The 2007 Australian Cotton Industry Awards attracted over 30 entries across five separate categories. This was a particularly good result given the climatic and market conditions facing the industry. The Awards have continued to enjoy broad industry support, with nominations coming from Cotton Grower Associations, industry organisations and individuals who nominated their peers and employees.

The event could not go ahead without the support of our corporate sponsors, who have not only contributed financially, but who have given up their time to participate in the Australian Cotton Industry Awards Taskforce and as judges. We’d like to especially thank the following sponsors for their ongoing commitment and support:

- AgriRisk Services
- Cotton Seed Distributors
- Elders
- Monsanto
- Twynam Agricultural Group

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The Australian Cotton Industry Awards are now in their fourth year. The Awards encourage and reward cotton’s young achievers, growers, researchers and other key personnel, acknowledging those who have made significant contributions to our industry.

One of the objectives of the Australian Cotton Industry Awards is to demonstrate and share achievements and successful farming practices with the wider cotton industry. This Awards booklet tells the stories of the finalists who made it to the top 13, and showcases the five winners of 2007.

Cotton Australia, as the grower’s representative body, has had a large part to play in these Awards and I would particularly like to thank the sponsors and each of the Cotton Grower Associations for supporting this competition.

I’m looking forward to another successful Awards competition in 2008 and to celebrating with you at the next industry ceremony.
Havana Farming is a family based agricultural enterprise that has been producing cotton and grain since 1980. The principals, Thelma, David and Jono Phelps, together with their families, live and work on the properties that make up the business. Last year Havana Farming produced 19,700 bales from 2,200 hectares of irrigated cotton.

Havana Farming has adopted an integrated approach to cotton crop development. Broadly, the six components within this approach are: crop rotation; increasing nitrogen use efficiency; adopting GM technologies; communication in management decisions; growing for yield and quality; and focusing on water use efficiency.

Cotton is generally grown in rotation with vetch, followed by a summer fallow. This rotation is contributing significantly to the use efficiency.

Havana Farming also considers it a priority to assist employees to increase their skills, including encouraging employees to attend trade shows and field days and training in basic computer skills.

Best Management Practices (BMP) has been embraced to self regulate environmental impacts and address legal obligations associated with cotton production and is used to improve record keeping and identify opportunities for business improvement.

Havana Farming is also positive about the future of Australian cotton, as the industry is made up of growers who embrace change and rapidly uptake new technology.

Like many cotton growers, Barb and Ralph Grey from Mungindi were faced with the problem of filling vacancies on farm.

In an effort to develop an effective and efficient team, with low turnover, Barb and Ralph had a self-described ‘light bulb moment’. They decided to base their recruitment on personality and attitude, not skills and knowledge as they perceived it was easier to teach a person cotton-growing skills than change a resolute attitude.

Faced with the worsening labour shortage crisis, Barb and Ralph decided to recruit farm labour from South Africa. So successful was the placement of their first migrant couple, the Grey’s subsequently recruited more South Africans and a Zimbabwean.

Although the team of South Africans and Zimbabweans, prior to working with the Grey’s, had never grown a cotton plant, their agricultural background and a positive ‘can-do’ attitude meant they have now embraced all things cotton. Over the past three years, Barb and Ralph have managed to grow consistently higher yielding crops than previously achieved, improving the whole farm physically, and advancing water-use efficiency and yields with the introduction of technological improvements.

Having addressed the issue of recruitment, attention was then turned to the matter of retention. The Grey’s quality workforce, created much interest and enquiry from fellow farmers, such that there was a fear of losing this valuable resource.

Consequently, Barb and Ralph are in the process of developing Workforce Partners (Qld), a recruitment company focussed specifically on helping farmers and businesses in regional NSW and QLD to resolve their skill shortages, by recruiting South Africans and Zimbabweans who are looking to migrate to the rural sector in Australia. Coupled with the energy and expertise of Peter McAliskey, a principal of recruiting company HRM Partners, Workforce Partners has helped Barb and Ralph to capitalise on the principle that good people are the most important asset of a business.

