

Spotlight

ON COTTON R&D

SPRING 2026

Industry welcomes
new CRDC MD

Conference 2026
attracts record crowd

Creating capacity
through leadership





Georgina Pengilley

In the Spotlight

Welcome to the Spring edition of *Spotlight*.

My first few weeks with CRDC have been spent listening, learning and meeting people from right across the cotton industry. Attending the Australian Cotton Conference so early in my time at CRDC was an invaluable introduction to an industry that is ambitious, collaborative and strongly committed to its future. It also reinforced something I have always believed: innovation only creates value when it reaches growers, performs under pressure and delivers tangible benefits on farm.

One of the things that has stood out most to me in my first weeks with CRDC is how connected the cotton industry is. Growers, researchers, extension staff, agronomists and industry organisations all play a role in translating ideas into impact. Whether it's researchers sharing new findings, growers hosting trials, students exploring future careers or emerging leaders stepping forward, there is a shared commitment to building an industry that continues to learn, adapt and improve. This culture is one of Australian cotton's greatest strengths. That focus on impact runs throughout this edition.

You'll see examples of current research and extension focused on improving decision-making, strengthening farming systems, supporting safety on farms and building capability across the industry.

The future performance of our industry depends not only on research, but on the people who lead, adopt and apply it. A recent review of industry leadership investments has informed a new Leadership Development Scholarship trial for this coming year, designed to support leadership capability across different sectors and career stages. We're also looking at how we attract and retain the next generation, with new research providing valuable insights into what young people are looking for in a career and the role scholarships, leadership programs and industry networks can play in creating pathways into cotton.

The Australian Cotton Conference also features strongly. Record attendance reflected an industry that is optimistic about the future and willing to engage with new ideas. From Innovation Alley and emerging technologies, through to the industry awards and Future Cotton Leaders program, the Conference showcased the strength of current research and the people who shape it. It was particularly encouraging to see so many young people actively participating, contributing ideas and positioning themselves to lead the industry into the future.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge CRDC's outgoing Executive Director, Allan Williams, whose dedication to Australian cotton over three decades is recognised in this edition. Allan leaves an extraordinary legacy of leadership, collaboration and commitment to research, and I know the entire industry joins me in thanking him for that contribution. I hope you enjoy this edition of *Spotlight*.

Dr Georgina Pengilley
Managing Director



CRDC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands of Australia's cotton communities, and recognises their enduring connection to the land and waterways that sustain us. We value the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have cared for this country for thousands of years. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today.



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Cotton Research and Development Corporation
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Vision: A sophisticated, prosperous and sustainable Australian cotton industry, strongly connected to its value chain.

Mission: Delivering world-class outcomes for the cotton industry through thought leadership, innovation, adoption and collaboration.

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MELANIE JENSON

ON THE COVER:
St George cotton grower, CSD Director and former CRDC Director, Cleave Rogan and granddaughter Liana are the embodiment of how the Australian Cotton Conference brings the past, present and future of cotton together.

Want to see more of Spotlight?

This edition can be viewed online at: www.crdc.com.au

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Cotton Pest Management Guide: out now

THE CRDC and CottonInfo *Cotton Pest Management Guide* remains one of the most important resources for Australian cotton growers and advisers, bringing together the latest information to support informed, cost-effective and responsible pest management decisions.

From identifying pests and beneficial insects to understanding thresholds, control options, resistance management and stewardship considerations, the Guide helps growers make decisions that protect yield, fibre quality and profitability throughout the season.

This edition includes a comprehensive new review of the potential impacts of pesticide exposure on honeybees, incorporating the latest international research and APVMA reports. Honeybee risk ratings have been updated to include separate assessments for contact and oral toxicities, providing growers with more detailed information to support pollinator stewardship and minimise off-target impacts.

Whether you're planning your pest management strategy before planting or making in-crop decisions, the *Cotton Pest Management Guide* is an essential reference for balancing effective pest control with long-term sustainability.

A hard copy of the *2026-27 Cotton Pest Management Guide* is enclosed with this edition of *Spotlight*. You can also access it via the new-look CottonInfo website: www.cottoninfo.com.au/publications-and-resources/CPMG



CottonInfo Digital Agriculture Technical Lead Quentin Feery-Lawrence was one of the line-up of specialists at the second CRDC Cotton Course microcredential, *Digital and Data Solutions for Cotton Systems*.

Putting knowledge to work on farm

PUTTING digital solutions and technology into practice has been a major outcome of the recent industry short course at the University of Sydney's (USYD) Narrabri campus (Kamilaroi country).

Held in July, the second of three microcredentials under CRDC's Cotton Course, *Digital and Data Solutions for Cotton Systems* was delivered by USYD in partnership with CottonInfo and Cotton Seed Distributors (CSD). The course attracted 11 people focused on creating or improving the skills needed for digital adoption and data-driven decision-making.

This included growers and farm managers, agronomists, account managers and industry analysts. Advice and information was shared around how to obtain and store data, the return on investment of digital agriculture, and the importance of, and how to collect and 'clean', useable data to inform decision making.

"The diversity in participants reflects the course's role in supporting understanding across the cotton value chain," USYD's Ian Simpson said.

"They now have a greater understanding of the data streams and technology available to help them make more informed management decisions and create sustainable cotton farming systems.

"From their feedback, 100 per cent of participants expect to apply their learning in their work or future roles.

"In particular, adopting satellite imagery/NDVI data into their operations and improving data collection systems and processes within business operations (for example, for yield and soil data) and utilising it for future trials, analysis and decision making.

"They also noted improved ability to evaluate technology investments and understand what data is available on-farm and the gaps service providers can assist with.

"And while understanding improved significantly, participants also recognised the complexity of embracing new technologies and adopting production systems to utilise available/emerging digital and data sources/technologies into cotton production systems and the support that is available to them."

As with feedback from the CRDC Cotton Course microcredential 1 *Australian Cotton Farming Systems*, the experience also offered connections to the industry and each other, which Ian says is particularly important for those from outside traditional production roles.

"Early career agronomists who undertook the course also highlighted the networking opportunities, saying one of the best aspects is the networking with peers in the industry," Ian said.

"Meanwhile many of the growers said that it was a great introduction to the capability of the mapping software and what resources are available to them to improve decision-making and crop management."

Turn to page 19 for details on the next microcredential under CRDC's Cotton Course: *Advanced Cotton Production for Decision Makers*.

For more
cotton.course@sydney.edu.au

Ag research leader welcomed as new CRDC Managing Director

A new era of research, development and extension (RD&E) leadership for Australian cotton growers has been ushered in with the appointment of Dr Georgina Pengilley as CRDC's Managing Director, after Allan Williams stepped down from the role in August.

Georgina has joined CRDC from Rice Breeding Australia, where as CEO she established a national breeding organisation and led the development of a \$10M facility that reduced variety development timelines by nine years.

Georgina brings a unique perspective to her new role through a 25-year career spanning research investment, on-ground delivery, and personal farming experience as partner in an 8300-hectare farming enterprise in Tasmania. She holds a PhD in Plant Physiology from the University of New England and is a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

CRDC Chair Richard Haire said the Board was delighted to welcome Georgina to the organisation.

"Georgina is an experienced agricultural research leader who has operated in key parts of the system as an investor in research, as a deliverer of research results, and as a grower with skin in the game," Richard said.

"Her combination of scientific expertise, executive leadership and genuine grower credibility is exactly what CRDC needs as we look to the next chapter.

"Georgina has a proven track record of translating RD&E investment into real, measurable outcomes for Australian agriculture, and we are confident she will build on CRDC's strong strategic foundations and continue delivering on Clever Cotton for the benefit of the entire industry."

Richard also paid tribute to outgoing Executive Director Allan Williams.

"Allan grew up in the cotton industry and has committed a lifetime to it, and the CRDC Board and Australia's cotton growers are deeply grateful for his service," Richard said.

"This commitment was rightly honoured when Allan was presented with the Service to Industry Award at the 2026



CRDC Managing Director Dr Georgina Pengilley said this year's Australian Cotton Conference provided the opportunity to be immersed in the industry, providing valuable insight and connections.

Australian Cotton Conference, recognising his 30 years of dedicated leadership within key Australian and international cotton organisations and for the past 14 years, CRDC.

"Allan has positioned CRDC and our growers well, and with Georgina at the helm we look forward to an exciting new era. We were particularly grateful for the long lead time Allan provided when stepping down which gave the CRDC Board time to plan thoughtfully for the future and manage a smooth transition from his leadership to Georgina's."

Georgina is based at Armidale, NSW (Nganyaywana country), and will work from CRDC's Narrabri office (Kamilaroi country). She formally commenced her role at the end of July and attended the 2026 Australian Cotton Conference in early August.

CRDC is a foundation sponsor of the Conference. Georgina said she was honoured to lead an organisation at the heart of Australian cotton's future and the Conference was an exceptional way to meet cotton industry people from across the supply chain.

"The opportunity to be immersed in the industry so early in my role has provided valuable insight and connections," Georgina said.

"To meet people from right across the value chain reiterates the coordinated approach of the cotton industry to

innovation and the future. And being able to hear about the contribution of the RD&E CRDC invests in and its impact on the industry points to the opportunities still to come.

"My career has been driven by a simple principle – agricultural innovation only matters if it reaches the paddock faster, performs under pressure, and creates value for growers.

"CRDC is the engine room of research for the cotton industry, and I am privileged to be the next person to lead it. Every dollar invested in research must deliver real, measurable outcomes on the ground and that will continue to be CRDC's mission.

"The challenges growers face around productivity, sustainability and profitability are not unique to cotton, and I'm excited to bring fresh eyes and broader agricultural experience to CRDC which is already doing exceptional work.

"I have no doubt that the industry is up for the challenge. It was fantastic to see so many young people at the conference getting involved, being heard and making contributions.

"That positivity sets us in good stead for the future and allows us to be bold in our ambitions."

For more

Georgina Pengilley

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A life in cotton: honouring an industry champion

Receiving the John Deere Service to Industry Award was a fitting tribute for one of the Australian cotton industry's champions, Allan Williams, who has been a leader both behind the scenes and in key industry roles for 30 years.

The 2026 Service to Industry Award capped a long and impactful career dedicated to agricultural science, research and development and improving the sustainability and performance of the Australian cotton industry.

It is particularly pertinent given Allan recently stepped down as Executive Director of CRDC, bringing to a close his 14-year career with the Narrabri-based organisation.

Prior to joining CRDC, Allan worked for a number of cotton industry organisations, including the Better Cotton Initiative, the Australian Cotton Growers Research Association (ACGRA) and Cotton Consultants Australia (now Crop Consultants Australia). While with ACGRA, Allan developed the industry's Best Management Practice program, which evolved into today's *myBMP*.

He is held in high esteem by the international cotton community, evident in his role as Chair of



ABOVE RIGHT:
The logo on Allan's shirt gives away the era – circa 2000 – as Executive Officer of ACGRA.

BELOW:
Allan came home to the farm and to support his mother Sue after the passing of his father Richard (pictured) with Allan. He still has the 'Merinda' sign.



the International Cotton Advisory Committee's (ICAC's) Expert Panel on the Social, Economic and Environmental Performance of Cotton (SEEP), which he held from 2006 to early 2026.

Over his 30 years working in cotton, Allan has lived through and actively managed industry developments and challenges, using skills built both on and off the farm.

As a child in the 1960s and 1970s, Allan had a front row seat as cotton developed into a brand new agricultural industry in Australia. His US-born father, Richard Williams, was a pioneering grower who had moved to Wee Waa, which was also home to a group of American cotton farmers that included the Kahl and Hadley families. It was the friendship between Frank Hadley's mother and Allan's grandmother that provided the opportunity for Richard to leave the family farm in Porterville, California and emigrate to Australia.

Coming back to cotton country

While Allan's history with cotton is life-long, joining the cotton industry wasn't always on the cards. After a gap year spent working on the family farm, Allan moved to Sydney to study and over the next seven years, earned a Bachelor of Science degree majoring in soil science and anatomy, and a Bachelor of Law with Honours from the University of Sydney.

"I didn't see cotton in my future. After uni I worked as a lawyer for two years, and thought my

future was in the city and the legal profession,” Allan said.

The sudden passing of his father in 1990 changed his course, and Allan brought his family back home to be near his mother.

Richard’s passing was not only a devastating loss to the family, it also left a hole in the cotton industry.

