the community.

Much of Lindsay Bennett's marketing work is aimed at reinforcing the sometimes publicly tenuous association between growing cotton and the fabric that Australians demand. School programs continue as does specialist programs relating to other agricultural sectors.

For the first time we are now planning an urban assault. The proposed Cotton Store is intended to begin the process of shattering urban myths about cotton by the sophisticated use of interactive and extensive school and community group visitations to the intended educational facilities not the Cotton Store.

If there is one final message that underpins all of this and that I wish to summarise with, it is this:

*The successful and universal adoption and adherence to Best Management Practice offers the cotton industry the circuit breaker with the media, regulators, politicians and of course local communities irregardless of whether any or all of their concerns are well founded or seriously flawed.*

BMP shows the local community that we as an industry are trying harder than anyone else. There is no industry on the face of the earth that I can think of, that has no effect directly or indirectly, on the environment.

The difference between our industry and a lot of others is that we are spending a lot of our money, time and effort to minimise that impact.

Lets make sure we do it, so we can tell all of them, all about it. That's the best community strategy any industry can possibly have.