

# 2023 State Election: Cotton Australia's policy platform

Cotton Australia is the peak body representing Australia's approximately 1000 cotton growers, who manage 1400 farms located mainly in New South Wales and Queensland. Around 90% of our growers operate family-owned farms.

## Our policy priorities for the 2023 NSW election

Like many agricultural industries, the cotton industry has been experiencing a range of climatic challenges. The breaking of the 2017-2020 drought has been followed by damaging floods and generally challenging weather conditions, but the significant improvement in New South Wales water reserves should ensure above average production for at least the next two seasons.

In addition to the climate challenges, the cotton industry is being challenged by rising input costs, scarcity of labour, supply chain issues, skill shortages and ongoing pressures on our social licence.

Regardless of the outcome of the NSW State election, our top issues for NSW cotton growers will remain:

- **Water security:** ensuring the rights of irrigators are protected, in a transparent and accountable manner.
- **Energy:** advancing productivity and profitability by supporting reliable and affordable energy.
- **Mining and Coal Seam Gas:** protection of land and water resources for food and fibre production from negative impacts, with sensible regulation of mining and coal seam gas access.
- **Crop protection:** ensuring continued access to existing and new technologies.
- **Biosecurity:** continuing strong state biosecurity systems.
- **Regional infrastructure:** sensible improvements to enable smooth, efficient logistics.
- **Education and skills:** education and skills programs that make a career in Australian cotton an attractive, accessible aspiration for all.

Across all areas, we need the government to foster community understanding and confidence in the NSW Government's regulatory settings and policies.

By working with industry to address these priority issues, the NSW Government will support a sustainable industry, and the capacity and wellbeing of the communities that depend on it. Cotton Australia looks forward to working with the NSW Government following the election.

## About Cotton Australia and cotton in NSW

Cotton Australia provides a united voice for cotton growers across government policy, research and development priorities, stewardship, natural resource management, biosecurity and cotton production issues. This is achieved through policy and advocacy, education, communication and grower services, as well as a strong and close relationship with the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CRDC) and the research community.

Cotton Australia works with growers and stakeholders to ensure the Australian cotton industry is viable, valued and advanced. We are focused on achieving outcomes for growers while balancing responsibilities to our communities, stakeholders and the natural environment.

Nationally, around 90% of our growers operate family-owned farms, and the industry employs more than 10,000 people in a good season. Cotton is a major driver of the local economies in the regions in which it is grown, with some regions deriving more than 50% regional gross value of agricultural production from cotton.

**Our NSW growers produce between 60-70% of Australia's total cotton crop. Production varies each year according to seasonal conditions, but in 2021-22 there were approximately 900 cotton farms in NSW and the industry contributed close to \$3 billion to the state's economy.**

Most of the crops are irrigated, but there is always a proportion that is raingrown or dryland. In 2021-22 over 20% of NSW's production was raingrown.

As an annual crop, cotton has an important place in irrigated agriculture, as it is opportunistic and flexible – farmers that are set up for cotton production can grow the crop when they have available water or hold off when there is not.

### **Australian cotton, carefully grown, naturally world's best.**

The Australian cotton industry is an agricultural success story, and its growers are innovative, well-informed and continue to seek improvements. We are proud of our myBMP (Best Management Practices) program - the Australian cotton industry's voluntary cotton production certification standard, which has existed and evolved for more than 20 years. It is a comprehensive farm and environmental management system designed to improve all aspects of on-farm cotton production.

The certification standards of the myBMP program are among the most rigorous in the world and participation in myBMP has allowed Australian growers to access cotton markets by opting into programs such as the Better Cotton (BC). BC is a global, multi-stakeholder sustainability program focused at farm-level improvements and recognised by major brands.

Australian cotton is in high demand due to its high-quality, sustainability, traceability and proven track record in meeting manufacturer and consumer needs. Consumer desire for sustainably produced goods is driving domestic and global demand for Australia's cotton.

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## OUR KEY ELECTION THEMES

### Water security

Access to water is vital for cotton production. Through significant investment in water-efficient irrigation infrastructure and adoption of better practices, the Australian cotton industry has delivered a 48% improvement in water productivity. Further efficiency improvements continue to be a key focus for the industry and the industry continues to achieve year-on-year gains.

Most of the Australia's cotton production occurs within the Murray-Darling Basin, and between 10% and 30% of the crop is rain-grown. With the Murray-Darling Basin Plan now close to finalisation by the Commonwealth, our attention is focused on ensuring that it is completed in a manner which minimises detrimental social and economic impacts on rural and regional communities while maximising environmental outcomes.

### What we are calling for:

#### *Murray-Darling Basin Plan*

That the rights of irrigators are protected, in a transparent and accountable manner.

That NSW continues to work towards the full implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in a manner that protects the rights of the community, irrigators and the environment.

In particular, the government consults extensively with irrigators and other stakeholders in regard to the implementation of the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects with the view to ensuring the full 605GI is achieved, even if this means allowing the significant modification of existing projects and the introduction of new projects, along with flexibility in regards to timeframes.

In regard to the 450GI "Upwater", acquisitions should only be made in accordance with the current social and economic neutrality test, and the Government should explore ways to achieve enhanced environmental outcomes with alternative investments (complementary measures).

#### *Floodplain Harvesting*

It is imperative that the partially completed process of issuing volumetric floodplain harvesting licences in accordance with both NSW Water Sharing Plans and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is completed, so as to ensure all irrigators who can legally access floodplain harvesting water are doing so under the same legal framework.

#### *Water Compliance*

That the Natural Resource Access Regulator (NRAR) continues to be resourced in a manner that allows it to fairly and transparently ensure all NSW water users access the resource in accordance with their appropriate licence conditions.