“Dad was an early supporter and promoter of research and development, and understood its importance if cotton was to become a sustainable industry here,” Allan explained.

“His lifelong passion was cotton and science. Dad helped form ACGRA which he chaired from its establishment in 1972 until his passing in 1990, and he was also Chair of CSD for 21 years, from 1968 to 1989. He was involved in the establishment of CRDC in 1989-1990, with an initial staff of three.

“Dad believed vision, collaboration, and direct grower involvement was needed in setting research priorities, and I believe those factors are as important today as they were in the 1960s.”

After Allan came home, it wasn’t long before work opportunities emerged in the cotton industry. Allan’s functional knowledge as a grower, paired with his science and law degrees, saw him appointed as the first Executive Officer of Cotton Consultants Australia in 1994, and he stayed until 1997. He was soon approached by ACGRA to take on an Executive Officer role, and worked there until 2006.

Keeping ACGRA close to growers

At the time, ACGRA was the Australian cotton industry’s peak body, responsible for advising CRDC on research priorities as well as liaising with Government. Allan’s key responsibilities included representing the ACGRA at industry forums, meeting with federal and state Departments of Agriculture on research-related issues for the cotton industry, and drafting submissions to Government inquiries relevant to R&D.

“I guess my law experience was looked upon favourably, although I was told at the interview to never bother wearing a suit and tie again!” Allan said.

He fostered opportunities for cross-sector collaboration in agriculture, bringing about the cotton industry’s membership of Plant Health Australia, and found himself in the right place at the right time.

“There were plenty of challenges emerging, such as chemical supply shortages, resistance management, fibre quality and pesticide management, and it was a rapid introduction to pretty much all the key industry sectors and the issues they were facing.”

Initially the role with ACGRA involved working



closely with cotton growers to review and prioritise research investments in cotton growing.

“I was closely involved in the review of research projects and ensuring decisions were informed by conversations with growers, which seemed to work,” he said.

‘Seemed to work’ is perhaps an understatement. Allan was integral in transforming adversity into opportunity for the industry, when Dave Anthony of ACGRA approached him to create the Best Management Practice program on the back of the pesticide crises of the early 1990s.

In 1993, a five-year research program involving CRDC, the Murray Darling Basin Commission and the Land & Water Research and Development Corporation was established. Titled ‘*Minimising the impact of pesticides on the riverine environment*’, the program led to the identification of options for reducing the movement of pesticides off farm.

Legacy in BMP

Allan codified the findings from this research into the first iteration of the BMP Manual, which was published in 1997, just in time to support growers to manage a new challenge when endosulfan was detected in Australian beef exports to Japan.

“This was a great example of the strength of our evidence-based industry. The development of BMP meant that in 1998 the industry was able to quickly and robustly demonstrate its ability to take responsibility and improve how pesticides were managed,” Allan said.

“This allowed the industry to maintain access to endosulfan as a relatively effective and certainly low-cost option and helped the industry recover reputationally.”

Allan grew up amongst pioneers of the cotton industry in the Namoi Valley. Pictured is dad Richard developing their farm.

Bringing the research to industry at the biennial ACGRA Australian Cotton Conference was another of Allan's tasks.

Developing best management

This year's conference marked 30 years since his first conference presentation when he introduced the BMP program. The 2026 session was titled '30 years of Transgenic Cotton'. Allan said that the success of the first transgenic variety, Ingard, was built on the active involvement and investment of growers in setting priorities for R&D from the early 1970s.

"In 1973, ACGRA instituted and collected a voluntary levy of 25 cents a bale. The Association took direct responsibility for determining research priorities and distributing that levy as additional research funding," Allan explained.

"It did this until 1982, when following ACGRA lobbying, the levy was raised to one dollar per bale and matched by Commonwealth funding. This saw the introduction of a formal body, the Cotton Research Committee (now CRDC), to administer the research funds, and ACGRA's role became advisory."

Since 1990, CRDC has been responsible for administering the grower and Commonwealth funds, with Cotton Australia as the advisory organisation following its merger with ACGRA in 2010.

"A defining strength of the Australian cotton industry is its collaborative approach to RD&E. Growers have always been at the centre of this system, identifying priorities, shaping investments, hosting trials, contributing data and adopting new knowledge and technologies," Allan told the conference audience.

"Research and development is not just a scientific exercise. The success of the industry is in no small part based on the willingness of cotton growers to take risks and trial new technology. When we look back on early innovations, I can see that Australia's cotton researchers were demonstrating systems thinking decades before it became a buzzword."

Taking on a global initiative

After 11 years working for ACGRA and BMP, Allan took up a role in 2005 with the global Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) as a Senior Agronomic Advisor, leading the development of a global definition for sustainable cotton production, and expanding his cotton farming perspective to locations including Brazil, West Africa, India and Pakistan.

Over the next seven years he played an integral role in defining 'Better Cotton', developing the Better Cotton system from scratch into the world's largest environmental standard for cotton,

Allan has laid the foundations for sustainability both domestically and globally. As Chair of SEEP he has presented at several ICAC Plenary Meetings, including Greece in 2014.



the Better Cotton Initiative, employing over 200 people and working with more than two million farmers. Around 20 per cent of the world's cotton is now grown under the Better Cotton standard.

Allan's contribution helped ensure global standards were science based, practical and informed by real farming systems. Australian growers directly benefit from Allan's farmer-focused approach by receiving a premium for BCI-certified cotton. An important (albeit unstated) part of the role with Better Cotton was helping to educate and inform retailers and brands about the realities of cotton farming.

"While working for Better Cotton, I developed new relationships with unfamiliar cultures in India, Pakistan, West Africa, Brazil and Europe," Allan said.

"I also developed an appreciation for diversity in farming perspectives, from small subsistence farmers in south Asia to large, mechanised farms in Brazil."

It was during this time that CRDC's then Executive Director Bruce Finney nominated Allan for membership to SEEP, an expert panel created by the International Cotton Advisory Committee to provide advice on the Social, Environmental and Economic Performance of cotton. In his role as chair over two decades, Allan helped to shape sustainability indicators that influence how cotton production is measured and improved worldwide.

After seven years of extensive travel with BCI, Allan chose to shorten his commute and in 2012 moved to CRDC as an R&D Manager. He became General Manager for R&D in 2019 and Executive Director in March 2024.

Reflecting on his time in the industry, Allan said while some things have changed dramatically, the process of removing cotton from the plant still uses spindles and doffers. But the importance of people in the system hasn't changed, and he applauds the increase in the numbers of women in the industry.

"The culture of collaboration has also been just as important to the industry's success as any individual technology or scientific breakthrough. Lasting progress rarely comes from a single innovation. More often, it comes from sustained investment in research, a willingness to tackle difficult problems, and growers being prepared to test, challenge and adopt new ideas.

"This is a characteristic that has long set Australian cotton apart. Our growers are not



passive recipients of research outcomes; they are active participants in shaping the direction of research itself.

"Among the many things I will take away from my time in cotton is the industry's respect for research and the willingness of growers to engage with it. Few industries maintain such strong connections between those generating knowledge and those applying it.

"Whether through on-farm trials, countless conversations in paddocks and meeting rooms, CottonInfo, or the Australian Cotton Conference – which started as a pure research conference in 1982 – the industry has consistently demonstrated the value of bringing researchers and growers together.

"The achievements discussed at this year's Conference are not the work of any one person or organisation. They reflect the efforts of many people over many years. Researchers, growers, consultants, extension specialists, industry bodies and tech providers have all contributed to building an industry that is recognised globally for its innovation, productivity, quality and willingness to embrace change.

"I am grateful for the support of many people (too many to mention here) and the opportunities I have been given over the last 30 years, and I know I leave the industry in great shape."

As he steps down from his role as CRDC Executive Director, Allan says R&D is not just a scientific exercise: industry success is largely dependent on the willingness of cotton growers to take risks and trial new technology.

"A defining strength of the Australian cotton industry is its collaborative approach to RD&E."



The industry highlights RD&E, and celebrates its achievements and its people at the biennial Conference.

Attendance record broken at 2026 Cotton Conference

The 2026 Australian Cotton Conference showed that support for the industry continues to grow, with 3070 registered delegates making it the biggest yet, and the program embodying the optimism, innovation, science and camaraderie of the people involved in Australian cotton.

Held from 4-6 August at the Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre at Broadbeach (Bundjalung country), the Conference featured three days of learning, networking, celebration and practical discussion around this year's theme, *'Future Fit Cotton'*.

CRDC returned as a Foundation Sponsor with Cotton Seed Distributors (CSD), joining Cotton Australia and the Australian Cotton Shippers Association (ACSA) in bringing the event to life once again.

Conference Chair Gus O'Brien, a Cotton Australia Board Director and cotton grower from Warren NSW (Wiradjuri country) said the scale and spirit of the event reflected the strength of the industry.

"To say I'm proud to be part of this industry is an understatement," Gus said.

"People say there's no other ag conference like it in the world, and we proved this right once again.

"Thank you to everyone who attended, for your engagement in the sessions, your energy and your enthusiasm. And a huge thanks to our volunteer committee and team, who did so much heavy lifting behind the scenes."

Future fit cotton

Under the theme *Future Fit Cotton*, the Conference explored how Australian cotton can adapt, innovate and thrive in a changing production, market and policy environment, while continuing to build its reputation as a sustainable, high-quality fibre of choice.

Across 29 sessions and six workshops, more than 150 presenters tackled the issues that matter most on farm and across the wider supply chain, including productivity, risk, sustainability, markets, traceability, digital agriculture, soils and water stewardship, workforce and community wellbeing, market access and the role of science and policy in shaping the industry's future.

Around one third of the speakers discussed CRDC-supported RD&E, covering topics such as weeds and soil health, natural capital, biodiversity and workforce. Disease was covered in a specific Australian Cotton Disease Collaboration (the ACDC) session in the aptly named the ACDC Plenary which seated 650 and was packed full for many of the presentations.

The 11 innovations supported by CRDC's Innovation Call also featured strongly, with a dedicated space in the trade hall via CRDC's Innovation Alley, and a pitch session in the agenda.

The program brought voices from inside and outside agriculture to the stage, with sessions featuring business, leadership, market and wellbeing perspectives, including entrepreneur Mark Bouris, former Australian women's cricket captain Alyssa Healy, ANZ's Head of Geopolitical Risk Cameron Mitchell and TradeMutt/This is a conversation starter (TIACS) founders Daniel Allen and Edward Ross, alongside growers, researchers and supply chain experts.

Digging deep for mental health support

Good mental health is a key part of being future fit and this year, Beyond Blue was the industry's chosen charity, with a record \$41,000 raised through the auction held during Thursday's lunchbreak. TradeMutt shirts were also sold prior to and during the Conference to raise awareness for mental health. ACSA and Conference Secretariat Tracey Byrne-Morrison said 1100 shirts had been ordered, and were all snapped up.

"The support for our charities through the auction has once again been a credit to the industry, so thank you to those who donated from the Trade Hall or put their hand up to purchase," Tracey said.

"Needless to say the support for the TradeMutt shirts was unbelievable, and we were still sending to people all over cotton-growing regions after Conference.

"Getting more than 1100 shirts out into our communities could spark the same number of



conversations, along with the funds directed toward support for mental health."

The Conference culminated in the 2026 Australian Cotton Industry Awards, celebrating the achievements and contributions of growers, innovators, leaders and researchers (see story page 28).

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay said the Conference was a powerful reminder of the value of bringing growers, researchers, supply chain partners, brands, retailers and regional communities together in conversation.

"By bringing people together across the supply chain, we're helping the industry make more informed decisions and tell a stronger story for Australian cotton," Adam said.

"While the formal sessions delivered headline speakers, research updates and expert debate, some of the most valuable moments happened between sessions, over coffee, in the aisles of the Trade Hall and Innovation Alley, and in conversations between old friends, new connections and people comparing notes from different regions and parts of the supply chain."

Presentations are now available on the Australian Cotton Conference website under the program tab. Photos taken by photographer-in-residence, *Spotlight's* own Melanie Jenson, are available via Flickr.

And one for the diary – the date has been set for the 2028 Conference on August 1-3 2028, so mark it in your calendars!

The chosen charity this year was Beyond Blue, with more than \$41,000 raised through generous donations from businesses and the spirited bidding of delegates.

