



COTTON
AUSTRALIA

**Regional Planning Interest (Condamine
Alluvium) and Other Legislation
Amendment Bill 2026 Inquiry**

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Submission prepared by Michael Murray, General Manager,
Cotton Australia

Contents

Regional Planning Interest (Condamine Alluvium) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 Inquiry	1
Submission prepared by Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia	2
1. Executive summary	3
2. Recommendations	3
4. Submission response.....	4
4.1. General Introduction	4
4.2. The Bill	5
5. Conclusion	7



ABOUT COTTON AUSTRALIA

Cotton Australia is the peak body for Australia's cotton growers, representing up to 1,500 cotton farms mainly in New South Wales and Queensland but also in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Cotton Australia works with growers and stakeholders to ensure the Australian cotton industry remains viable.

Cotton Australia supports the Australian cotton industry to be globally competitive, sustainable and valued by the community. It drives the industry's strategic direction, retains a strong focus on research and development, promotes strength of the industry, manages sustainability reporting and implements policy objectives.

1. Executive summary

Cotton Australia welcomes the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry and would appreciate the opportunity to appear at the Public Hearing on April 22, 2026, in Brisbane.

Cotton Australia represents Australia's cotton growers, including many on Queensland's Darling Downs who rely on the Condamine Alluvium for irrigation. This submission responds to the Regional Planning Interest (Condamine Alluvium) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 (the Bill). Cotton Australia's position is that the Bill cannot be supported in its current form because it reduces practical protections for the productive capacity of priority agricultural land and the Condamine Alluvium, without putting in place sufficiently clear, enforceable "guardrails" that will allow government to take decisive action if impacts prove materially worse than forecast.

- The Bill removes or weakens key elements of the existing Regional Planning Interests (RPI) framework and the Regional Interests Development Approval (RIDA) pathway, which currently require consideration of economic and agricultural productive capacity impacts not addressed through an Environmental Authority (EA) alone.
- It risks operating retrospectively by removing landholder leverage to require RIDA for developments proceeding under existing EAs, while any "enhanced" deemed water quality condition would apply only to new wells approved after commencement.
- While Cotton Australia acknowledges improvements proposed in the Bill (including treatment of deviated drilling as an advanced activity and clarifying subsidence as compensable), these do not offset the broader loss of practical protections for agricultural productivity and groundwater-dependent farming systems.

Cotton Australia supports a regulatory approach that enables resource development where it can be demonstrated that land and water productive capacity will be maintained, and where landholders are appropriately compensated. To provide confidence for growers and the broader community, the Bill should be substantially amended to reinstate the protection provided by the Regional Planning Interest Act. This reinstatement must endure after any amendments to the Environmental Protection Act 1994 proposed by this Bill. Failing that, Cotton Australia recommends the Bill be withdrawn.

Further, Cotton Australia is disappointed that in drafting this Bill the government has not taken a more holistic approach, establishing clear, enforceable guardrails for managing unexpected impacts.

2. Recommendations

1. *The Regional Planning Interest (Condamine Alluvium) Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 cannot be supported in its current form.*
2. *The Bill either needs to be substantially amended, by returning all the provisions of the Regional Planning Interest Act that the Bill seeks to remove; or*
3. *The Bill needs to be withdrawn.*

4. Submission response

4.1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Cotton Australia represents the interests of Australia's 1500 cotton growers that operate across our Nation. Approximately 300 growers are located on the Darling Downs, and a significant number of them rely on the Condamine Alluvium as a primary source of their irrigation water.

Cotton Australia is neither supportive of, nor against the Coal Seam Gas (CSG) industry. As an organisation, we acknowledge that we have some growers who are openly engaging with the CSG industry, others who are publicly opposed, and yet others who are quietly managing to co-exist.

Much is said about industries co-existing; it is Cotton Australia's view that industries don't co-exist, but individuals and entities can co-exist in the right environment.

Cotton Australia's CSG policy can be summarised as follows:

- The productive capacity of the land our growers operate on must be maintained.
- The productive capacity of the water resources (in this case the Condamine Alluvium) must be maintained in terms of both quality and quantity.
- And if these can be assured landholders should be appropriately compensated.

For Cotton Australia, what is essential, and currently largely missing, is ensuring "guardrails" are in place, that will allow government to take decisive action should there be significant economic impacts on the productive capacity of the Darling Downs land and the Condamine Alluvium.

We respect the work of the Office of Groundwater Impact (OGIA), who in last year's Underground Water Impact Report estimated that the net annual loss out of the Condamine Alluvium will be 920 megalitres per year. But what processes are in place to halt or significantly amended approved CSG development is for example, the modelling changed to show impacts of 5,000 megalitres per year?

Similarly, what "guardrail" provisions are in place if subsidence impacts currently modelled at 10-15cm, but up to 25cm, are much greater or significantly less even.

Further, what guardrails are in place if the migration of gas affects the productive capacity of the Condamine Alluvium,

Cotton Australia sincerely hopes that these larger impacts do not occur, and the guardrails are never needed, but they should be in place.