#### *Research and Development specific to irrigation*

Given the importance of managing limited water resources for all, we seek commitment to funding research and development into irrigation farm efficiencies, specifically focused on irrigation farming efficiency technology to promote water and energy savings.

## Energy

Cotton growers and other irrigators have been subject to sustained electricity price rises over the past two decades, with the problem exacerbated over the past 12 months.

Our members want access to reliable and affordable energy, including renewable energy technology. As early adopters of new technology, they also see themselves as being part of the local energy solution, but the current energy framework does not enable this.

### **What we are calling for:**

The implementation of electricity tariffs that better align with the needs of primary producers, including the option of a volume-based tariff (for Large Users).

Continued government support of initiatives that foster the transition to renewable and decentralised energy sources but not at the cost of prime agricultural land.

Direct opportunities to support and encourage agricultural related industries and communities in the renewable energy zones.

Fair and adequate compensation for landholders hosting energy infrastructure on their land.

## Mining and Coal Seam Gas (CSG)

Cotton Australia recognises that mining and CSG development offers potential economic benefits to Australia. However, it is imperative that high value agricultural land is protected, so too the sustainability of aquifers that underlie irrigated and dryland cotton production and their communities. This requires proper regulation and enforcement. Only when it is definitively proven that the development will have no impact on the productive capacity of the land should the government consider permitting projects.

### **What we are calling for:**

Protection and sustainability of land and water resources that underlie irrigated and dryland cotton production and their communities in any development. We do not accept any negative impact on the property rights of cotton growers, arising out of the activities of the mining and CSG industries.

We oppose development, unless and until it is demonstrated by independent, high quality, peer reviewed science, and that it will have no impact on the productive capacity of the land.

That any impact intended or unintended must be fully compensated by the industry and guaranteed by the government.

## **Crop protection**

Cotton growers need assured and continued access to existing and new technologies (crop protection products, biotechnology traits) to ensure a profitable and sustainable crop choice into the future.

### **What we are calling for:**

Bipartisan support for access to current and emerging technology and chemicals which are independently proven safe for use by a robust regulatory system.

Funding for adequate and independent regulation and review of products.

Improved capacity and resourcing for field staff at the EPA to investigate incidences of spray drift.

A commitment by the NSW Government to work with the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) to ensure label requirements and regulations on Group 4 herbicides are adequate to minimise the risk of off-target application damage.

## **Biosecurity**

We need to ensure the state's biosecurity systems remain world leading.

### **What we are calling for:**

Bipartisan support of initiatives and innovation that foster biosecurity as a competitive advantage.

Enhanced resourcing of the relevant government agencies (LLS, DPI) for surveillance and monitoring programs, detecting, and responding to exotic plant disease outbreaks and public awareness.

## **Infrastructure and transport**

Our regional areas and the industries they support need good infrastructure to ensure smooth running, modern and productive businesses.

### **What we are calling for:**

A multi-government framework for physical infrastructure investment and regional development policy.

The state government to work with local governments and their road managers to address pinch-points and timber bridges that restrict movement of high productivity vehicles and oversized, over mass agricultural vehicles.

Improvements to river and irrigation infrastructure to improve the efficiency of water delivery, storage and supply and reduce losses.

Adequate funding for local governments to maintain their roads.

## Education, skills, and training

It is important that the youth of Australia understand how agriculture exists as part of a managed landscape, and how our modern-day agricultural industries are something to be proud of. Agriculture provides an important and highly useful learning foundation for students across all disciplines, and importantly, the priority STEM subjects.

Cotton Australia recognises that education provides an opportunity to engage with the broader community about our industry and also helps attract a future workforce by showcasing the diverse range of interesting career opportunities available. We have long been committed to providing educators, students and parents with information and knowledge to ensure that the forward-thinking, sustainable, and positive credentials of the Australian cotton industry are understood and valued.

Agriculture supports Australia's GDP and is among our most technologically advanced industries so agriculture would benefit from being recognised as an approved/mandatory context for Business & Economics and STEM teachers.

Addressing future agricultural workforce needs to school students would be supported with explicit exposure to agriculture careers (and pathways) not as 'farming', rather highlighting the whole food and fibre value chain focusing on career opportunities in large rural towns and our cities.

We value the AgSkilled 2.0 program, the successful partnership between NSW's plant production industries and the NSW Government, which delivers vocational training to our industries through the NSW Government's Smart and Skilled system. Under this industry-led model, training leverages industry investments in research and development to ensure training is relevant, meets industry needs and disseminates the latest research findings to improve farming and business practices. Training has been delivered flexibly in regional and remote communities, or on properties to suit the needs of industry. AgSkilled has facilitated partnerships and relationships between training organisations and industry, including researchers and subject matter experts to ensure the highest quality training and outcomes for participants. The AgSkilled model has been recognised as a key model for training in agriculture in the National Agricultural Workforce Strategy.

Our goal is to ensure an appropriately skilled workforce, motivated and equipped to tackle current and future challenges. Like other Australian agricultural industries, the Australian cotton industry faces challenges attracting and retaining the workforce it needs on-farm.

### **What we are calling for:**

The continued funding of AgSkilled (the current program runs until June 30, 2023), so it can continue to deliver superior training outcomes for NSW agricultural industries.

Continued commitment to ensuring agriculture, food and fibre production is strongly positioned in NSW's education system.

Provide incentives and clearer pathways for skilled agriculture teachers to fill the lack of trained professionals currently in NSW's schools.

Initiatives to better promote career opportunities in the agriculture supply chain to students of all ages and abilities.

Support to expand knowledge and understanding of the agriculture-technology industry for teachers in rural and metropolitan schools.

Initiatives to attract skilled labour to regions and increase participation in the regional labour force.