For more

www.australiancottonconference.com.au

www.flickr.com/photos/australiancottonconference



Scan here

to see delegates' biggest takeaways from the speakers and sessions.

Taking the road to success through an alley of innovation

Thinkers, creators and developers brought together by CRDC's Innovation Call were on show in Innovation Alley at the 2026 Australian Cotton Conference, where delegates could give practical feedback on their ideas to address nitrogen use, weed management and creating a low-pesticide use future. The 11 innovators were also involved in a dedicated session to pitch their projects.

Through the Innovation Call, CRDC has provided \$50,000 to 11 successful applicants to support feasibility studies into their innovations. Those judged most successful by CRDC will receive further funding of up to \$500,000 to take their innovation to the proof-of-concept stage.

CRDC Innovation Call project lead Chris Murphy said Innovation Alley gave participants the perfect opportunity to understand in more detail the practicalities of cotton production and where their innovation could add most value. Conference delegates were invited to provide feedback on the innovations, highlighting a desire for further research, stronger on-farm validation, clear economic benefits, and practical pathways to support grower adoption.

Will Lane of Growth Agriculture during the Innovation Call pitch session. He says Innovation Alley and the session "put us in front of the people we most want to talk to".



"Innovators really appreciated the chance to talk directly to growers and agronomists for specific feedback on their ideas," Chris said.

"They made useful connections with agribusinesses to potentially test and trial technology.

"And as this is the first time all 11 innovators had come together, Innovation Alley opened up avenues for co-collaboration."

One of the innovators, Growth Agriculture, is looking to develop its innovation to create a fertiliser circular economy by taking farm and food waste and turning it into slow-release fertiliser that feeds cotton and reduces carbon emissions. Its pelletised biosolids and meat processing waste is undergoing testing in the lab and field as part of its feasibility study.

Growth Agriculture's Will Lane was at Conference to pitch the innovation.

"The energy across the whole event was unmatched in my time in the industry," Will said.

"Innovation Alley in particular had a great buzz to it. There was a steady stream of people through the whole time, so we rarely had a quiet moment.

"What I got the most out of though was seeing what everyone else is working on. There's a lot of clever thinking happening in this industry and being in the middle of it for a few days gave me plenty to take home and think on."

Innovation Alley offered the perfect opportunity for discussions.

"It put us right in front of the people we most wanted to talk to," Will said.

"The feedback was very valuable. Hearing straight from growers, agronomists and industry about what they're seeing in their own paddocks is worth more than almost anything else.

"It helped us sharpen how we talk about what we do and focused us on the real problems.

"Growth Agriculture's background is in foliar nutrition and integrated pest management, so having a spot where growers and agronomists could stop, ask questions and actually dig into the detail with us was ideal.

"The format made it easy to have proper conversations rather than quick hellos, and that's where the value is for a regionally-based company like ours.

"We have made great new contacts across growers, agronomists, researchers and industry. That side of it alone made the trip worthwhile."



The CRDC Innovation Call was developed by CRDC Acting General Manager of Innovation Susan Maas and Senior Innovation Broker Dr Nicola Cottee.

Nicola said there were several drivers for the Innovation Call scope and process.

“We had a great experience with the Australian Government’s Business Research and Innovation Initiative (BRII) project, when they accepted the cotton industry challenge to alleviate spray drift, so modelled our innovation call off their process,” she said.

“The result saw Australian regionally-based farmer-led business SwarmFarm Robotics along with INCYT awarded \$1 million each to work on their respective technology to reduce spray drift.

“Susan and I also attended a Beanstalk pitch event and Evoke Ag where most of the innovators said for the next step, they just wanted a bit of time and money to test their innovations on farm.

“So the CRDC Innovation Call is for short projects that are specifically designed to test the feasibility of their innovations in cotton.

“The focus areas — preparing for a low-pesticide future, optimising nitrogen use and improving weed management — allowed us to broaden the call and attracted a greater number of small projects, rather than trying to pick a winner

“The feedback was very valuable. Hearing straight from growers, agronomists and industry about what they’re seeing in their own paddocks is worth more than almost anything else.”

with a large investment from the outset.”

Susan said CRDC’s role is to help connect great ideas with industry challenges, bring the right people together, and create pathways for research and innovations to move more quickly from concept to impact.

“The traditional journey from research and innovation to adoption and impact can be long, but through initiatives like the Innovation Call we are deliberately exploring new approaches that can shorten that journey and deliver benefits to growers sooner,” Susan said.

“Innovation does not happen in isolation. The best ideas need partners, investors, researchers, growers, agronomists and industry champions.

“That is why networking events like Conference and Innovation Alley are so important, and there’s no better example of the impact than CRDC’s 2018 Innovation Alley which featured SwarmFarm Robotics.

“At that stage SwarmFarm were an emerging technology company with a bold vision.

“SwarmFarm founder Andrew Bate said that during that 2018 Conference, thanks to the opportunity afforded to them by CRDC and Innovation Alley, they sold their first five robots. Today SwarmFarm is recognised as a global leader in agricultural robotics.

“It’s a great reminder that innovation often starts with a conversation, a connection, or an opportunity to showcase a new idea to the right audience.”

CRDC’s Innovation Alley gave Conference delegates and the innovators valuable opportunities for interaction and feedback on their projects.

For more

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Making decisions about crop nitrogen needs in real time

CREATING a decision-support tool that uses satellite images and weather data to optimise nitrogen use efficiency is how a research team at the University of New England (UNE) proposed to answer CRDC's Innovation Call.

The team, led by Associate Professor James Brinkhoff at UNE's Applied Agricultural Remote Sensing Centre, is one of 11 innovators chosen to receive up to \$50,000 from CRDC to undertake a feasibility study. The study has now been completed, developing multiple real-time indicators of a crop's nitrogen status and fertiliser needs, opening the door to optimisation.

The UNE team tested the technology under commercial cotton farming conditions across several farms and regions, equating to more than 400 fields, using grower feedback and industry data to refine the dashboard to deliver against real farm management needs.

"Our study provides evidence that a scalable, real-time cotton monitoring platform is feasible and valued by industry, and that the most credible pathway to nitrogen optimisation is through the combined use of crop growth tracking, yield-nitrogen response modelling and spatial variability layers," James said.

"The longer-term goal is to provide farmers with clear, live information about crops, enabling data-driven fertiliser decisions that boost efficiency, profitability and environmental outcomes."

Building on technology already adopted by the rice industry, the team combined satellite images with local weather and field-level data — such as paddock maps, fertiliser rates, and previous yields — to track cotton crop growth and nitrogen status against regional benchmarks.

"We want to create decision tools that help cotton farmers hit their yield targets efficiently," James said.

"Nitrogen plans are typically developed pre-season based on soil tests, field history and yield expectations, but there is an opportunity to optimise planned in-season applications using indicators of crop status.

"Some growers use simple visual



UNE's Associate Professor James Brinkhoff pictured in Innovation Alley at this year's Australian Cotton Conference. Read more about the Conference and Innovation Alley in this edition.

inspection or in-field sampling like petiole testing to guide mid-season nitrogen applications, however these tests are sensitive to methodology, time-consuming and costly, and don't represent in-field variability.

"A promising model we've developed, based on a significant dataset contributed by growers and consultants, estimated the marginal yield response to additional nitrogen by first flower that is dependent on canopy status. This has resulted in the development of a practical in-season decision tool about where additional nitrogen is most likely to benefit yield and efficiency."

Once all 11 Innovation Call participants have completed their feasibility study, the call will move to round two: proof of concept. Some of the innovators will be selected to continue to this second round.

"Taking our innovation to the next phase — a proof of concept — would involve in-crop use in commercial fields, combined with nitrogen strip trials replicated across regions/seasons and varieties where feasible to validate yield-nitrogen models, quantify uncertainty, and demonstrate economic value," James said.

According to CRDC Innovation Broker

Dr Nicola Cottee, the Innovation Call is about "getting the tech into the hands of farmers."

"We know from attending and supporting previous ag-tech start up events such as AgriFutures Australia's Evoke Ag that innovators and researchers want to test their ideas and technology on farm as a next step but don't always have strong connections with growers and consultants across agriculture. We applied these learnings to our Innovation Call, to help create those connections," she said.

"This particular project is a fantastic example of the power of industry collaboration.

"CRDC heard from the Grower Panels that they want more RD&E on 'getting nitrogen right' and this project is a good assessment of whether real-time remote sensing can actually help growers to achieve that, or at least be confident in their decisions."

For more

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Radford Agriculture's Patrick Montgomery at Etta Plains Station with Qld DPI's Broadacre Cropping Director Mark Hickman.

Creating cohesive farming systems in north Qld to unlock productivity

A \$5.3 million partnership between the cotton and grains industries and the Queensland government has been launched to drive the expansion of profitable broadacre cropping systems in northwest Queensland.

The initiative, *Unlocking Farming Systems for North Queensland*, sees CRDC, the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) and Qld DPI joining forces to drive the growth of sustainable broadacre cropping in the Flinders and Gilbert regions.

The initiative aims to boost production of cotton to 100,000 bales and annual grain and pulse production to \$100 million

in value by 2035.

The project will initially focus on improving the viability of cotton and grains in the upper and lower Flinders River catchments, where broadacre cropping currently contributes around \$13.2 million in gross value of production.

The region, best known for cattle production, includes the townships of Hughenden, Richmond and Julia Creek. This work will be followed by a focus on the Gilbert River catchment to the north, where experts believe there is significant growth potential.

While cotton is currently grown in the region, and there is targeted R&D,

infrastructure such as a cotton gin is needed to give confidence for expansion by current and potential new growers.

Qld DPI has begun working with growers and agronomists in the regions to develop agronomy tactics that optimise productivity in a pioneering production environment.

Qld Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon. Tony Perrett MP, said the initiative would accelerate agricultural opportunities.

"If we can expand our cropping opportunities through better techniques, optimised production methods, and more efficient use of resources, we will open up a whole new region for farming," Minister Perrett said.

"We're looking at place-based and co-designed RD&E that will generate practical, data-driven insights and enable producer learning.

"This is a science-led approach to identifying new opportunities and growing

"These investments focus on collaboration and regional impact, ensuring we move away from isolated research efforts toward a cohesive, varied, profitable and sustainable system that benefits the region."

our agricultural sector in a really smart, research-based way.”

The project will focus on six targeted investment areas:

- ◆ Technical review and industry co-design
- ◆ Advancing cotton-dominant farming systems
- ◆ Advancing grain-dominant farming systems
- ◆ Developing new farming frontiers
- ◆ System modelling, economic and risk analysis
- ◆ Emerging production issues.

CRDC Managing Director Dr Georgina Pengilley said supporting sustainable development in northern Australia was a key priority for CRDC and she welcomed another opportunity to join with GRDC to advance production.

“This partnership is an important collaboration, investing in the people, RD&E, knowledge and regional capability to support the long-term success of cotton and grain industries in north Queensland,” she said.

“Research is critical to helping growers unlock new opportunities and ensuring development is productive, profitable and sustainable.”

GRDC Managing Director Nigel Hart said with the right systems in place, Northern Queensland presented a significant opportunity to grow Australia’s grains and cotton industries.

“This partnership will focus on real-world solutions to help growers manage risk, make better decisions, and build productive, resilient farms for the future,” he said.

“Our role is to ensure research is grounded in grower needs and delivers real on-farm impact in the north.”

The investment builds on other CRDC collaborative RD&E investments in Northern Australia, including the Cotton Grains Cattle (CGC) project delivered by the Cooperative Research Centre for Northern Australia (CRCNA), with support from CRDC and GRDC.

The CGC collaboration highlighted the importance of integrated ag systems and found that the greatest RD&E investment value is achieved when cropping is coordinated with existing activities, such as beef production.

CRDC’s Acting General Manager of Innovation, Susan Maas oversees



Work is already underway on this major collaboration, meeting with growers in the regions to hear about their priorities and opportunities first-hand.

investments in Northern Australia.

“These investments focus on collaboration and regional impact, ensuring we move away from isolated research efforts toward a cohesive, varied, profitable and sustainable system that benefits the region,” she said.

“CRDC has a long history of supporting research in Northern Australia. Learnings from this work have been published by CRDC and CottonInfo via the *NORpak* guidelines, and, more recently, in the *Cotton Production for Northern Australia* manual, compiled by Qld DPI’s Dr Paul Grundy, our CottonInfo Technical Lead for Northern Australia.