Cotton Australia is disappointed that the Government in drafting the Regional Planning Interests (Condamine Alluvium) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 (the Bill), did not take a much more holistic approach to addressing a range of landholder concerns, that would have given much greater confidence that if the unexpected occurred, there were real and decisive remedies in place.

4.2. THE BILL

Recommendations

1. *The Regional Planning Interest (Condamine Alluvium) Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2026 cannot be supported in its current form.*
2. *The Bill either needs to be substantially amended, by returning all the provisions of the Regional Planning Interest Act that the Bill seeks to remove; or*
3. *The Bill needs to be withdrawn.*

Background

The Condamine Alluvium and the farming land that overlays it has been recognised as a very important asset to the State of Queensland (Qld) and was given enhanced protection through the establishment of the of the Regional Planning Interest Act 2014 (RPI Act), the Darling Downs Regional Plan and the associated regulations, all of which give statutory force to the State Interest of Agriculture.

It should be noted that the RPI Act was introduced when the Liberal/National Party were last in Government in Queensland, and the Darlings Downs Plan was one of the first to be completed, with specific provisions to assist in the protection of the Condamine Alluvium, and the productive capacity of agriculture on the Darling Downs.

While not perfect, the RPI Act, through Regional Interests Development Approval (RIDA) applications when made, forced the consideration of a wide range of possible impacts on the economic and agricultural sustainability of the Condamine Alluvium and the productive capacity of its Priority Agricultural Area. This impact on the productive capacity is not a consideration when a proponent applies for an Environmental Authority (EA) under Qld environmental law.

Therefore, the two approval processes (EA & RIDA) are not duplicates, but perform two different and very important functions.

It is essential that Resource companies still have to abide by the combined requirements of the RPI Act, as the Act requires the consideration of many factors that are not considered under an EA.

Further, this Bill seeks to remove those protections provided through the RIDA process immediately on passing, while the supposed enhanced protections from the inclusion of the deemed water quality condition, would only apply to new wells approved under an EA after the Bill became law.

It is important to be aware that existing EAs are in place for much of the expected CSG gas well development over the footprint of the Condamine Alluvium.

And it needs to be emphasised, if this Bill becomes law, the ability of a landholder to effectively force a Resource Company to seek RIDA, will be removed immediately, while any enhanced protection to water quality (which we believe is limited) will only apply if the resource company applies for new wells against an EA.

Hundreds of currently unconstructed, but EA approved wells, could be constructed without the need to consider a RIDA, and without the water quality protection that will be deemed in new EAs.

Let's be clear, this is a retrospective action that will leave landholders with **less rights** than before the Bill becomes law.

The argument has been made that the RPI Act and the RIDA process has not delivered, as very few RIDA applications have been made and assessed, however, this is not an active measure of success.

The very existence of the RPI Act has imposed certain obligations and expectations on resource companies and has significantly strengthened the position of landholders when negotiating CCAs.

Further, many of the EA approved but unconstructed wells are planned for the most highly valued lands that overlay the Condamine Alluvium, and it is a reasonable expectation that resource companies will have to make significantly more RIDA applications as their developments move east of the Condamine River.

We do acknowledge that the Bill has addressed some key issues, including the intention to declare Deviated Drilling as an Advanced Activity, and the consequential requirement for the resource developer to enter into a Conduct and Compensation Agreement (CCA) with the Landholder, and making it clear that subsidence is a compensable effect under the Mineral and Energy Resources (Common Provisions) Act 2014.

We generally support those provisions, and do not seek amendments, but we have significant concerns how potential, but unknown subsidence impacts, can be fairly (to both parties) included in a CCA.

We are also concerned that the Bill does not make it clear how landholders who may have existing CCAs, that did not take in account subsidence, will be able to receive compensation for subsidence.

Finally, Cotton Australia has long argued that any compensation in regard to subsidence must result in the productive capacity of the land being restored, and this requirement is lacking in the Bill.

Should the government decide to not amend the Bill as we have called for, then we would prefer to see the Bill withdrawn (and lose the above-mentioned improvements), rather than see the Bill passed, and leave landholders with less rights and unaddressed concerns, including an acute paucity of protection for the productive capacity of this exceptional agricultural region.

We believe this Bill represents a missed opportunity to taking a much more holistic approach to ensuring the extraction of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) does not negatively impact on the productive capacity of the Darling Downs and the waters of the Condamine Alluvium.

By taking a very narrow approach, largely focused on water quality concerns, and making some welcome changes to the recognition of deviated wells as an Advanced Activity, along with making it clear that Subsidence is a compensable impact, the government has failed to take into account risks associated with unexpected impacts on water volumes in the Alluvium, and how to manage any subsidence impacts on productive capacity in a more nuanced manner than simply making it clear that subsidence is a compensable effect.

