

NSW SUSTAINING THE BASIN *Irrigated farm modernisation*

Testimonial: Sam Coulton, Boggabilla

May 2012

Sam Coulton is no stranger to adversity and adapting to survive in a difficult industry.

Mr Coulton is a keen participant in the **NSW Sustaining the Basin: Border Rivers-Gwydir** pilot project and believes the program has come at the right time and is the only sensible way forward.

“I have been against water buy backs because the water leaves the valley, but this way some of it stays here and so do the jobs.”

“If production through this program is increased, more money will be circulated into the community to create jobs.”

“This model would fit well into other valleys as well and the socio economics* would suit them too,” he said.

In Mr Coulton’s opinion a reliable water supply is the key to being a successful cotton grower. It provides confidence the crop can be grown.

Unfortunately, the droughts of the early 2000’s and the introduction of water sharing plans reduced allocations, which reduced irrigators confidence to forward sell their crop in case they couldn’t get enough water to finish it off.



He believes this is the next major challenge for the industry and says the only way of making Mr Coulton says “Switching from furrow irrigation to pivots or lateral moves can save up to 30% of water in some cases. However, the other big advantage is the reduction of maintenance on channel banks, head ditches and fields, and the labour needed.”

“The indication is that labour will continue to be in tight supply while nearby gas and coal mines are actively seeking a labour force, so I reckon the combination of less labour and maintenance by improving infrastructure adds another 30% in efficiency,” he said.

The Coulton family are a pioneering irrigation family from North Star. Their father was the first irrigator in northern NSW in 1957. With a handshift system he began irrigating lucerne and oats to fatten cattle and sheep.

By the 1970s this small irrigation system had grown into the largest privately owned cotton growing enterprise in Australia, producing around 40,000 bales of cotton. It was an exciting time and the Coultons bought as many farms and water licences as they could.

Mr Coulton said “The expense started once you began to develop the land for irrigation through land levelling, excavating channels and constructing above ground storage networks”.

more out of the declining water resource is to increase water use efficiency.

He relates how the cotton industry has had massive ups and downs with their production falling to 7000 bales in some years because of drought and the limited availability of water.

Community pressure about the level of pesticide use in the cotton industry prompted the Coulton family to go organic and commence value adding by manufacturing clothing under the brand of *Goondiwindi Cotton*.

Despite difficulties with the low yields and high cost of production Sam persisted with developing the production systems and now some of the cotton from the Coulton farms is processed by *Goondiwindi Cotton*, which sells 40,000 garments a year to 200 boutique stores throughout Australia.

The Australian Government is providing \$83 million to this project through its *Water for the Future* initiative.

* Powell & Chalmers (2008) indicated that every additional million dollars generated by the cotton industry had a multiplier effect of 5.3 jobs into the broader community

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