

Australian cotton will no longer be a punching bag

■ By Adam Kay – Chief Executive Officer, Cotton Australia

THE year 2019 has started with a bang for the Australian cotton industry. No sooner had we turned over our calendars to January and recovered from the busy festive season before our industry was unfairly shoved into the middle of an explosive national debate around the environment, water regulation, and the future of irrigated agriculture.

The sight of thousands of fish washing up dead at Menindee was devastating. No one likes to see the graphic reality of drought in the way the images of the fish deaths did. But it started a debate that was emotional, irrational, lacking facts, and riddled with some opportunistic politicians using the issue to score cheap points.

The criticism dumped upon the cotton industry was both unfair and largely ill-informed.

Australian cotton did not cause the fish deaths. Australian cotton will no longer be a punching bag.

Before we explore these facts further, it must be remembered that with an upcoming election in New South Wales in March and a federal poll to be held by May, the water issue has become a focus for politicians looking to win points with their constituents. For example, some South Australian Senators, like the Greens' Sarah Hanson-Young, have made ill-informed comments about our industry. Just because no cotton is grown in South Australia, meaning the risk of these politicians offending their constituents is lower, does not mean they can kick us without the facts.

Facts matter

Scrolling through social media at the height of the crisis, it was clear to me that many gullible people gobbled up the sensationalist headlines being screamed by opponents of cotton, and regurgitated those messages without the thought of checking the facts.

Here is a taste of the ill-informed comments I saw while



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scrolling my news feed: 'You are choking Australia'; 'We should not grow cotton in Australia because of the amount of water needed for these crops'; 'The water belongs to all Australians not just cotton growers'; 'It is time for a boycott of Australian-grown cotton.'

These comments were written by people who clearly have no idea how water licensing works in Australia.

The fact is, farmers buy or lease water licences and entitlements. Every year, state governments allocate water to irrigators based on the amount of water available in the system, after water for the environment and critical human needs has been prioritised. Those licences allow growers to access a set amount of the total water allocated by authorities for farming. Farmers with a water licence can use the water they extract to grow whatever they like. They are not cotton, or rice, or soybean licences, they are water licences. Simple as that.

In response to the comments around why we grow cotton in Australia, the simple answer is that farmers grow cotton when there is water available, because it is a water efficient crop and provides the best return per megalitre of water. Banning cotton would not see any extra water returned to the environment, as the water has been allocated to the irrigator's licence. If cotton was to be banned in Australia, farmers would use their water to grow the next most profitable crop.

Let's also keep in mind how crippling this drought has been. The drought is impacting many agricultural sectors, including cotton. As the Bureau of Meteorology reported in their latest climate statement, New South Wales had its sixth-driest year on record, and the Murray-Darling Basin had its seventh-driest year on record. There has been little-to-no rain, so it is unsurprising



Some critics have no idea how water licensing works in Australia.

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our rivers are struggling. Until good rain comes, that situation won't change.

We are not immune from drought, with this season's Australian cotton crop set to be around half of what was grown last year. Many cotton growing valleys have received a zero per cent water allocation this year. There simply has not been any water in the system for growers to use – as a result, many have chosen to not grow cotton this season – others are growing dryland cotton, while some are irrigating cotton using carryover water from their storages or bore water.

Contribute to the conversation

When this issue erupted, Cotton Australia swung into action with a proactive campaign to defend our industry and put our side of the story forward. We spoke with national and regional media organisations and our views featured prominently in national online, television and radio stories. On our social media platforms alone, our posts reached over 380,000 people. We had to stand tall and push back against our critics, like Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young and NSW independent Jeremy Buckingham, who were shooting their mouths off against our industry without learning the facts. It reflects poorly on them if they are hell-bent on their own perspective and not prepared to listen to reason and facts from a perspective different to theirs.

As the peak body, Cotton Australia stands up publicly and works behind the scenes through meetings with stakeholders to defend our industry. But it is also critical we unite as an industry and that anyone working in cotton feels comfortable joining the conversation and defending what we do. In the heat of this issue, it was heartening to see many growers and industry personnel leaping to the defence of Australian cotton. The caveat to this is

the risk of abuse people may suffer. It is serious and concerning when this happens, but support is available. Threats made against people should always be reported to the authorities. Cotton Australia has offered social media workshops to all Cotton Grower Associations, with many of them taking up the offer for support and training.

To be well-informed, I encourage all growers and industry personnel to head to Cotton Australia's website and social media channels to read the fact sheets we've produced and to share them as widely as possible. Save the resources on your phone and refer to them often when engaging in conversations in person and online about our industry.

We can put forward the facts, we can have our voice heard, and we can share our personal perspectives on our industry's success.

Time for calm

The time has come for calm, rational, fact-based conversations to be had by all sides of this debate.

Suggestions of banning cotton, or reactively overhauling how irrigators access water, are concerning. Knee-jerk reactions and ill-informed decisions would have a significant impact on Australia's entire agricultural sector. If improvements in water regulation need to be made, let's rationally discuss the options, but irrigators will not be the scapegoats for issues in the Murray-Darling Basin.

This issue is complex and can't be fully understood by only reading the headlines some opponents of irrigation have been screaming. Learning and sharing the facts is essential, because too much is at stake for us not to.

This was written before the release of the South Australian Royal Commission report and the report of the Productivity Commission – but the facts remain the same.

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