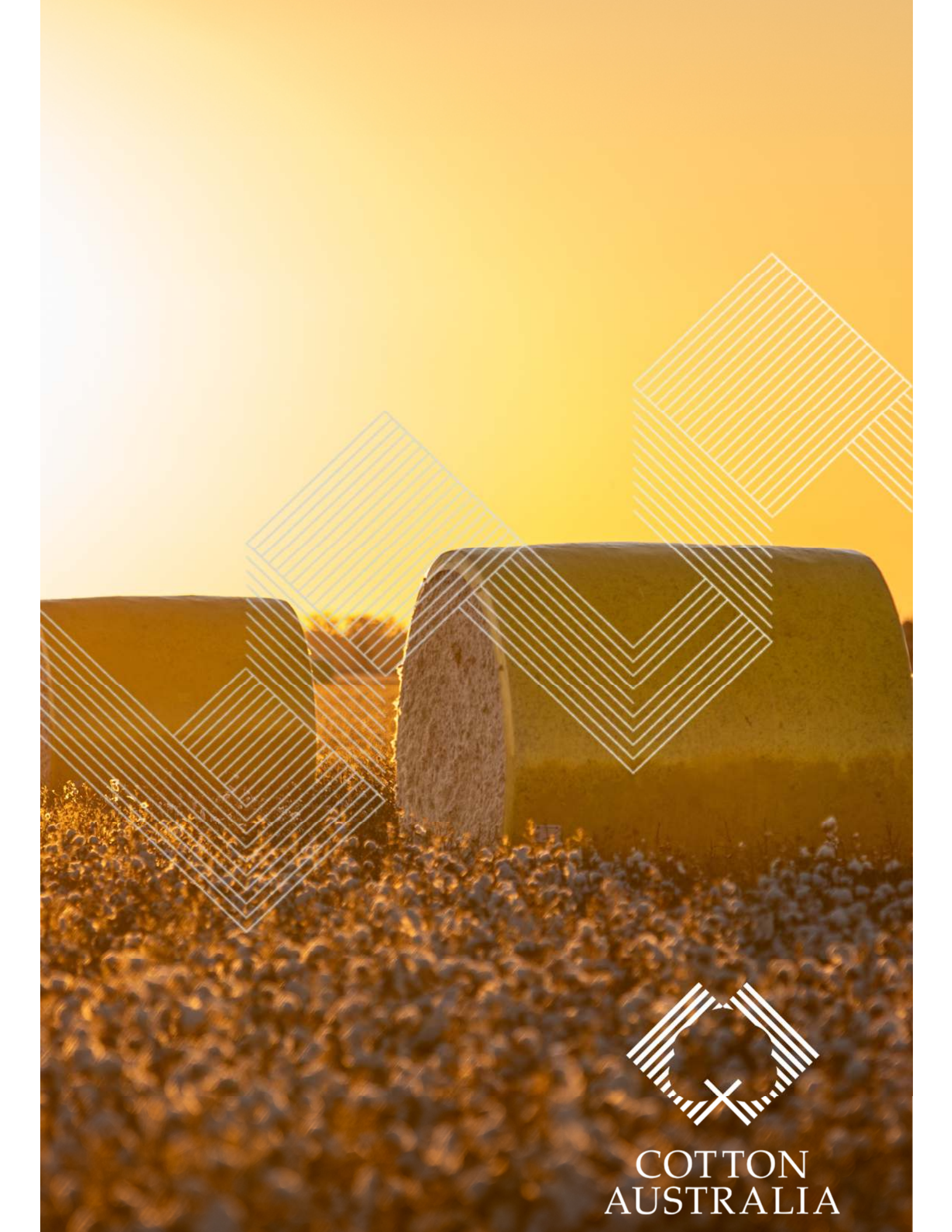
Cotton Australia wants to ensure that the extraction of CSG does not come at the short or long-term expense of the agricultural productive capacity of the Condamine Alluvium and the land that overlays it, and the provisions of the Regional Planning Interest Act play a key role in protecting those resources.

5. Conclusion

Cotton Australia's central concern is ensuring that Queensland's priority agricultural land and the Condamine Alluvium are protected so their productive capacity is maintained in both the short and long term. The Bill, as drafted, would remove the practical operation of the Regional Planning Interests framework and diminish landholder leverage at a time when many developments may proceed under existing Environmental Authorities, without the additional assessment and decision-making tests that the Regional Interests Development Approval process provides.

Given ongoing uncertainty around the magnitude of potential drawdown and subsidence impacts—and the absence of clear, enforceable “guardrails” that would trigger decisive remedies if impacts are materially worse than forecast—Cotton Australia urges the Committee to recommend that the Bill be substantially amended to reinstate the protections the Bill seeks to remove. If those amendments are not made, Cotton Australia recommends the Bill be withdrawn. Cotton Australia remains willing to work constructively with the Queensland Government, regulators, landholders and industry to develop an approach that supports coexistence, maintains agricultural productivity, and provides certainty and fairness for affected growers.

Cotton Australia would welcome an opportunity to appear before the Inquiry. For questions or clarifications, please contact Cotton Australia General Manager Michael Murray – 0427 707868 or michaelm@cotton.org.au .



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