“As part of the CGC project, the 2025 Northern Australia Climate Analysis co-authored by Paul highlighted the different opportunities and challenges in North Queensland, and the new *Unlocking Farming Systems for North Queensland* project is structured to build on past work and alongside industry development.

“It will start with a review phase to identify priorities, existing knowledge

and capability gaps, ensuring future investments remain targeted, relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of growers and the broader industry.

“The project team have already started engaging with growers and the challenges and opportunities they face on the ground.”

She said challenges remained outside of RD&E which were common to emerging industries in new areas, including transport and distance to ginning facilities.

“Ultimately, this work is about giving growers and industry the evidence, confidence and practical pathways needed to build a viable northern farming system — one that fits the region, supports investment, and can grow sustainably over time.”

For more

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Take action now to prevent harm on our farms

MACHINERY incidents, falls and manual handling continue to cause serious injuries and deaths across Australia's cotton and grain industries, highlighting simple areas where action can prevent harm.

Analysis of national work health and safety injury, fatality and workers' compensation data shows 46 people lost their lives working in the cotton and grains industries between 2019 and 2025, with an estimated economic cost of \$125.8 million. Workers' compensation claims cost both industries a further \$64.3 million across 2021-22 and 2023-24.

The data, compiled through the Ag Safety Data Net project on behalf of CRDC and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), has identified three clear priorities for improving on-farm safety outcomes: improving machinery and vehicle safety, preventing falls, and reducing manual handling-related injuries.

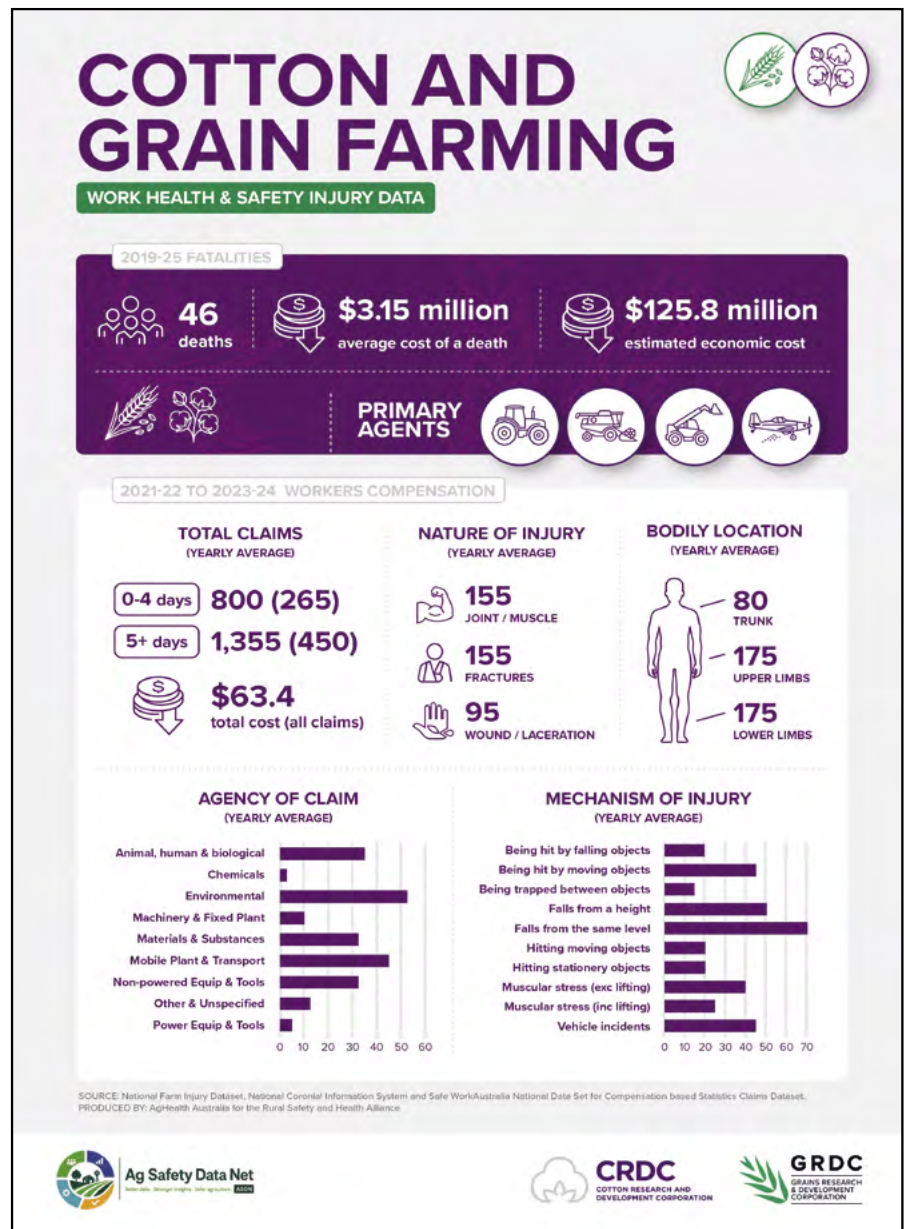
Other key findings include:

- Vehicle and machinery-related incidents remain a significant contributor to fatalities, with tractors, harvesting machines and telehandlers the primary agents involved.
- An average of 1355 workers compensation claims each year resulted in five or more days off work.
- Falls, particularly falls on the same level, are among the most common mechanisms of injury, highlighting the risks associated with uneven ground surfaces, farm infrastructure and routine work activities.
- Vehicle incidents and being hit by moving objects are also among the leading causes of injury.
- Environmental hazards, including exposure to heat, dust and challenging terrain, can increase injury risks.

Ag Safety Data Net operational lead, Kerri-Lynn Peachey, said the findings provided growers and farm businesses with practical guidance on where to focus their safety efforts.

"These findings reveal three clear priorities for safety improvements across the cotton and grains industries: improving machinery and vehicle safety, preventing falls, and reducing manual handling-related injuries," she said.

"Every injury prevented makes



a difference, not only for the person involved but also for the productivity and resilience of farming businesses.

"By focusing on the risks that are causing the greatest number of injuries and fatalities, growers can take practical steps to improve safety outcomes for themselves, their families and their workers."

To support these conversations, CRDC and GRDC have developed a practical summary of the findings, highlighting the key risks and opportunities to improve safety performance on farm.

The Ag Safety Data Net project is an

initiative of the Rural Safety and Health Alliance (RSHA), a collaboration of nine research and development corporations including CRDC and GRDC that invest in work health and safety research.

For more

www.crdc.com.au/three-preventable-risks



The latest Sustainability Report shows growers are using a range of methods to improve soil health.

Annual data provides insights for growers and surety for customers

The annual Australian Cotton Industry Sustainability Report was released at this year's Australian Cotton Conference.

The latest report provides a summary of the industry's progress for the 2024-25 year across its most important topics from the industry's PLANET (environment), PEOPLE (social) and PADDOCK (economic) pillars.

PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK. is the Australian cotton industry's framework to manage sustainability. The annual sustainability report transparently communicates positive and negative trends enabling growers and industry to manage risks and opportunities.

This information is increasingly important in supporting farm productivity, profitability and sustainability, which in turn impacts market access and protects the value of Australian cotton, as customers, brands, governments and others seek reliable evidence of responsible production practices.

Sustaining regional economies

The report shows good seasonal conditions and a large area planted to cotton in 2024-25, with about 5.4 million bales harvested at a value of \$3.1 billion. Of this, 67 per cent (or \$2.1 billion) is estimated to flow back into the Australian economy through the purchase of goods and services, employee wages, taxes and capital payments.

Importantly, much of this value stays in the regional economies where cotton is grown.

The report also shows that water use efficiency improved slightly on the previous year, but the long-term trend remains the same: about 50 per cent less water is used to grow a bale of cotton in most seasons, compared to 1997.

Similarly, average industry net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per kilogram of picked cotton lint remained steady at 1.05 kg CO₂e. Irrigated GHG intensity was 1.01 kg CO₂e, and rainfed intensity was 1.3 kg CO₂e. Optimising nitrogen use efficiency and reducing diesel use can reduce input costs and emissions significantly, as these are two major sources of cotton production GHGs.

Using a range of soil health and agronomy practices also reduces inputs and increases climate resilience, with the Sustainability Report showing soil health is front of mind for growers: 93 per cent used two or more 'regenerative' soil health practices in 2025. Soil health practices such as conserving crop residues, minimum tillage and rotation systems are widely used.

Adding value for growers

Australian cotton industry sustainability adviser Chris Cosgrove said releasing an annual report was one part of the cotton industry's plan to add value for Australian cotton growers.

"Sustainability is all about managing the social, economic and environmental risks and opportunities involved in growing cotton," Chris said.

“Our PLANET. PEOPLE. PADDOCK. Sustainability Framework follows a structured process to monitor, identify and prioritise current and future risks and opportunities, coordinate a whole-of-industry response to manage what matters, and measure progress and impacts.

“We keep the report as concise as we can to minimise the resources needed to produce it, but it follows the structure that our brand, investor and other stakeholders expect to see in a sustainability report.

“The report is an important tool to build industry trust and acceptance by providing a balanced assessment of the natural, human and economic resources we rely on to grow cotton, and the positive or negative impacts cotton production has on these resources.”

Community trust in agriculture research, conducted annually by CRDC, shows trust and acceptance of the cotton industry can be influenced by greater transparency, accountability, awareness, and evidence of environmental management. To support this transparency, the report draws on data from across the cotton industry, including research investments, industry datasets and grower surveys. An accompanying online data pack provides links to data sources, methodologies and assumptions, and CRDC continues to work with industry partners to improve the quality, consistency and coverage of the data used to track sustainability performance.

Prioritising farm safety

The wellbeing of people on farms is integral to the success of any primary industry, however the report shows that the number of serious injuries on cotton farms has increased over the years 2019 to 2024 (see story page 17).

“Serious injuries on cotton farms increased from 50 in 2023 to 60 in 2024,” Chris said.

“We are working to source better data for measuring what matters on farms, how to attract new labour when needed, how to keep farmers and permanent employees, and how to ensure everyone on cotton farms is safe and skilled.

“Meeting legal requirements for labour standards in the workplace by using the extensive myBMP resources for guidance is a step we can take on farm to improve WHS outcomes.

“The cost of injury or death is great. Investing time and money in farm safety and personal skills development pays off.”

For more

www.australiancottonsustainability.org.au/reports

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High-quality decisions key to high performing cotton systems

THE third course in the suite of microcredentials offered via the CRDC Cotton Course is built around a simple principle: high-performing cotton systems are driven by high-quality decisions.

The *Advanced Cotton Production for Decision Makers* course is designed for growers, farm managers, agronomists and consultants with a foundation in cotton production looking to strengthen their strategic agronomic decision-making capability. The goal is to help participants develop cotton systems that are more resilient, more efficient and better prepared for future challenges, while delivering profitable and sustainable outcomes over the long term.

The course is the third offering in a suite of microcredential courses from CRDC in conjunction with the University of Sydney (USYD), Cotton Seed Distributors (CSD) and CottonInfo. The course will run from November (online) with an intensive school in Narrabri from February 2-4, 2027.

CSD's Technical Agronomy Lead Dr Mick Bange has been developing the CRDC-supported course in conjunction with Ian Simpson and Professor Stephen Cattle at USYD.

Mick has been a crop systems agronomist for more than 35 years. As a former Chief Scientist with CSIRO based at the Australian Cotton Research Institute, he led research into cropping systems, plant physiology/agronomy, water use efficiency, crop nutrition, climate change impacts, and fibre quality initiatives across the value chain. During this time, he's gained valuable insights from cotton systems across the world.

“Successful cotton production is not simply about understanding agronomy, it is about making sound decisions in complex production systems where opportunities, constraints, risks and uncertainty must be constantly balanced,” Mick said.

“As cotton production systems become increasingly complex, the difference between good and exceptional outcomes is rarely access to more information. Rather, it is the ability to bring knowledge, experience, data, and practical insight together to make better decisions that improve system performance over the long term.

“This course moves beyond individual agronomic practices and technical recommendations to explore how decisions influence the entire cotton production system.”

Participants will be challenged to think critically about how decisions relating to nutrition, irrigation, varieties, crop protection and agronomic management interact to influence productivity, profitability, risk, efficiency and sustainability.

