

Lake Argyle water security drives industry expansion

By Richard Porter, Australian Cotton Shippers Association

March 2026

While many cotton-growing regions across Australia's east coast face declining water storages, the Ord Valley in Western Australia is emerging as a region of optimism for the future of cotton production.

The vast water reserves of Lake Argyle underpins this confidence. At approximately 10.7 million megalitres, Lake Argyle is more than six times larger than the largest east-coast storage (Blowering Dam which holds around 1.63 million megalitres).

Cotton has a long history in the Ord Valley, dating back to the early days of the irrigation scheme in the 1960s and 1970s. However, production was eventually deemed unsustainable due to severe pest pressure - particularly heliothis - along with low yields and poor fibre quality.

In recent years, however, cotton has made a strong comeback in the region. Several key developments have supported the crop's resurgence, including the adoption of Bollgard 3 technology for improved pest control, the Ord Valley's reliable water security, ongoing expansion of irrigated farmland, and the construction of a local cotton gin in Kununurra.

The establishment of the Kimberley Cotton Company (KCC) gin has been particularly significant. Previously, Ord Valley cotton was transported more than 3,400 kilometres to gins in Queensland, adding substantial cost and logistical complexity. The new gin was made possible through strong collaboration between local growers and support from both state and federal governments seeking to build a sustainable broadacre cropping industry in the region.

2025 has proven to be a milestone for the Ord Valley cotton industry.

Planted area expanded dramatically, increasing from less than 1,000 hectares in 2024 to nearly 10,000 hectares in 2025. This growth was underpinned by the commissioning of the KCC Gin, which produced its first bale on 21 August 2025. Completing a project of this scale on time and on budget was widely regarded as a major achievement for the region. The gin's inaugural season also delivered strong results, with 81,042 bales pressed.

Supply chain developments have further strengthened the industry's position. In October 2025, the first containerised shipment of Ord Valley cotton departed from Port of Wyndham, with 60 containers loaded onto ANL's vessel "Contship Yen". Regular shipments have continued since, with the final old-crop scheduled to depart in late March 2026. This milestone was made possible through close coordination between growers, merchants, freight and warehouse providers, the shipping line and the port operator.

Another key development was the commissioning of the Top End Classing facility in Kununurra, which has significantly improved the efficiency of the Ord Valley cotton supply chain by enabling local fibre testing and classing.

With 2025 now viewed as a landmark year, the industry is turning its attention to the future. Growers and supply chain partners are focused on refining agronomic practices, strengthening logistics and further improving ginning operations ahead of the 2026 season. Supported by reliable water resources, expanding infrastructure and strong industry collaboration, the Ord Valley is positioning itself as an increasingly important contributor to Australia's cotton industry.

End