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

Jono and David Phelps’ professionally presented and managed property implements sound strategies for land, water and crop management based on good resource management principles. Their comprehensive evaluation and review system includes farm trials and an effective adoption of crop rotation with a major focus on soil health. An intensive nutrient management program, strong team commitment, sound OH&S, and achieving PCA levels on all BMP Modules underpins the Phelps’ strong commitment to industry leadership, research and development, and community and industry support.

Geoff McIntyre, Head Judge, Qld DPI&F

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

The judges greatly respected Barb and Ralph Grey’s innovative and unique approach to staff recruitment, based on a rigorous Human Resource Policy of self assessment with an equally robust assessment of potential employees. Barb and Ralph took a very focussed and structured approach to improving the workplace, instilling great ethics and a sense of fun. Furthermore, the business performance of the farming operation has improved as a consequence of attracting and nurturing a well trained, skilled and enthusiastic workforce focussed on routine operational issues, thereby allowing management to better address whole farm strategic management issues.

Geoff McIntyre, Head Judge, Qld DPI&F
John Watson began cotton growing at Boggabri in 1979, the first cotton to be grown south of Narrabri along the upper Namoi River. As part of the industry’s expansion John was a member of the committee behind the acquisition of a gin for Boggabri. John also won the 2002 Cotton Grower of the Year Award.

John’s farm, “Kilmarnock”, was involved in early seed development with Cotton Seed Distributors Ltd (CSD). John was Secretary of the Upper Namoi Cotton Growers Association for 10 years and remains on the executive committee. He has been a member of the Australian Cotton Growers Research Association (ACGRA) since the early 1990s, including being Chair of the Environmental Committee, helping co-ordinate weeds research whilst on the ACGRA Weeds and Diseases Committee.

“Kilmarnock” was one of the first farms to take up the Best Management Practices (BMP) Program, with John chairing the Australian Cotton Industry Council’s BMP Committee for three years. He also played an active role in the implementation of BMP in the Boggabri area, encouraging other local growers to get on board with the program and has been an active member of his local Landcare group.

John has been involved in every ACGRA Cotton Conference held as either a participant or organiser and has worked closely with the Cotton Research Station (now Cotton Research Centre) at Narrabri, hosting many cotton industry research trials on-farm.

He has been a supporter of the Post Graduate Cotton Production Diploma Course and has served on the committee of local Water Users Association since its inception and was Chair of the Roundup Ready sub-committee of the Transgenic and Insect Management Strategy Committee (TIMS).

Dr Stephen Allen has provided over 25 years of dedicated service to the cotton industry and is still developing innovative research programs to combat disease. He is a world-leading scientist and a key researcher in the Australian cotton industry’s battle against fusarium wilt.

He began his career in cotton by undertaking pathology research at the Australian Cotton Research Institute in 1983, and remains a leading pathologist at the Institute. He has been a key researcher in annual cotton disease surveys of NSW and Queensland.

Dr Allen is well-known for his research into bacterial blight, verticillium, black root rot, and most recently, fusarium wilt. He has developed techniques and nurseries for screening verticillium and fusarium resistant varieties, as well as playing a major role in developing the v-rank and f-rank concepts, writing the Integrated Disease Management Guidelines and introducing ‘Come clean – go clean’ to the Australian Cotton Industry. Dr Allen has also carried out extensive trials to develop ‘Bion’ as part of an integrated disease control package for black root rot and fusarium wilt.

Dr Stephen Allen’s exceptional integration and coordination of research, management tools and extension, as well as his dedication to the development of young industry researchers and extension personnel were standouts to the judges. His addressing of critical cotton disease issues facing the industry makes him a richly deserving winner of this award. It’s very deserving that Dr Stephen Allen is the only person after Drs Norm Thompson and Greg Constable to have received the Researcher of the Year Award twice in his career.

Adam Kay, CEO, Cotton Australia

Dr Allen’s research papers have appeared in international journals, and he has also presented his research findings at national and international conferences. He has been research supervisor to a host of students over the past 20 years, as well as being Chair of FUSCOM, a program leader in the Australian Cotton CRC and a member of the Science and Education panel of the current CRC.

He holds a Bachelor of Science degree with first class Honours, a University medal and a PhD.