The focus will be not simply on what decision to make, but why it should be made and what consequences it may have across the broader farming system. A key feature of the course is the opportunity for participants to bring their production challenges or agronomic questions, working alongside fellow participants and industry leaders to analyse real-world constraints, test ideas, challenge assumptions and explore practical solutions.

“Importantly, this is not a course that provides simple answers to complex questions,” Mick says, “Instead, it equips participants with the frameworks, knowledge and confidence needed to make better decisions in situations where multiple options may exist and uncertainty is unavoidable.

“Whether you are a grower looking to strengthen the strategic direction of your farming operation or an agronomist seeking to refine your advisory capability, this course will help you think differently about cotton production and the decisions that shape its success.”

For more

www.crdc.com.au/crdc-cotton-course

When CRDC became a founding stakeholder of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation in 1992, it encapsulated this quote in the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP)'s Course 1 Directory: *“Successful corporations don’t wait for leaders to come along; they actively seek out people with leadership potential and expose them to career experiences designed to develop that potential.”*

New leadership scholarship trial to support diverse leaders

The cotton sector was one of the first commodity groups to commit to the flagship ARLP, designed to create leadership capability across the Australian Research and Development Corporations, and CRDC funding guaranteed the participation of candidates from the industry.

In the 34 years since, CRDC and other cotton industry sponsors have collectively supported 49 leaders to undertake the ARLP.

During that time, the number of leadership programs supported by CRDC has also grown. CRDC currently supports a number of leadership initiatives: the Australian Future Cotton Leaders Program, the ARLF's flagship ARLP and TRAIL Emerging Leaders Programs, and Nuffield Australia scholarships.

A recent review has informed the structure of an additional new trial approach for this year that will funnel applicants towards the leadership and development opportunities best aligned with their industry leadership aspirations, career stage and personal circumstances.

Open to growers, researchers, extension staff and other industry contributors, CRDC's trial Leadership Development Scholarship will run in 2026-27 and provide funding for individuals to undertake opportunities that align with both their personal development goals and the future needs of the cotton industry.

Scholarships of \$2000 to \$25,000 will be available to support approved activities.

“The Leadership Development Scholarship is a short trial of a potential new CRDC approach to leadership investment. Where in the past we have identified programs to support and then found participants, the aim of this trial is to flip this approach – to invite interested individuals to apply with a specific program they have in mind that they would like to complete,” CRDC Managing Director Dr Georgina Pengilley said.

“The aim is to provide flexibility and accessibility for participants and support the development of leaders across different career stages and sectors.

“We are particularly interested in developing

diverse leaders with the skills and knowledge to lead positive change.”

Priority leadership areas for CRDC include sustainability and natural capital, profitability, innovation, industry culture, research and development, workforce capability, diversity and inclusion, and cultural change.

The trial also includes a dedicated focus on strengthening capacity in research and extension.

Under the new trial, CRDC's Leadership Development Scholarships may be awarded to individuals at any stage of their leadership journey, including emerging leaders keen to develop foundational leadership capabilities, experienced leaders looking to increase their impact and influence, and strategic or senior leaders seeking to drive change across organisations, industries and communities.

Eligible programs and activities include the existing programs that CRDC supports, and importantly, also a wide range of additional opportunities – accredited or non-accredited programs, coaching/mentoring or short courses. Provided the program or activity aligns with both the participant and industry needs, CRDC will actively consider it in assessing applications.

The funding on offer is not limited to the program itself – applicants can approach CRDC to cover associated costs, including domestic or international travel and accommodation. CRDC encourages co-investment from the applicant, their employer or a third party to maximise the impact of the scholarship funds.

Scholarship applications are open from September 28 to November 6, 2026. Check the CRDC website and social media for more details.

For more

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How can we attract and keep young people in cotton?

Prioritising hands-on experience and showcasing career diversity to young people are two key strategies that could help solve the cotton industry's workforce challenges.

The CRDC-supported project *How to attract and retain young people in cotton*, an initiative of CQUniversity's Agri-tech Education and Extension team, investigated how the industry could better engage young people across the educational stages, from high school through to university graduates and early-career researchers.

Project leader, CQUni's Professor Amy Cosby, said the industry is at a pivotal point. While cotton farms adopt advanced technologies from precision agriculture to AI-enabled analytics, the sector faces a persistent challenge in attracting and retaining the next generation of skilled workers.

"At present, only 25 per cent of the agricultural workforce is under 35, compared to 37 per cent across the broader Australian workforce," Amy said.

"Without stronger pathways for young people, the cotton industry risks workforce shortages, reduced innovation capacity, and diminished regional resilience.

"During the project we went directly to the source to capture feedback and information from university students regarding research careers and job attraction, and assessed the effectiveness of a high school pilot program in increasing knowledge of and interest in cotton careers.

"We held focus groups and interviews involving 93 university students, and ran a high school intervention trial involving 197 students across six schools in NSW and Queensland."

CRDC Innovation Broker Rachel Holloway said the project revealed several significant outcomes that will drive better recruitment of people into the cotton industry.

"Understanding how we are perceived by the people we are trying to attract is powerful knowledge and allows CRDC and Cotton Australia to better tailor our investment priorities," she said.

"The research highlights the need for coordinated action from universities, industry partners and policy makers to address barriers and promote research career pathways."

Barriers discouraging people from working in



University of Southern Queensland's (UniSQ) Isaac Halling has been supported by CRDC into a research career in cotton through Summer and Honours Scholarships and now a PhD project. Undertaken as part of the One Basin CRC program at UniSQ, he's investigating how emerging sensing technologies and field-based monitoring can improve irrigation decision-making, water use efficiency, and overall cotton production outcomes.

Isaac is pictured with his PhD supervisor and long-term cotton industry researcher, UniSQ's Associate Professor Joe Foley and fellow researcher Dr Jochen Eberhard.

Top 5 Recommendations

Prioritise hands-on experience

These are the most powerful engagers. Across high school, university and first roles after graduation, offer farm excursions, technology demonstrations and real world engagement.

Build partnerships

Connections, mentoring and professional development help build an educator's capacity to connect students with agriculture, a graduate's job skills, and researcher's capacity to support agricultural innovation.

Showcase career diversity

Make the range of cotton roles visible across the education spectrum.

Provide social & financial support for students and new workers

Provide financial support for excursions, attending conferences, relocation costs, and offer fair pay across internships to graduate positions.

Promote inclusive, progressive workplaces

Foster innovation, gender equity, sustainability, and welcoming cultures where young people feel they belong.

the cotton industry included limited career visibility, urban-rural disconnection, gender inequities and negative perceptions of regional living. However, hands-on agricultural experiences, supportive mentorship, and values alignment emerged as powerful enablers.

University graduates prioritised learner-friendly environments with mentorship, opportunities for career exploration before commitment, supportive

social networks and progressive leadership embracing innovation and inclusion on their employment wish-lists.

The project also considered the impact of advertisements on potential employees.

Students assessed visually appealing design, role clarity, salary transparency, cultural signals and trusted sources. Facebook emerged as the primary job search platform, with personal connections valued over traditional channels like LinkedIn. Graduates prioritised authentic information over polished recruitment agency ads.

Financial insecurity emerged as the primary barrier to students taking on higher research degrees in agriculture, with PhD stipends below minimum wage. Additional barriers included the perceived limited career value of research qualifications in agriculture, inadequate information about Higher Degree by Research (HDR) pathways, and the pressures of an academic workload. However, an intrinsic passion for research, direct exposure to research environments, and supportive supervisor relationships were successful motivations for students to take research pathways.

When it came to attracting high school students to cotton careers, farm excursions came up trumps.

"We got responses from 197 students across six schools assessing the impact of a teacher-led lesson using technology and a farm excursion," project researcher Dr Pat Colusso said.

The farm excursion proved most impactful, with 40 per cent of students reporting they knew 'a lot more' about cotton, compared to 19 per cent of students after the classroom lesson.

"The number of students agreeing that there are lots of different jobs in the cotton industry increased significantly across the interventions, and so did their positive perception of the industry's environmental management record," Pat said.

"Teachers reported increased confidence in teaching cotton concepts and strengthened industry networks, with the farm excursion providing the greatest professional development value."

For more

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Creating pathways to cotton careers

2026 AgriFutures Horizon scholars Annalise Magill and Sophie Jonsson were 'wrapped in cotton' at the recent Australian Cotton Conference, which they attended with support from CRDC.

The conference allowed the two university students to fully immerse themselves in the industry, the science and the people of cotton, with the goal of creating industry connections, finding work placements and linking up with mentors.

Each year, CRDC supports students to enter the AgriFutures Horizon scholarship program to build awareness of the diverse range of roles in the cotton industry, and to inspire them to view cotton as a rewarding career.

CRDC Innovation Broker Rachel Holloway oversees the program on behalf of the industry and works with students to organise work placements, build practical pathways and attract young people to cotton.

"It's not just about awareness. Young people want to feel valued and supported, and to identify a career path that matches their academic strengths while also reflecting their personal values, aspirations, sense of belonging and purpose," Rachel said.

"A common response from people who participate in CRDC-supported scholarships is that the support and the exposure to opportunities instils confidence and the tools to explore new pathways in cotton."

This type of support aligns with the recommendations from recent research by CQUniversity (see previous story) around what it takes to attract and keep young people in the industry.

2022 Horizon Scholar Ayla Christophers works as an agronomist in Western Australia. After graduating with a Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences from the University of Adelaide, Ayla wasted no time heading to Katherine in the Northern Territory (Jawoyn country) to take on an



2022 Horizon scholar Ayla Christophers is now working as an agronomist in cotton in WA and says the CRDC placements gave her great connections with people in the industry and helped land her first job as an agronomist.

agronomy role in dryland cotton. This year Ayla moved across the border to Kununurra in WA (Miriwoong country), to work on irrigated cotton for Cotton Grower Services.

A born and bred Territorian, Ayla is the first to acknowledge the Horizon Scholarship helped her find a home in cotton.

"I am passionate about the environment and tropical agricultural systems, and I said that after I finished my degree, I would love to use my knowledge to address issues in Northern Australia such as food security, climate change and the sustainability of agricultural practices," Ayla said.

"My placements through CRDC helped me meet people working in the industry and gave me great connections that helped me land my first job as an agronomist.

“I am an avid believer that science is one of the best ways to help people and the environment, and I’m very grateful to CRDC and AgriFutures for all the support they’ve provided during my studies and my career.”

Along with the Horizon Scholarships, CRDC creates opportunities for early career researchers, PhD and honours students to undertake cotton R&D projects, pairing them with established industry researchers.

“CRDC and the cotton industry are firm believers that people are our most important resource,” Rachel said.

Meet the Scholars

Annalise Magill is supported by CRDC through her 2026 Horizon Scholarship, coming to agriculture after growing up in the city. She says her wider family’s experience with dairy and citrus farming along with travelling through rural Australia fostered a deep respect for the role of farmers in supporting communities and the economy.

Studying Agricultural Science, majoring in Agricultural, Environmental and Resource Economics at The University of Sydney, Annalise is passionate about balancing environmental sustainability with food security and economic resilience.

Why did you apply for the scholarship, and what do you hope to take from it?

The scholarship was an opportunity to explore the different pathways I could take after university. I was really attracted to the combination of the placement opportunity and the chance to connect with industry professionals and gain a better understanding of where a career in agriculture could take me. I also really valued the connection the scholarship creates between participants. Agriculture is a relatively small cohort at university, so the opportunity to meet and learn from other like-minded students from across the industry really appealed to me. I hoped to broaden my horizons, build my industry network and learn from people with experiences different to my own.

How did you make your way into cotton?

I always joke that I didn’t choose cotton – cotton chose me! I was fortunate enough to volunteer with Cotton Australia at a forum in Sydney and things really snowballed from there. I attended the Australian Cotton Research Conference in Narrabri (Kamilaroi country) last year and was blown away by the community and the progress being made across the industry.

Coming from a city background, I wasn’t sure where I would fit in the cotton industry initially, but I’ve found the cotton community incredibly



welcoming. That’s been one of the things I’ve enjoyed most, everyone is so willing to share their knowledge and bring you into the conversation.

You’ve just attended your first Australian Cotton Conference. What was it like?

This was my fourth agriculture conference but first in cotton and certainly the biggest! It was fantastic to meet so many people I’d previously only communicated with online and finally put faces to names.

