

MEDIA RELEASE

GRAINS AND COTTON GET TOGETHER

The Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) is backing new research into the potential for irrigated grain crops – winter cereals, sorghum and maize – to make profitable use of irrigation water in cotton cropping systems.

Generally, profit from cotton on a per hectare basis remains better than irrigated grain crops, but high-yielding grains grown with irrigation can match cotton in relation to returns per megalitre of water used.

For many irrigation farmers, water is now more limiting than land, hence returns per megalitre are driving cropping choices rather than returns per hectare.

Tracey Farrell, NSW DPI/ Cotton CRC district agronomist at Narrabri, said the project was prompted by three major drivers:

the fact that nearly all cotton growers grow grain in their crop rotations
there are research questions that need to focus on both the cotton and grain crops rather than just on one of the commodities.
recent trials of intensive, high-input systems of wheat have produced high yields under irrigation on the farms around Wee Waa.

Ms Farrell said the high yield trials, experimenting with different varieties suitable for irrigation, together with a new approach to crop establishment and more intensive nutrition management, have achieved yields approaching 10 tonnes of wheat per hectare.

“One of the first steps in developing this project was to survey cotton and grain growers from both NSW and Queensland.

“Growers perceived the highest priority for future research to develop high- yielding grain crops in cotton rotations was agronomic packages tailored to appropriate varieties and regions.

“Growers also wanted information that considered the implications for both cotton and grain crops.

“In addition, in northern NSW, the need for more accurate irrigation scheduling advice was also considered a high priority in order for grain crops to achieve comparable returns per megalitre,” Ms Farrell concluded.

Program leader for the Cotton CRC, Graham Harris, QDPI&F, who interviewed Queensland growers, found that soil health and area wide management of pests, as well as water management, were important considerations.

Mr Harris said phase 1 of the project also included a comprehensive economic analysis of a range of irrigated grain crops in cotton systems and a review of the literature, and research done in other regions such as southern NSW.

Ms Farrell says the next stage of the project is likely to focus on irrigated wheat in northern NSW and sorghum and maize on the Darling Downs next summer.

The collaborative project, which is part of the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC, has combined the skills and knowledge of NSW and Queensland Departments of Primary Industries, CSIRO, GRDC, and Cotton Grower Services, and Ag Central Donald McMurrich)

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Caption: Tracey Farrell