BACKGROUND
This overarching flier provides an overview of the current challenges around labour in the cotton industry, and what is being done by the industry, and across agriculture more broadly, to understand and better manage workforce challenges in the future.

Cotton Australia has developed a separate information flier specifically addressing options available to growers and communities to source labour through the migration system. This is one avenue through which agricultural employers can source workers, particularly in times of peak demand. This flier aims to provide broader context to support that information.

WORKFORCE AND LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE AND THE COTTON INDUSTRY
The cotton industry’s labour force is critical to sustaining the industry’s competitive advantage. Innovative, resilient and adaptive people, businesses and communities are crucial to the future success of the industry. It is therefore important to support processes for attracting, retaining and developing people.

The cotton industry’s labour force takes into account on-farm labour, as well as the service industry and supply chain, which represent an extensive network of input and advisory providers that support cotton farmers such as agronomists, researchers, consultants, agribusiness, State government agencies, Cotton Australia, CSIRO, and universities. The dynamics of the industry’s labour varies across season, location and business size.

The key underpinnings of the national agricultural workforce include the national skills and training system (tertiary, VET and schools), and the national migration system.

Current challenges
The Australian agriculture sector is currently experiencing a labour and skills shortage, driven by an aging workforce, low attraction rates and strong competition from the resource sector. This is being felt in the cotton industry, which is facing the challenge of attracting and retaining core staff, on-farm labour (unskilled and skilled), and access to professional advisers and service providers. The problem has recently been driven by rapid expansion of the industry following years of drought, and the resources boom in some regions. Other factors such as poor public perception/image of rural towns, lifestyle and work are also believed to be contributing.

In the cotton industry and across the agriculture sector, overseas workers are used to fill labour gaps, particularly during peak times when local labour is difficult to access. However, options through the migration system...
system can only support Australia's domestic training arrangements which must deliver the backbone of Australia's skilled labour needs\textsuperscript{2}.

For the cotton industry, a commitment to the strength of our local workforce and communities remains a priority, which is reflected in the strategies and investments of the industry's organisations - Cotton Australia, the Cotton Research and Development Corporation and previously the Cotton CRC. The importance of people is long recognized and increasing in the industry.

**What is being done to address workforce challenges?**

Australia's primary industries face challenges because of their regional location and business size which means they cannot influence the employment and training system or maintain internal labour markets. Nevertheless, much is being done by industries, training organisations, researchers, government and communities to look at ways to address labour and skills shortages across agriculture.

Cotton Australia has been involved in discussions and planning at a sectoral and industry level on workforce, which is developing solutions and driving action. The organisation works with a number of groups across the agriculture sector working to address these issues, including the National and Queensland Farmers' Federations, QLD Rural Industry Training Council, and the Primary Industries Education Foundation.

At an industry level, Cotton Australia and the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CRDC), are working to better understand and help manage grower and industry workforce, skills and training needs. The organisations support initiatives and programs in the areas of school education, resources development, career path development and industry leadership. They also support external workforce attraction programs and link to national and state school programs, the VET sector and regional workforce initiatives.

At a local level, many Cotton Grower Associations (CGAs) prioritise education and labour as important to their community and local industry, and therefore initiate and facilitate activities and projects, e.g. working with schools and training providers in their area. Cotton Australia works to support the needs of CGAs, and CRDC have also provided additional capacity to support these regional ideas.

Cotton Australia, along with CRDC, are also focused on identifying funding sources or services available to support delivery and implementation of industry workforce and training activities. E.g. the National Workforce Development Fund has recently been explored to support the delivery of an industry training project concept.

**Influencing policy**

Cotton Australia provides important input to state and federal government skills and workforce demand reviews, to highlight the current and future industry workforce situation and ensure needs are supported.

As a member of the NFF, Cotton Australia participates in the NFF Workplace Relations Committee, which coordinates policy work, lobbying and action on issues including education, skills and training, industrial relations and migration. Driven by the Committee, NFF are currently lobbying the government:

- For consideration of the workforce development needs of agriculture as a priority. The NFF are also driving the development of an Agriculture Workforce Development Plan.
- To address limitations in the migration system that are impeding on the sector’s ability to secure overseas workers, and for greater flexibility in the system.
- To determine whether the skills recognition frameworks are appropriately recognising the agriculture industry’s current skills and qualifications.
- To ensure appropriate labour demand surveys for agriculture, given agriculture’s strong informal recruitment and skilling systems don’t adequately feature in current national skills demand surveys\textsuperscript{3}.

\textsuperscript{2} National Farmers’ Federation submission to the Skills Occupational List (SOL) 2013

\textsuperscript{3} Primary Industries Skills Council, “Skills Supply and the ANZSCO Codes: Urgent Concerns and Implications for AgriFood Industry Sustainability”

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COTTON AUSTRALIA
Government’s increased focus on agriculture’s workforce has seen Cotton Australia, in consultation with the industry, contribute to a number of recent reviews:

- The Senate Inquiry into higher education and skills support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia
- Review of Agricultural Education and Training in New South Wales
- National Rural Advisory Council’s (NRAC) assessment of agricultural employers’ workforce planning capabilities, focusing on addressing labour and skills shortages.

**Cotton industry RD&E**

The cotton industry prioritised workforce development for strategic investment in its R&D plan (2008-2011) by setting ‘human capacity’ building as a goal.

Through a number of cotton industry R&D human capacity projects managed by CRDC, the industry is gathering data to better understand the extent and drivers of workforce demands – critical for developing solutions and influencing policy. It is important that industry workforce plans that evolve to address the industry’s needs in the medium to long term are informed by RD&E.

A key cotton industry workforce development project is currently underway. The ‘Innovative work: cotton workforce development for sustained competitive advantage’ is a three year project being led by the University of Melbourne that will help the cotton sector better understand and address its workforce needs over time. Researchers will conduct a labour market analysis from existing data (e.g. ABS) and through industry consultation selected cotton production valleys will prioritise their workforce needs and work towards obtaining funding to address these.

Cotton Australia provides important grower advice on the industry’s R&D program in this area, via the Human Capacity Advisory Panel (pictured).

**myBMP Human Resources module**

The cotton industry’s online myBMP program includes a ‘Human Resources’ module, which provides guidance to help growers meet legal obligations around employing staff and put in place procedures to optimise employee productivity. The module includes a range of templates and resources including current employment legislation; draft position descriptions; and induction templates.  


**Further information and resources**

**Department of Immigration and Citizenship Industry Outreach Officer**

The NFF has a Liaison Officer on secondment from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. As a member of the National Farmers Federation, Cotton Australia and our members have access to the officer who can provide expert support to employers who want to employ skilled overseas workers. Contact Satinder Pasricha on 0413 234 126 or satinder.jit.singh.pasricha@immi.gov.au

**COTTON AUSTRALIA**

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