I also really enjoyed hearing from the trade show delegates about some of the technology and advancements coming through the industry. But for me, one of the best parts of conferences is the social side, being able to sit down over a coffee with people I haven’t seen for a while and having those informal conversations you don’t always get online.

It reinforced how connected and collaborative the cotton industry is, and how much opportunity there is for young people coming into the sector.

What type of role in the industry could you potentially see yourself in down the track?

I’m currently working as a junior economist and really enjoying it. I’d love to continue in a role that combines the technical and analytical side of economics with agriculture and grower-facing communication.

I’m particularly interested in commodity trading and market analytics, but I’m still exploring where I might ultimately end up. One of the things I’ve really valued about the Horizon Scholarship is having the opportunity to see the breadth of careers available in agriculture and realise there are so many different pathways I could take.

Annalise is already working with the cotton industry as a junior economist with Ag Econ, who prepare the annual Australian Cotton Industry Gross Margin Budgets among other industry studies and reports. Ag Econ principal climate analyst and economist Jon Welsh is also the CottonInfo Technical Lead for Climate, Carbon and Energy.

Practical experience a key attraction

Sophie Jonsson is being supported in her scholarship jointly by CRDC and GRDC. She is studying a Bachelor of Agronomy at the University of Queensland with a focus on crop production, soil health and sustainable farming systems. Growing up farming avocados, grain and cattle, has shaped Sophie's strong connection to agriculture and practical understanding of on-farm challenges.

Why did you apply for the scholarship, and what do you hope to take from it?

I applied because I saw it as an opportunity to step outside of what I already know and broaden my understanding of Australian agriculture.

Coming from a mixed farming background, I've grown up around agriculture, but I've always wanted to understand more about the different industries, the people behind them and where the opportunities lay for the future. I was particularly attracted to the industry connections and practical experience that come with the scholarship.

I want to build relationships with people across the industry, learn from those already working in it and gain a better understanding of where I could see myself contributing in the future. I think some of the most valuable learning happens outside the classroom, and the Horizon Scholarship gives me the chance to do that.

How did you make your way to cotton?

My connection to cotton has come through my broader interest in agronomy and crop production. I come from a farming background in Far North Queensland, where my family has experience across a range of crops such as avocados, corn, sorghum and livestock, including growing cotton for two years. That has given me a strong appreciation for the challenges farmers face and how important agronomy is to making a farming

system productive and sustainable.

Through university, my studies and now the Horizon Scholarship, I've had the opportunity to meet people involved in cotton research, agronomy and production and understand just how much innovation is happening within the industry.

What has stood out to me is how closely cotton brings together science, technology, agronomy and on-farm decision making. Everyone is always willing to take you and show you how great the industry is. I guess it feels almost like a second family. This is what has really caught my eye.

You've just come back from your first Australian Cotton Conference. What was it like?

It was a really valuable experience because it gave me the opportunity to meet people from so many different parts of the cotton industry. Coming in as a student, you can have an idea of what an industry is like from university, but actually being surrounded by growers, agronomists, researchers, industry representatives and other professionals gives you a completely different perspective.

What I probably enjoyed most was how willing people were to have a conversation and share their experiences. It also reinforced for me how inter-connected the industry is. There are so many different career paths within cotton, from agronomy and research through to technology, extension, business and management. It made me realise that there are a lot more opportunities within agriculture than just the roles you might initially think of.

What type of role in the industry could you potentially see yourself in down the track?

At this stage, I'm particularly interested in agronomy and working directly with growers. I really enjoy the technical side of agriculture, understanding soils, crop nutrition, crop production and how you can make better decisions on the farm. Long term, I could see myself building experience as an agronomist and then moving into more of a leadership or business-focused role. I'm still keeping an open mind about exactly where that takes me, which is one of the reasons the Horizon Scholarship has been so valuable. I'm getting the opportunity to explore different parts of the industry before I have to decide exactly what my career path will look like.

Applications for the 2027 AgriFutures Horizon Scholarship open in November 2026.



CRDC Innovation Broker Rachel Holloway, Sophie and GRDC Northern Region Grower Services Manager, Sally Dickinson at Conference.

For more

Rachel Holloway

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www.agrifutures.com.au/opportunities/

horizon-scholarship/

Changing lives and leadership in cotton with TRAIL

“Amazing!” is how CottonInfo Program Manager Janelle Montgomery described her time in the Training Rural Australians In Leadership (TRAIL) Emerging Leaders Program.

CRDC supported Janelle to attend TRAIL this year, along with the 2025 CRDC Chris Lehmann Young Cotton Achiever Awardee Grace Stewart (nee Griffiths), who described it as an unforgettable experience.

TRAIL is a cross-sector program delivered by the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation where participants spend eight days in the bush, largely disconnected from the world. Janelle and Grace agree that the experience pushed them right out of their comfort zones.

“Being in the wilderness for a week with 15 other people you’ve never met before is a real rollercoaster ride. It challenges you constantly,” Janelle said.

“They call it experiential learning, and rather than just hearing about leadership concepts, you live them. So you get to see, hear, try, fail, laugh, adapt, share and grow together.

“The relationships you build in that short time are unbelievable. No-one really understands unless you have done it or something similar before. It’s hard to explain.”

Grace attended with support from CRDC as a part of her Young Achiever Award. She is also a recent graduate of the Australian Future Cotton Leaders Program and has taken on leadership roles voluntarily across social media and in her local cotton organisations.

She says TRAIL offered a different perspective.

“I have been pretty lucky in that the courses I have done have been applicable to where I was in life at the time, in either business, career or volunteering with the CGA, for example,” Grace said.

“Future Cotton Leaders for me



was more about self-awareness and interpersonal skills, personality type, and how to work to everyone’s strengths.

“TRAIL was a lot more about personal growth, and made me think about how I show up in the world, in my work and community, and how that affects people. It was everything I thought it was going to be and so much more.

“I came out saying that I wish everyone I work and interact with could get to do that program. It is an opportunity that I will never forget and I will be eternally grateful for.”

Grace has urged employers to consider supporting people to attend.

“It is definitely something worth investing in for staff and upskilling leadership,” she said.

“What really resonated with me through both courses, and something I have tried to implement the best I can, is that leadership and management are two very different things.

“Leadership isn’t about being the one at the head of the table, and the best leadership normally happens in the back room, shaking hands, supporting and advocating for people.

“It’s about hearing opportunity, creating networks, mentoring and helping. Now I try to make a conscious decision to share what I have learned, as opposed to putting my hand up for everything. I want to empower other people by raising the tide to float all ships.

“TRAIL showed me that leadership isn’t

grand gestures or big roles – it’s how we act every day in the interactions we have.”

Janelle agreed.

“Leadership is so much more than being a CEO, a member of a Board or captain of a team,” she said.

“The program focused heavily on self-awareness, understanding your values, and developing skills that help you navigate both work and life.

“We learned so many things in that week, but what comes to mind first is that change is good, and that we need to have some disruption and change to keep growing.

“Building a high-performing team takes time and effort from everyone in that team, and it’s okay to just steer and not row.

“Another major takeaway was the importance of ‘Listen, listen, listen and then talk!’

“I’ve come into the course in my mid-50s, and while it’s never too late to learn, to have had the opportunity to do this as a 25 to 30-year-old would have been immensely valuable.

“The insights, confidence, and self-awareness I’ve gained would have provided a strong foundation for both personal and professional growth throughout my career.”

For more

www.rural-leaders.org.au/

trail-emerging-leaders-program/

Exercise strengthens cotton industry's biosecurity preparedness

Preparing for the possibility of an exotic pest incursion such as cotton boll weevil (*Anthonomus grandis*) requires ongoing testing and refinement of response arrangements. A biosecurity preparedness exercise, *Common Thread*, undertaken in July, provided an opportunity to test the industry's response and identify areas that could be further strengthened.

While Australia remains free of boll weevil, increasing global trade and the movement of people and goods mean the risk of an exotic incursion is ever present, and regular scenarios and exercises are designed to test the industry's preparedness.

As Australian cotton's number one exotic pest threat, an incursion of boll weevil could result in significant costs and production losses for growers, as well as increased insecticide use and more complex pest management. These impacts have been well demonstrated in countries where boll weevil is established such as Brazil.

Led by Cotton Australia with support from Plant Health Australia, CRDC and CottonInfo, *Common Thread* brought together government agencies, growers, consultants, researchers and CottonInfo Regional Extension Officers to test how they would work together during an emergency plant pest response.

Participants worked through a simulated boll weevil incursion, evaluating emergency response arrangements, information sharing between industry and government, and the *Australian Cotton Boll Weevil Contingency Plan*.

“The scenario identified the R&D gaps that we should look at to be better prepared for this threat.”

The exercise tested communications processes and resources to ensure growers and other stakeholders would receive timely, accurate and consistent information during a biosecurity emergency.

Cotton Australia Policy Officer for R&D and Stewardship, Doug McCollum, coordinated the exercise. He said it provided an opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities, test existing arrangements, and identify areas where coordination and preparedness could be further strengthened.

“There are some tweaks that can be made to the contingency plan and some specific action items that we can work on to be as well prepared as possible,” Doug said.

“One of the biggest strengths of the exercise was bringing growers, consultants, government agencies, researchers and industry organisations together, as the people who would be involved in a real incursion response.

“In a biosecurity emergency, those relationships and communication pathways are just as important as the technical response, so having everyone in the room helps ensure we understand each other's roles and can act quickly and consistently if the need ever arises.

“By continuing to build capability and capacity in planning and partnerships, the cotton industry is better positioned to respond effectively to an exotic pest incursion, to minimise disruption to growers, supply chains, and potential market access.”

Follow-up activities will now focus on refining the contingency plan, continuing discussions with regulators and the industry, and progressing research priorities, including identifying if research is needed to fill gaps in preparedness.

From blue disease to boll weevil...

CRDC continues to strengthen the industry's preparedness for biosecurity threats through study tours (see next story) and research to better understand pest biology and potential impacts.

CRDC Innovation Broker Shakira Johnson said *Common Thread* highlighted the difficulty in dealing with unknowns.

“For example, an incursion could have an unknown source. We could go through a whole process and if we couldn't identify the source, it could re-infest,” she said.

“The response is so complex because we are dealing with so many facets and people, from biology and science, to farmers, travellers, researchers, and so on. Logistically, it makes us wonder if we have enough traps, people to manage them, and systems in place to get the message out to people right across the industry.

“These regular exercises are very valuable in really testing our networks and CRDC will work with Cotton Australia to identify and address any research gaps.”

The previous cotton industry biosecurity exercise was Operation Blueprint, held in 2019, which focused on cotton blue disease.

CRDC Acting General Manager of Innovation Susan Maas attended both events, and said both exercises clearly reinforced that tackling any biosecurity incursion wouldn't be easy.

“I thought boll weevil would be easier to deal with than blue disease but it wasn't,” she said.

“What I took from that is how important preparedness is. One thing that can be done to give us some protection is to make sure on-farm biosecurity is up to scratch.

“This exercise makes me want to reinforce to everyone to ‘Come Clean. Go Clean’.



Bicoloured weevils (left) are smaller than the exotic cotton boll weevil at around three mm long, and have a distinctive two-toned appearance, with a reddish-orange head, thorax and legs contrasting with dark brown to black wing covers. **Cotton boll weevils (right)** are generally larger, around five to eight mm long, and are more uniformly greyish-brown to reddish-brown, with a longer, more prominent curved snout.

Australia's highest priority cotton biosecurity threat

The cotton boll weevil is Australian cotton's highest priority exotic insect pest threat.

This pest is established across Central and South America, where it has caused significant impacts to cotton production. It was the scourge of cotton growers in the United States where it caused substantial crop losses and control costs over more than a century following its arrival in the late 1800s. Large-scale area-wide eradication programs, which began in the late 1970s, have since eliminated the pest

from US cotton-growing regions.

For the Australian industry, Brazil provides a more contemporary example of the challenges posed by boll weevil. Its cotton industry faces many of the same production challenges as Australia's northern cotton regions, while also managing several pests and diseases not found in Australia, including boll weevil.