Dr Allen becomes only the third person after Dr Norm Thompson and Dr Greg Constable, to have received the Researcher of the Year Award twice in his career.

Hamish Millar, Chair, ACGRA
Dr Grundy has worked for over seven years as an entomologist based in Biloela in central Queensland. His roles at the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Cotton Catchment Communities CRC have included a strong research/extension capacity focussing on the field application of IPM tools that has included predator releases, biopesticides, attractants and other Novel insecticides for the management of Heliothis and silver leaf whitefly.

In recent seasons, Dr Grundy’s efforts and expertise have been central in the management of silver leaf whitefly outbreak situations on the Darling Downs and St George. He has made himself available as an expert resource for growers and consultants experiencing a very difficult pest for the first time. During the last three years he has taken on additional work in the Burdekin agricultural area of north Queensland over and above his current research project activities with the aim of developing feasibility benchmarks for cotton production in that region, as well as an understanding of appropriate cotton IPM practices.

This work has since become his primary research focus as part of a team of people whose aim is to develop innovative solutions for sustainable cotton production in Northern Australia. Dr Grundy is also a member of the industry Transgenic and Insecticide Management Strategy committee (TIMS), and shares his knowledge and experience in both the northern cotton production system and the interaction of insecticide use and pest activity, as well as transgenic cotton management.

In an extremely competitive field, the judges were most impressed with the achievements of Dr Paul Grundy. His six-year involvement in cotton pest management in Central Queensland and the leading role he played in developing responses to the particular challenges facing growers and consultants attracted praise. Dr Grundy actively helped develop applied management responses to IPM challenges in Central Queensland, was integral in Silver Leaf Whitefly management strategy extension in infestation areas, proactively improved cotton communities’ pest control knowledge through his research on novel methods and alternative management strategies while his commitment to pest and crop management challenges in the emerging cotton farming system in North Queensland’s Burdekin region is second to none.

Greg Kauter, Executive Officer ACGRA

What the judges said:

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Greg Kauter, Executive Officer ACGRA
"Brayland", a cotton farm situated north of Comet on the Nogoa River, has 376 hectares of productive land with 424 hectares currently covered as an ecosystem under a stewardship agreement with the Fitzroy Basin Association. "Brayland’s" Peter and Trish Cross were one of the first growers to be audited for all seven modules of the Best Management Practices (BMP) Program. Their commitment to industry’s BMP requirements, enhances yield potential, avoids water logging and limits the potential for deep drainage to occur.

In terms of water use, Peter and Trish optimise application efficiency through variations in head ditch height, different siphon sizes for different slopes, the use of soil PAM (polyacrylamide) to aid infiltration and protect against silt loss in runoff water, and re-levelling as required. Furthermore, “Brayland” reduces losses from water storages by using the storage in a short-term capacity so water is not stored for any prolonged period of time.

James and Aimee Thomas are cotton growers from the St George Irrigation Area, who embarked on a new business strategy and farm management approach. The business is “Top Gun Farming”, a management tool for farmers, agronomists and agricultural consultants to use when making sustainable and economic farming decisions.

James and Aimee have used their innovation on their own property, Bloomfield, in the past season, where it tested its mettle in a very tough cotton growing season.
David Larsen has been a valuable member of the cotton industry since 1979. He is an experienced agronomist, and is recognised for his extensive knowledge and ability to pass on research results to growers and advisors.

David is in constant contact with growers at the Cotton CRC Technology Resource Centre, where he provides information to cotton growers and consultants in person and via the CRC website. David’s role is crucial in the dissemination of technological information to the cotton industry to help growers adopt new best practices and to increase use of research findings.

During his career, David has assisted with the writing of the SOLPak manual, as well as carrying out on-farm visits to farmers with soil issues. He has also run a series of soil workshops for consultants and agronomists in the major cotton regions. His contribution to a number of industry publications and manuals, featuring research and extension findings, has been valuable to the industry at large. With practical guides to on-farm applications of research findings such as the “Tractor Drivers Guide to Fusarium Wilt,” and “Sowing decisions with reduced water supply,” among many others, growers have benefited from the information he has brought together in these publications.

