

The year that was

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The start to the 2019/20 cotton crop was less than ideal in all production areas, with scant rainfall during winter and the drought situation as bad as many had seen in recent memory.

Added to this situation was a poor outlook from the Bureau of Meteorology, which suggested a warmer and drier end to the year, little stored water in most valleys and groundwater allocation cutbacks in several regions. What a great start – things can only get better, right?

Wrong.

Hot and dry conditions prevailed through December in most production areas and several valleys endured their driest year on record. The culmination of these factors led to one of the smallest Australian cotton crops in three decades and what was planted, didn't necessarily have ample water to comfortably get the crop through to maturity, regardless.

January brought some relief in many areas through storm activity, but even these were hit and miss. Patchy weather events saw falls in the single digits in some areas, through to in excess of 200mm over parts of the Darling Downs. These storm events proved a saviour for some crops, although came too late for others.

Whilst the rains were welcome - along with the resulting stream flows, the downside for some was the cloudy weather which saw fruit shedding in some crops and cooler conditions prevailing. Some southern crops recorded in excess of 40 cold shock days during establishment and early squaring, then, extreme heat as well as issues associated with a high percentage of smoke in the atmosphere due to the bushfires. What a mixed lot!

The outcome of all the combined challenges has been one that is probably best relegated to the history books, however, in saying this, the quality of the crop hasn't really fared that poorly. Whilst both area/overall crop volume and yields were lower than recent years, mid-season classing results show that the quality achieved to date has been largely reasonable.

Classing results to June 30, 2020 (when data was obtained) showed that 91% of the crop was classed as Middling (31-3 or base grade) colour or better and in fact, in excess of 58% of this was 21-3 (Strict Middling) or better.

99% of the crop at that point in time was 1-1/8" (36) staple length and almost 96% was actually 1-5/32" (37) staple or better. Not bad, considering the challenges of the season.

Strength too, was excellent, with 99.6% of the bales classed at that point 28 GPT (base grade) and better and of this, almost 35% was in excess of 32 GPT or better, which is a very desirable strength reading.

Micronaire was the bigger issue this season and whilst more than 85% of the total volume classed at that point in time had a micronaire reading within the G5 range (3.5 – 4.9), more than 11.5% was low micronaire (2.9-3.4). The remainder was high micronaire (albeit <4%).

This "out of spec" micronaire is less than ideal from a merchandising point of view and can prove problematic to offload. This is evident by the discount that this style of cotton attracts both by way of premium and discounts to the producer and its resultant value in the marketplace.

Whilst less than ideal seasonal conditions will always prove challenging to the grower, choosing the correct varieties for each production area is likely to be the best method of minimising the risk of lower quality outcomes at picking time.

Much work has been done by our researchers and seed breeders to maximise quality and yield in all production areas through sowing the varieties best suited to each area and these efforts should be considered by all growers prior to planting.

I look forward to seeing some good, general rainfall in the near term and a bigger and better cotton crop for all in the 2020/21 season.

August 2020

Ends