Adult cotton boll weevils are small reddish-brown beetles with a distinctive curved snout and a unique double-pointed spur on their front thighs. The

larvae develop and feed inside squares and bolls, causing young squares to shed and damages lint in older bolls. Cotton boll weevil can resemble some native species including the bicoloured weevil, which can feed within cotton crops in tropical regions. As a result, any unusual weevil activity, or insects not definitively identified as the native species must be reported immediately.

If you see anything unusual, call the Exotic Plant Pest hotline 1800 084 881 and contact your local CottonInfo Regional Extension Officer.

"If a pest can be contained, not transported by vehicles and machinery from farm to farm or anywhere else, it gives us a better chance of managing the incursion."

For growers keen to upgrade or implement an on-farm biosecurity strategy, key resources include the *myBMP* Biosecurity module, the Cotton Pest Management Guide, CottonInfo fact sheets, podcasts and articles, and via Qld DPI and CottonInfo Biosecurity Technical Lead, Sharna Holman-Buckley.

Exercise Common Thread was funded through the Queensland Biosecurity Boosts Program and Plant Health Australia.

For more

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Sharna Holman-Buckley

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Study tour boosts preparedness

To further help improve industry preparedness, CRDC supported a study tour to Brazil earlier this year. The group included CottonInfo Technical Leads Sharna Holman-Buckley and Paul Grundy from Qld DPI, consultants Jamie Street and Penny Goldsmith, and CSD Western Australia and Northern Territory Technical Agronomist Alex Roughley, supported by CSD.

This provided first-hand insight into crop protection affecting Brazil's cotton industry, including cotton boll weevil, along with other production challenges and opportunities relevant to tropical production systems.

"These insights help the Australian industry anticipate how pest, disease and production risks may evolve as northern cotton expands and better understand the potential implications should an exotic pest establish in Australia," Sharna said.

"Brazil has not eradicated boll weevil,

instead they are implementing a strict management approach. But it is still their primary pest, requiring an intensive year-round approach to manage populations.

"The study tour reinforced why Australia's strong biosecurity systems are so important.

"Seeing the impacts (and surveillance) of boll weevil first-hand highlighted the potential consequences if the pest were to arrive here and reinforced the value of preparedness, early detection of exotic pests and coordinated industry-government response planning.

"At the farm level, as far as is practicable, being aware of everything and everyone coming through the gate, with clear biosecurity procedures in place creates an extra level of protection. This is integral to any industry response which could be the difference between an incursion that can be controlled and the establishment of a new pest in the cotton industry."

Awards signal bright future from field to fabric

The Australian Cotton Industry Awards shine a spotlight on the people whose talent, commitment and dedication help the industry thrive. The 2026 awards were no exception, recognising outstanding contributions from across our cotton community.

The awards dinner is the culmination of the Australian Cotton Conference and is an opportunity to applaud the achievements and contributions of growers, innovators, leaders and researchers who go above and beyond to keep the industry moving forward.

The 2026 Australian Cotton Industry Award recipients are:

- ◆ Bayer Cotton Grower of the Year – Mitch and Mariah Brimblecombe and Linton and Melinda Brimblecombe, Moira Farming, Lockyer Valley Qld (Barunggam country).
- ◆ AgriRisk High Achiever of the Year – Rhys Herbert and Trish Carroll, Pastoral Properties (Cropping), Warra Qld (Barunggam country).
- ◆ CRDC Chris Lehmann Young Cotton Achiever of the Year – Alexandria Doyle, Grower Services Representative with Louis Dreyfus Company, Emerald Qld (Gayiri country).
- ◆ Cotton Seed Distributors (CSD) Researcher of the Year – Dr Katie Broughton, Research Scientist at CSIRO Agriculture and Food, Narrabri NSW (Kamilaroi country).
- ◆ John Deere Service to Industry Award: Allan Williams, outgoing CRDC Executive Director, Narrabri NSW; and posthumously to the late Elizabeth (Liz) Alexander, Emerald Qld.

The Brimblecombe family has farmed at Forest Hill in the Lockyer Valley for more than 100 years, with Moira Farming now operated by Mitch and Mariah Brimblecombe alongside Mitch's parents, Linton and Melinda.

Growing cotton in rotation with vegetable crops, the family combines a wealth of farming experience with a focus on continuous improvement, people and workplace culture. Moira Farming is *myBMP* certified and employs nine full-time staff and up to 50 seasonal workers during vegetable harvest.

The Brimblecombes are actively involved in cotton and vegetable research and trials, working with CSD, CSIRO, Qld DPI and Griffith University, while also running their own on-farm trials to support innovation and better decision making.

"The experiences of the past prompted us to consider cotton as a really good fit for the future of our business," Mitch Brimblecombe said.

"Diversification is important. Cotton is a less labour-intensive crop than vegetables and it's also a globally-traded commodity, which gives us risk diversity and an alternate cash flow.

"Often summer is a little quieter for vegetable production, whereas that's when cotton production ramps up and we can keep our machinery and staff going and our land working for us.

"The positivity and the sustainability of cotton makes it a wonderful industry to be a part of and it's an honour to be named the 2026 Bayer Cotton Grower of the Year."

AgriRisk High Achievers Rhys Herbert and Trish Carroll from Pastoral Properties (Cropping) have increased cotton yields by around two bales per hectare over the past five years on their large-scale irrigated and dryland operation, and improved fibre quality through better planting timing and careful variety selection.

Pastoral Properties' integrated weed management strategy includes camera spraying to improve accuracy and reduce chemical use, and they've recently become *myBMP* certified.

The business has a strong focus on workplace culture and the flexibility to adapt to changing weather, water availability and seasonal pressures.

"Culture's a really big thing for us. I think it's really important from management down that you lead by example and have a positive attitude," Trish said.

"We're proud of what we do and proud of what we grow, and we're very humbled to be named the AgriRisk High Achiever of the Year," Rhys added.

"Our goal for the future is to keep getting better at what we do and hopefully be able to wear the cotton that we're growing."

Alexandria Doyle, a Grower Services Representative with Louis Dreyfus Company based in Emerald, was named the CRDC Chris Lehmann Young Cotton Achiever of the Year.



Alexandria is President of the Central Highlands Cotton Growers and Irrigators Association and has contributed to agronomy, grower engagement and community leadership. Her work focuses on strengthening cotton communities, encouraging the next generation and supporting growers through practical advocacy and connection (see story page 30).

Dr Katie Broughton was named CSD Researcher of the Year for her groundbreaking work on how cotton systems respond to climate variability and environmental stress, helping growers better manage seasonal risk in a changing climate.

Katie has been supported by CRDC for much of her 19-year research career, which has improved industry understanding of water-use efficiency, crop management and yield stability. She is currently working on novel plant growth regulators as new tools for both irrigated and rainfed cotton systems.

The evening culminated with the John Deere Service to Industry Award, with CRDC's outgoing

Executive Director Allan Williams named along with posthumous recognition of Elizabeth Alexander's contribution to cotton (see story page 32).

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay congratulated the 2026 recipients and highlighted the breadth of talent and commitment across the cotton supply chain.

"These awards recognise the best of the best in Australian cotton, and the Brimblecombe family and Rhys and Trish are outstanding examples of growers who are continually improving, investing in their people and producing high quality, sustainable cotton," Adam said.

"Alexandria and Katie are making valuable contributions to growers, regional communities and the long-term success of Australian cotton.

"Together, these recipients with Allan Williams and the late Liz Alexander demonstrate the innovation, resilience and willingness to share knowledge that make Australia's cotton industry so highly regarded. They should all be very proud of this recognition."

ABOVE:
Celebrating people in cotton: Dr Katie Broughton, Allan Williams, Alexandria Doyle, Kate Brimblecombe, Mitch and Mariah Brimblecombe, Linton and Melinda Brimblecombe, Trish Carroll and Rhys Herbert.

"Culture's a really big thing for us. I think it's really important from management down that you lead by example and have a positive attitude."

For more

www.cottonaustralia.com.au/awards-recipients

www.australiancottonconference.com.au

Coming home to cotton, leadership and life

For Alexandria Doyle, the five-year journey from questioning her future in cotton to being named the 2026 CRDC Chris Lehmann Young Achiever of the Year has been one of personal growth and learning how to carve out a niche that utilises her unique strengths.

A Central Queenslander born and bred, Alexandria grew up on a cotton and grain property just outside Emerald (Gayiri country) and now works as a grower representative with Louis Dreyfus Company (LDC), as well as being president of her local Cotton Grower Association.

Alexandria was one of three finalists for the CRDC Young Cotton Achiever Award alongside grower Lauren Roellgen from the Darling Downs (Barunggam country), and Cotton Seed Distributors' technical agronomist Natalie Aquilina from Narrabri (Kamilaroi country).

Cotton is Alexandria's crop of choice, and it shows in her passion for her work, commitment to volunteer leadership roles and her advocacy for growers and the industry.

"I am incredibly humbled by this recognition and am sincerely grateful for the support, mentorship and opportunities I have been fortunate to receive throughout my journey in the

cotton industry," Alexandria said.

"It's safe to say I was shocked to hear my name called that night and deeply honoured to join the list of outstanding young people recognised as a part of Chris Lehmann's award legacy.

"To be nominated with two such talented, visionary women working in our industry is a privilege and I'm excited to see where we all go next, now we are home from another fantastic Cotton Conference, and more motivated than ever!"

It's clear how passionate Alexandria is about supporting farmers to grow their best crops and maintain sustainable and profitable businesses. Along with her work at LDC, she has been the President of the Central Highlands Cotton Growers and Irrigators Association (CHCG&IA) since 2024. After being in the secretary role for six years, she was "eager to lead the team".

Alexandria's parents, Peter and Catherine Galea, are long-time cotton growers and have always been involved in the CHCG&IA.

"We would always turn up, set up, and pack up at CGA events so that made me keen to contribute as an individual," she said.

"I first joined the executive team after a call from local grower Aaron Kiely who was president at the time. I was unsure of what was involved, but Aaron and the team were encouraging and supportive.

"As CHCG&IA secretary I very quickly learned the depth of responsibility a grower association holds and the amount of work involved. It was a real eye-opener to the importance of connecting growers on the ground with peak industry bodies like Cotton Australia and CRDC."

Alexandria says an active grower association offers a central space to support and unite its grower members and local industry.

"A CGA facilitates the opportunity for growers' concerns and curiosities to be heard and collated to effectively represent many across our area as one voice. We are a lot stronger united and when we work together, we can achieve outcomes others would not."

While the CHCG&IA has always been an active group, it still finds it hard to fill board positions and rally helpers. When COVID-19 and some challenging cotton seasons hit, Alexandria admits they floundered.

"When I took on the position of president, my key goals were to strengthen the capacity of our executive team, build momentum to involve all ages,

Alexandria says she was fortunate to have mentors to help her identify areas for improvement, develop strategies to address them, and implement new practices with confidence.





Alexandria received her award from CRDC's outgoing Executive Director Allan Williams and Deb Lehmann, wife of the late Chris Lehmann after whom the award is named.

refocus our purpose to be grower-centred, ensure initiatives were relevant and proactively engage with broader industry bodies," she said.

"I'm always looking for ways to facilitate opportunities which foster new learnings and advocate for our growers, and where possible, have a good time doing it!

"While the role of president can feel like a full-time job, my formal employment with LDC and my CHCG&IA roles are complementary, as I connect with growers to understand their individual cotton production systems, hear firsthand their concerns with the season and industry, and listen to their ideas for progress and insights into how the past can inform the future.

"I am grateful to work for organisations which actively support the community they operate in."

A recent CRDC-supported study into how to attract and retain young people in cotton highlighted the importance of mentors. They have been an important source of leadership inspiration and guidance for Alexandria, and the Central Highlands has no shortage of them.

"While our cotton community is relatively small, we seem to supply exceptional leaders and innovators who advocate for the industry and improve growers' production," Alexandria said.

"Many of our older generations have laid the foundations for today by contributing extensively to our association and industry.

"We now see local members excel in broader industry leadership positions and research initiatives, including holding board positions with Cotton Australia, CRDC, Queensland Farmers Federation and government, establishing local water management, and influencing cotton research and development and novel production practices which improve our sustainability.

"Our growers in general have an 'open gate' approach and are happy to help and share what they know."

Alexandria makes special mention of her parents Peter and Catherine as leading by example, promoting strong work ethics, standing up for fair policy and constantly striving for improved outcomes.

