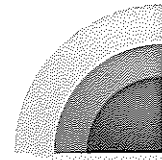


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What is the 'sleeping giant' of agriculture?

DRYLAND cotton is the 'sleeping giant' of agriculture in the North West with underdeveloped potential capable of significantly boosting farmers' incomes and the region's economy, an Edgeroi field day was told last week.

"Overall, the rate of return for dryland cotton over the past five years indicates that this district has missed out on considerable wealth creation by not growing more dryland cotton," said a speaker at the field day, Moree-based agronomist Rob Long.

Technology has moved ahead significantly with GM varieties and dryland cotton now is a crop, which should be looked at more closely by district farmers, said the convener of the Edgeroi field day, Monsanto's Bob Ford.

"Nowadays, it has become much simpler for farmers to include dryland cotton in their farming program.

"And the field day was, in fact, called 'Dryland Made Simple.'

"The benefits offered to growers by seed companies, and the technology from Monsanto, substantially reduces the risk and gives growers more confidence to include dryland cotton in their farming program.

With a much more encouraging seasonal outlook this year, dryland cotton had the capability of lifting farmers' incomes, even if they 'put a toe in the water' with a small acreage, Mr Ford said.

Dryland cotton enjoyed a boom in the late 1990s with up to 110,000 ha planted across the industry.

The drought and insect pressure has reduced that to about 10-15,000 ha industry wide.

"However, the fantastic advances in biotechnology by Monsanto, with Bollgard II and Round Up Ready Flex varieties on the market, has meant a great reduction in the

amount of insecticide sprays applied to cotton and the allowed ability to spray Roundup over the top of the crop until the middle of December," Mr Ford said.

"This has greatly reduced the risk of cost blow outs in relation to insecticides and weeds and has given greater insurance and safeguards to growers while having the capability of being very profitable."

Forty-five farmers, consultants, agronomists and industry businesses gathered at the Edgeroi Hall on Wednesday to discuss the benefits of dryland cotton in comparison with other more traditional cropping options.

About eight of the attendees were potential new cotton growers. The remainder were growers who had been growing cotton for some time.

Presenters at the field day included James Quinn from CSD, Wee Waa agronomist Anna Madden, Campbell Ball, Queensland Cotton, Dave Moore, Monsanto Melbourne, Rob Long from B and W Rural Moree and Bob Ford, Monsanto Narrabri.

The day started in the Edgeroi Hall with presentations and then moved outside to look at three individual farms, Geoff O'Neill's 'Llano', Bruce Kirkby's 'Noelurma' and Ian Gourley's 'Blue Hills.'

Mr Ford said all three farms had great potential and looked very promising from a yield perspective.

"We hope anyone with a full profile of moisture will look at cotton as an attractive option, particularly on the black soil plains of the Namoi Valley," Mr Ford said.

"The technology which has come in over the past 10 years, and advances in machinery, and GPS navigation, and new cotton varieties which utilise soil moisture

much better, all combine to make dryland cotton very attractive in the Narrabri region.

"And we have many professional people in many fields in this district who have been growing cotton for a long time, who are able to help and advise new growers."

Several district dryland cotton growers were at the field day.

"I have been growing dryland cotton for over 10 years averaging 1.4 bales per acre. It is the most profitable dryland farming option," Ian Gourley said. "Ian is a testament for growing dryland cotton having success with the crop over a long period," Mr Ford said.

"Much more dryland cotton should be grown in northern NSW and southern Queensland. It is a highly under utilised crop that benefits from rain in late December and mid February after sorghum has finished," Rob Long said.

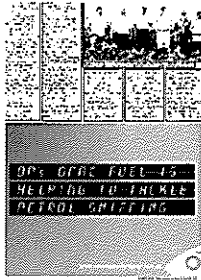
"The relative returns indicate that cotton has shown a significantly stronger rate of return when averaged over the past five summers compared to sorghum.

"The gross margin for cotton averages \$580 per hectare while sorghum averages \$290 per hectare."

Jim Quinn from CSD said Bollgard II has reduced the risk of cost blow outs, wider row configurations and full soil moisture profiles have reduced production risks and the impact of possible hefty quality discounts.

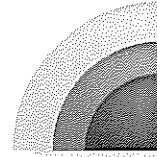
"Our region is now very well set up with good technology, infrastructure, and contractors, to make dryland cotton production simpler," Mr Ford said.

"Dryland farmers should see cotton as a profitable cropping option for summer that is a lot easier to grow than what it was like a decade ago."



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AT the Edgeroi field day last week, Campbell Ball (Queensland Cotton), Bob Ford (Monsanto), Dave Moore (Monsanto), Jim Quinn (CSD), Wee Waa agronomist Anna Madden and grower Ian Gourley.