Dr Knox has worked as a research scientist in the cotton industry since 2003, and is currently placed with CSIRO Entomology. Since his appointment he has established a suite of microbiological skills and laboratory resources within the Australian Cotton Research Institute, Narrabri. These have permitted the measurement of culturable microbial populations, their biomass, and several microbial driven functions, such as respiration, which were previously not routine. To achieve this Dr Knox has had to adapt several microbial techniques, such as respiration measurement and culture assays, to meet the available resources. This has provided increased capacity to investigate the effects of soil health on the biological factors that affect cotton production.

Through this research and extension, Dr Knox has become a significant contributor on a number of issues that are of importance to the Australian cotton industry and has become a key figure in the area of soil health. Dr Knox’s extension of these results to the industry have been both successful and well received, resulting in numerous invitations to talk at industry sponsored events and the production of both scientific and industry publications.

Dr Knox’s willingness to actively participate in industry forums and working groups highlights his commitment to the needs of the industry.

Nilantha has been a quiet achiever in the cotton industry for many years. He has worked in cotton research since 1992, and in the intervening years has generated a bank of significant knowledge for the benefit of the industry. Nilantha’s research work has had a particular focus on sustainability and productivity including:

- Quantifying advantages and disadvantages of using rotation crops such as wheat in terms of soil quality, nutrient recycling, profitability and water conservation, and integration of permanent beds systems into crop rotation.
- Identifying role of deep drainage as a component in the water balance of cotton soils, as well as nutrient and salt leaching.
- Identifying the potential for cotton to be affected by salts, particularly chlorides and sodicity.
- Identifying minimum tillage systems for pupae busting.
- Identifying advantages and problems related to using treated sewage effluent for irrigation.

Nilantha also recently won an award to study and train others in Aceh, bringing positive publicity to the industry.

Through her involvement in the Macquarie Valley over three and a half years, Jessica ensured the ongoing access to and availability of water for the industry through her previous role as irrigator advocate with Macquarie Food and Fibre. Jessica threw herself into life in a cotton town, and quickly became adept at understanding the issues surrounding cotton, which resulted in her being very well respected by media and government. Jessica helped to achieve a ten per cent increase in the water allocation in 2003 to give cotton growers more of a chance to deal with the drought, and she was a key player in developing and implementing water efficiency programs. She led a group of valley stakeholders to develop protocols for the transfer of water between two dams in the local catchments to benefit cotton farmers downstream. She was able to develop protocols that satisfied the needs of both upstream and downstream users, as well as maximising the benefits to the environment.

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Gala Dinner to Celebrate Our Top Achievers

The 2007 Australian Cotton Industry Awards were held as part of the Cotton Collective in Narrabri on Tuesday 7th August 2007 where finalists, winners and over 300 guests celebrated well into the night. Held at The Crossing Theatre, the night was hosted by bush poet and MC, Mr Murray Hartin and guests were entertained afterwards in the “Retro Riverside Piano Bar”.

Winners were announced by representatives from the five corporate sponsors, and Chairman of ACGRA, Mr Hamish Millar and Cotton Australia CEO, Mr Adam Kay awarded the prizes which included $4,500 in cash for each winner.

Australian Cotton Industry Awards Taskforce

The Australian Cotton Industry Awards Taskforce, along with Step Communication is responsible for organising the Awards event, and steering its direction. The following representatives kindly donated their time to be involved this year:

- Hamish Millar (Taskforce Chairman), ACGRA Chairman
- Adam Kay, Cotton Australia CEO
- Greg Kauter, ACGRA Executive Officer
- Geoff MacIntyre, QLD DPI&F
- Mike Carberry, Cotton Australia Director
- Keryn McLean, sponsor representative – Monsanto
- Christine Campbell, sponsor representative – Twynam Agricultural Group
- Peter Graham, sponsor representative – CSD
- Scott Sheppard, sponsor representative – Elders
- John van der Vegt, sponsor representative – AgriRisk Services
- Deidre McCallum, sponsor representative – AgriRisk Services
- Brooke Summers, Matt Vagulans – Step Communication