



# KIERAN O'KEEFFE

*CottonInfo Team Griffith, NSW*



Kieran O'Keeffe has forged an impressive career in agronomy development and extension for almost 30 years, making him one of the longest serving regionally based cotton extension officers.

Coming from a farming background, Kieran was always keen to pursue a career in agriculture. Based in Griffith, he started his career as a high school agriculture teacher before joining the NSW Department of Primary Industries as an irrigation agronomist. From there he became the district agronomist at Coleambally until making the move six years ago to join CottonInfo as the Southern NSW Regional Extension Officer.

With CottonInfo, Kieran has played an intrinsic role during transformation of Southern NSW to a major cotton region that has grown from 39,000 hectares to a peak of 90,000 hectares in 2018. Making the challenge even greater, in 2018, 64 of the 219 growers were first time growers. Through all of this expansion, Kieran has diligently and enthusiastically guided growers through every aspect of the transition, from growing to irrigating, harvesting to marketing and ginning, all the while using a variety of different extension techniques.

Compared to established cotton valleys, it's hard to fathom the area Kieran covers, from Forbes in the north to Victoria in the south, Narrandera in the east to Balranald in the west an area of over 90,000 square kilometres.

He also deals with a significant number of new growers on a daily basis. Kieran sees the structure of the CottonInfo joint venture, with extension and research working together, as an excellent model to get information to industry. 'I enjoy working with irrigation farmers to become more successful. I have a strong belief that extending proven research is the key to increasing uptake of best management,' explained Kieran.



'The cotton research community is innovative, forward thinking and constantly looking for ways to improve. Underpinned by world-class research, the industry is always looking at new ways to enhance productivity, from improvements in water efficiency, irrigation automation to improved labour efficiencies and better data management to make informed decisions.

Every part of the cotton production industry is driven towards best practice and that is what is so exciting and rewarding about this industry,' he added.



A key aspect of his role with CottonInfo that Kieran enjoys is the great variety it offers. From working directly with growers and advisors (having organised over 130 field days and workshops), to writing industry articles and benchmarking performance, Kieran thrives on the value his role allows him to contribute to the southern cotton industry.

It's for these reasons that many describe Kieran as the south's "go-to man" for cotton. He is greatly respected and known for his wide experience, huge knowledge base and practical no-nonsense approach.

Intrinsically interested in long-term soil health, Kieran has been instrumental in putting disease at the forefront of grower's minds. With black root rot a significant problem in the south, Kieran has held field days, farm walks, conducted disease surveys and written articles for industry publications to inform growers and consultants of best practice.

He promotes the need to keep inoculum levels low, especially with newly developed cotton areas, as well as issues associated with back-to-back cotton and the importance of a planned rotation. More recently Kieran has given significant focus to the presence of acid soils in some cotton fields. Having experience with these soils in other agricultural industries, he has keenly shared this knowledge with the growers affected.

Kieran is the Vice Chair and cotton representative of the Irrigation Research and Extension Committee (IREC). He is passionate about the testing and adoption of new technologies that are proven, practical and profitable for long term sustainable cotton production.

He played a key role in establishing the IREC field station to showcase new technology as well as to conduct and attract research trials to the site. A significant aspect of his research trial work is ongoing, such as minimising impacts of soil constraints (seedling diseases, acid soils and compaction) through sensible rotations for long term productivity.

'With the south being a 'new' cotton area that has seen many farmers transition from a rice operation to row cropping, it's required a change in mind set,' Kieran explained. 'It's been essential to help growers be on the front foot at all times and to the long-term sustainability of a productive cotton industry in the south.'