"The saying 'If you're not sitting at the table, you're on the menu' is something they'd say, meaning it's our responsibility to invest in our community and be active participants in setting the direction of our industry. If we don't water our lawn someone else will, and chances are they'll miss a spot."

Surprisingly, Alexandria struggled for a while to see herself in an agricultural career.

"Even growing up on a farm with supportive parents, I didn't know if there was a place for me and my interests or passions," she said.

"As a teenager I knew I wanted to build a career that was people-centred but I found it hard to see that in agriculture. I couldn't see past the never-ending line up of black syphons on the head ditch!

"This started to change after I came home from studying a teaching degree in the city to work with local resellers in agronomy, and I found a greater appreciation for the community on my childhood doorstep.

"Sometimes you have to leave to learn how special what you have is."

Little did Alexandria know that her eyes were about to be opened to the potential opportunities in the cotton industry in 2021, when she was selected to participate in the Australian Future Cotton Leaders Program and took on the role of manager at Cotton Grower Services in Emerald.

"Future Cotton Leaders broadened my perspective of the cotton industry and vision for a

range of opportunities I had not considered before. It fostered inspiration not only for what we could do at the time, but in five to ten years' time," she said.

"I was 25 and started leading a team of all ages and managing a business through the many challenges that agriculture can throw at it. I was so fortunate to have mentorship to help me identify areas for improvement, develop strategies to address them, and implement new practices with confidence."

For the 'COVID Cohort' of 2021, there were none of the usual group activities of the leadership course and graduation was via Zoom. But Alexandria says that was inconsequential, as the opportunity to work with program facilitator Jo Eady at such a pivotal stage of her career was invaluable.

"I couldn't encourage young people more to put themselves out there and show interest in being considered for a development program in cotton, and if you don't get in today, that's okay, because regardless of when you participate you will gain new skills that spark inspiration for what to do next.

"The cotton industry is so encouraging of young people. I am so grateful to those who have supported me and I hope to pay this forward to others."

Alexandria says that the quality of mentors in the cotton industry is incredibly beneficial for young people as they navigate the uncertainties in an agricultural career.

"Young people crave certainty, yet we work in an industry where nothing is sure. From not knowing what crop a client is going to grow let alone harvest, to the challenges of a potential foreign pest or market pressures and whether there will be a farm to come home to," she said.

"However, being comfortable with uncertainty can be positive if you stay open to new opportunities. I think it is best to gather the skills and connections to be adaptive and flexible for whatever tomorrow brings."

The 2026 CRDC Chris Lehmann Young Achiever of the Year appreciates the cotton industry's recognition of its people and their work, and the value of positivity in advancing the industry.

"I'd like to congratulate all the nominees and recipients of this year's awards," Alexandria said.

"You exemplify the calibre of people who make our industry so strong and you are an inspiration to us all as we continue to contribute to the future of Australian cotton."



Scan here

for a trip to Emerald with Alexandria as she talks about her young achiever nomination and passion for the industry.

Industry champions honoured

Two champions of the industry were honoured with the 2026 John Deere Service to Industry Award.

CRDC's outgoing Executive Director Allan Williams and the late Elizabeth (Liz) Alexander were named as recipients of the award, which recognises individuals who have made a lasting contribution to the industry through leadership, advocacy, innovation, research, education or long-term support for growers and the broader industry.

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay said the influence of the two industry identities had strengthened local communities, improved grower outcomes and helped shape the reputation of Australian cotton at home and overseas.

"Allan and Liz have each made extraordinary contributions, not through one single achievement, but through decades of commitment, practical leadership and service to others," Adam said.

"The Service to Industry Award recognises people who give their time, expertise and energy to ensure the industry moves forward.

"Allan's work in research, sustainability and best management practice has created enduring value for growers, while Liz's passion and community spirit helped bring people together and inspired many others to step into leadership."

Allan has served the Australian cotton industry for more than three decades, with roles spanning research and development, sustainability governance and best-practice systems.

Raised on a cotton farm near Wee Waa (Kamilaroi country) he built his career on translating research, policy and sustainability expectations into practical systems that support growers and regional communities (see our feature story on pages 6-9).

Allan laid the foundations for many organisations integral to the development of the cotton industry. As the first Executive Officer of the Australian Cotton Growers Research Association in the 1990s, Allan led the development of the Best Management Practices program, which became the foundation for *myBMP*.

Allan has a unique perspective on the global cotton industry and has advocated for Australia on the world stage. He contributed internationally



John Deere Australia and New Zealand Managing Director, Luke Chandler, Allan Williams and Cotton Australia Chair Liz Stott.

as Senior Agronomic Advisor to the Better Cotton Initiative, helping shape the agronomy and sustainability foundations of what has become the world's largest cotton sustainability program. He continued his international role as Chair of the International Cotton Advisory Committee's Expert Panel on the Social, Economic and Environmental Performance of Cotton, a role he held for 20 years.

Allan joined CRDC in 2012, working as an R&D Manager, then General Manager for R&D Investment and, most recently, Executive Director, before stepping down from the role in August.

The late Liz Alexander spent more than two decades serving the Central Highlands and Dawson Callide cotton and irrigation communities, beginning when she moved to Emerald (Gayiri country) as Cotton Australia's Central Highlands Grower Services Manager in 2001.

Liz played an important role in the rollout and adoption of *myBMP* in the Emerald and Theodore region, resulting in the first bale of BMP cotton coming from the Dawson Valley. It later became the first region to achieve 100 per cent accreditation.

Her contribution continued as a Director of Cotton Australia from 2011 to 2013, CRDC from 2014 to 2020, and Plant Health Australia from 2013 to 2021. She also served on the board of the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority, and played a pivotal role in the transition of the SunWater Theodore Channel Distribution Scheme to Theodore Water.

Beyond formal roles, Liz was recognised as a mentor, connector and champion of regional

people. Through her business and work with organisations including the Central Highlands Regional Resources Use Planning Cooperative and the Central Highlands Development Corporation, she supported local businesses, industry innovation, agtech and community-led problem solving.

John Deere Australia and New Zealand Managing Director, Luke Chandler, said the company was honoured to support an award that recognised the enduring contribution that Allan and Liz had made through their leadership, knowledge and service.

"John Deere has worked alongside Australia's cotton industry for decades, and we have seen first-hand the people, innovation and commitment that have made it one of the country's great agricultural success stories," Luke said.

"Our sponsorship of this award reflects the deep respect and commitment we have for the industry and the people who shape its future.

"Both Allan and Liz devoted an extraordinary amount of time, expertise and energy to Australian cotton and these awards are an important opportunity to honour their service and acknowledge the lasting legacy of their work and commitment."

For more

www.cottonaustralia.com.au/awards-recipient

www.australiancottonconference.com.au



Inspired leadership creates a new generation of changemakers

It was impossible to feel anything but enthusiastic from being in the same room as the latest crop of Australian Future Cotton Leaders.

The largest cohort to date, 17 emerging leaders, graduated surrounded by supporters, family, past participants and the teams of CRDC and Cotton Australia at a special event at Broadbeach (Bundjalung country) on the evening prior to the 2026 Australian Cotton Conference.

The audience heard directly from the inspiring group about the practical projects they are each implementing to strengthen communities, improve industry connections and support the future of Australian cotton.

The 2026 program, run by Cotton Australia with support from CRDC, brought together participants from across the supply chain, including growers, consultants, merchants, researchers and extension personnel, and from across the country, from Kununurra (Miriwoong country) to Walgett (Kamilaroi country).

Building confidence and capacity

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay said the graduation was an opportunity to celebrate not only the completion of the program, but the tangible contribution that participants were already making to the wider industry.

“The Future Cotton Leaders Program is about building confidence, capability and networks in our people, but it is also about action,” Adam said.

“This cohort has embraced the challenge of identifying issues that matter to their businesses, regions and communities, and then developing practical projects that can make a difference.

“From planning templates and toolbox meetings to retain staff, to connecting school students with cotton farms, and hosting conversations about women’s leadership and career pathways in the industry, these projects show the value of investing in emerging leaders.”

In addition to group face-to-face workshops, one-on-one coaching, online learning and industry engagement, Future Cotton Leaders participants are tasked with developing individual projects that put leadership into practice.

ABOVE:
The 2026 Australian Future Cotton Leaders are an inspired and inspiring group, pictured at their official graduation.

Strengthening ties

Murrumbidgee (Wiradjuri country) grower Sam Ryan has focused his project on strengthening communication between irrigators and water organisations.

After identifying frustrations among growers seeking more direct access to senior decision-makers in his local irrigation organisation, Sam has been working with the CEO and general manager on an 'open door' initiative that would give customers and shareholders regular opportunities to speak with senior management, the CEO and board members.

"Water is such a precious resource in our area and if growers and irrigation corporations can work together better, it benefits the whole community," Sam said.

"A strong irrigation industry and healthy rivers mean kids in schools, people in local shops and healthy regional towns."

Supporting new growers

In Far North Queensland (Kuku-yanjji country), Jason Salvetti is developing a practical online resource to support cotton growers in a region where the industry is still relatively young and where managing the wet season, freight and production systems can be challenging.

Jason plans to use social media and videos to share what is happening on his farm, including lessons learned, mistakes made and decisions taken as his family grows cotton in rotation with sugarcane and soybeans.

"Cotton is a great industry but it's always tricky when you're starting off and you have to deal with a unique environment like that in Far North Queensland, so the idea is to create a place where people can go to get information," Jason said.

"If we can share what we've learned and help others get started, then hopefully we can help grow the cotton industry in the north."

Creating a place to connect

Emerald (Gayirri country) agronomist Bridget Bender has used her project to create a Young Aggies group in Central Qld, modelled on the Darling Downs Young Ag Professionals network. After moving to Emerald from Chinchilla (Barunggam country), Bridget saw an opportunity to help people connect outside the workplace, build

"Future Cotton Leaders is about building confidence, capability and networks in our people, but it is also about action."

2026 Australian Future Cotton Leaders:

- ◆ Emily O'Shannessy, Cotton Grower Services, Kununurra, WA
- ◆ Alexander Stephens, McVeigh Partnership Pty Ltd, Macalister, Qld
- ◆ Angus Dalglish, Nutrien Ag Solutions, Cloncurry, Qld
- ◆ Bridget Bender, AGnVET, Emerald, Qld
- ◆ Henry Perry, Perry Farming, Goondiwindi, Qld
- ◆ Jason Salvetti, Salvetti Farming Co, Arriga, Qld
- ◆ Lauren Roellgen, Tyunga Farms, Brookstead, Qld
- ◆ Liam Blackwell, Clark Farming Group, Billa Billa, Qld
- ◆ Ashley Hollis, Cotton Australia, Sydney, NSW
- ◆ Georgia Carrigan, Australian Food and Fibre, Warren, NSW
- ◆ Georgina Rowlands, Australian Food and Fibre, Ashley, NSW
- ◆ Hugh Lennon, Hancock Agriculture, Merah North, NSW
- ◆ Lachie Holz, B&W Rural, Walgett, NSW
- ◆ Jessie Schwager, Priag Marketing, Narrabri, NSW
- ◆ Megan Baker, CRDC, Narrabri, NSW
- ◆ Natalie Aquilina, Cotton Seed Distributors, Narrabri, NSW
- ◆ Sam Ryan, RynCo Enterprises, Murrumbidgee, NSW

peer support and strengthen local networks.

"It is about connection building and having someone to talk to outside your own workplace," Bridget said.

"We meet once a month and it seems to get bigger and bigger every time, which is exciting but intimidating.

"I would never have had the confidence to create this group without the support of Jo Eady and the Future Cotton Leaders Program."

CRDC Managing Director Dr Georgina Pengilly was on hand to meet and congratulate the future leaders, and said the graduation had been a fitting introduction to the industry.

"As I begin my role with CRDC, it's been wonderful to see firsthand the Australian cotton industry's commitment to supporting and developing its people," Georgina said.

"Programs like Future Cotton Leaders are a great example of the value the industry places on backing the next generation.

"The projects developed by these graduates show what can happen when you give passionate people the confidence, skills and networks to turn good ideas into action, and the benefits extend well beyond the individuals involved, into the broader cotton industry."

The Australian Future Cotton Leaders Program is delivered every two years by Cotton Australia and coach Jo Eady of RuralScope, with funding support from CRDC. Since it began in 2006, the program has produced more than 130 graduates.

For more

www.cottonaustralia.com.au/leadership-programs



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leaders.



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