

Paper on BMP Program presented to ICAC Meeting, Liverpool, September 2005 by Allan Williams

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the opportunity to address this meeting of the ICAC. It is a pleasure to be able to provide you with the Australian perspective on options for improving the sustainability of cotton production, resulting from our experiences with developing and implementing a program for managing the environmental impacts of cotton farming – our best management practices or BMP Program.

It is also a privilege to be representing cotton growers. I appreciate that the vast majority of cotton production takes place under conditions very different to those in Australia. Nevertheless, farmers face many common challenges, and tend to prefer farming to meetings, no matter where they are from. I hope some of my broad observations are relevant.

We have been developing the BMP Program for 10 years now, so you will appreciate that I will not be able to present, in 10 minutes any great detail about the BMP program itself; details on what issues it covers, its structure and some of the outcomes achieved can be found on the CD included in your conference materials.

I would like to concentrate on 3 things:

1. Why the Australian cotton industry developed the BMP Program
2. What has worked well in our efforts to improve the overall environmental performance of the cotton industry in Australia
3. Why we are interested in collaborating with WWF in their Better Cotton process

So, why did we develop the BMP Program, and probably more importantly, why, after 10 years since work on the BMP Program commenced, is it an essential and on-going part of the industry?

Its fair to say that 10 years ago the image of cotton growing in Australia was very poor; pesticides associated with cotton were being detected in rivers, and in beef. Increasing pressure was being placed upon the industry to do something, or run the risk of losing access to some of the pesticides in question. Not only was this placing immediate pressure on the industry, it also led to a situation where there was a level of almost automatic negative perception about the industry when new environmental issues arose, particularly water. So for example, in the debate in Australia about access to water to irrigation, cotton, in much of the public's mind was seen as a large and inefficient user. But the reality was that Australian cotton growers are amongst the most efficient irrigators in Australia. Furthermore, the agricultural industry that in Australia uses the most water — and about 4 times the water cotton does — barely received public attention.

So we needed to demonstrate that the industry was willing, and able, to address the environmental impacts associated with cotton growing. It was anticipated that this would then help to overcome negative perceptions held about the impacts of cotton farming, help maintain access to chemical inputs and minimise additional regulation of farming activities.

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Pleasingly, we have largely been able to achieve those goals, with nearly 60 % of our cotton produced by cotton farmers certified under the program.

Second, what have we done that has worked well? Critically, we initially focussed on only 1 aspect – pesticides, the most pressing issue confronting the industry, rather than trying to be comprehensive. This was a deliberate choice. By focussing on a specific issue we minimised the risk of overwhelming the farmers with things to consider. Furthermore, we provided a process whereby the farmers could quickly prioritise where their greatest risks were, and combined this risk assessment process with solutions or BMP's. That is, the farmer didn't then have to go and try and find solutions in some other document. And it is important to note that the BMP's already existed; the main task was trying to take the mountain of information already available and put into a form that was digestible by farmers.

But while the form of the documentation was important, probably the single most essential element has been the support provided to cotton farmers in implementing the BMP Program, that is the extension or outreach. This support, which is provided by Cotton Australia, the peak cotton grower organisation in Australia, with assistance from technical experts, is provided both through individual farm visits and training workshops.

One of the reasons that Cotton Australia undertook this responsibility was that while governments were placing an increased emphasis on farmers environmental management practices they were at the same time decreasing their level of support, cutting the budgets of the departments of agriculture, and reducing government

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extension or outreach services. And I understand that this policy of governments reducing their provision of this type of support is not confined to Australia. If farmers are to improve their management of the environment, direct extension support is, in my view, essential.

Another important factor in the success of the BMP Program has been the development of partnerships, which have matured over the life of the program. Initially the partnership consisted of ensuring that feedback on the BMP documentation was sought from the relevant regulatory agencies so that they were comfortable with the solutions being recommended. More recently that partnership has developed in Queensland to the extent that the legislation governing water management has been amended to allow for industry programs, such as the BMP Program, to provide an alternative means for cotton growers to comply with their regulatory requirements. The industry is currently negotiating with the Queensland government to have the BMP Program formally recognised.

Why did we seek to develop partnerships? The traditional approaches to changing behaviour are, at one end traditional government regulation, and at the other end, industry self-regulation. Both of course have their flaws. Regulation, in the words of an academic:

“... neither encourages a sense of ownership of environmental problems and solutions nor is it conducive to changing attitudes to environmental management and engendering a ‘custodianship ethic’”

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And to be fair given the number of government people in the room, here is the same academic quoting about self-regulation:

“Industry self-regulation has an equally undistinguished history. It lacks credibility with external stakeholders, and is widely regarded as an attempt to give the appearance of regulation while serving private interests at the expense of the public”

So we believed a partnership between industry and government offered a way of overcoming the flaws in both systems while preserving the benefits each provides.

So why are we working with WWF?

Given our existing success in developing partnerships in Australia, we believe a partnership could offer political and commercial advantages additional to the partnerships developed with government, by providing additional external credibility to the efforts of the industry, and helping promote the benefits of cotton to consumers, especially in light of the challenges cotton is facing in the global fibre market, and the increasing emphasis being placed by consumers on sustainability.

Involvement in the Better Cotton process also represents a next logical step in the development of the industry’s BMP Program: formally demonstrating the actual improvements being made as a result of the adoption of better management practices. As explained in more detail in the paper, the outcomes of the BMP Program so far have related to adoption of specific practices designed to lead to improved environmental conditions. While adoption of good practices is of course important

and a pre-requisite to achieving outcomes, it's the environmental outcomes themselves that governments and organisations such as WWF are fundamentally interested in.

And this is certainly one of the positive aspects of the Better Cotton proposal-it focuses on the outcomes to be achieved, and will allow for flexibility, and the ingenuity of farmers as to how those outcomes can be achieved, rather than mandating specific practices or approaches. Thus better cotton can equally be produced using genetically modified varieties, or through organic farming – the farmer retains the flexibility to choose what suits their situation best.

There are of course a number of challenges: these include:

1. defining what better cotton actually is
2. how to cater for the regional conditions when establishing the definition of better cotton
3. finding targets / indicators that are relatively easy to measure and have a direct benefit for the cotton grower
4. Ensuring that the benefits to the farmer outweigh any burdens

Everyone in this room knows what a wonderful fibre cotton is to wear; with the competition it faces from man-made fibres, and the increasing environmental consciousness of consumers we need to ensure that it's environmental profile is just as positive. Partnerships with organisations such as WWF offer an opportunity to achieve that positive profile.