

MARK CATHCART

AgriRisk High Achiever of the Year Finalist



Mark Cathcart has been growing cotton for 35 years and currently farms approximately 280 hectares of irrigated cotton on CSD Farms, near Wee Waa, Northern NSW. CSD Farms is an amalgamation of three farms totalling 1,130 hectares with 650 hectares irrigation. Overhead, siphon and to a smaller extent, drip irrigation is currently in use. The property has access to a reliable river allocation and five groundwater bores from which water is stored in 1,300 mega-litres of on-farm storage. The property is also fully BMP accredited.

At CSD Farms cotton is grown in rotation with winter cereals. The team includes Mark as the full time manager, two permanent employees and casual staff throughout the year. Contractors are employed for the harvest of winter and summer crops, but most other operations are done in-house. CSD Farms has three principle functions being early generation seed increase, cotton crop research, and variety and technology demonstration. Mark and his team take the breeder seed handed over by CSIRO and over successive years screen and produce volumes of potential varieties, which can then be grown out by commercial seed growing partners. "It's basically like a research farm, but most of our work is seed increase for our company," Mark explains. "When we're growing cotton for seed, we're not always looking for the highest yield; we're looking for evenness of finish so that we can have a more mature, timely crop. We're trying to get the seed picked before we're influenced by any sort of weather, to maximise the quality of the seed. So seed production is our primary role and our lint is our secondary commodity."

Mark and his team are also responsible for conducting a vast array of trials including screening of new varieties for diseases such as Verticillium wilt, crop spacing and row configuration for dryland and irrigated farming systems, irrigation technologies, crop nutrition, seed treatments as well as new biotechnologies.

HOME PROPERTY

CSD Farms, Wee Waa, North West Plains, NSW

OWNERS

Cotton Seed Distributors

TOTAL ENTERPRISE SIZE

1130 ha

AREA TO COTTON 2015/2016

260 ha

YIELD TARGET

11.4 bales/ha irrigated

WATER ALLOCATIONS

River (2028 ML), recycled bore water (1250 ML), storages (1300 ML)

TYPE/S OF IRRIGATION

Food irrigation and overhead centre pivots and lateral

NO. STAFF

A full time manager, two permanent employees and casual staff throughout the year

ENTERPRISES

Seed and lint production, research



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"In any one year we could have between 20 and 30 different trials going," Mark says. "The trials may be seed, product or technology related, and while we try not to overload ourselves, we do as much as we possibly can. We have six commercial cotton varieties in at the moment. The farm is a really important link in the chain for the whole cotton industry because we'll get a first look at a variety, we'll evaluate it, trial it and see if it's got a fit for the industry."

To achieve the highest possible seed quality as well as commercially acceptable lint yields, Mark undertakes an extensive soil testing program annually to determine soil needs, depletion and remediation. Cereal and pulse rotation cropping is critical in maintaining soil health and seed quality, so retention of crop stubble has enabled him to improve soil health, while also improving water use efficiency. Where possible, he also employs a minimal approach to insecticide application in order to encourage

early season beneficial insects. Mark routinely achieves an evenness of maturity across the crop to produce the most consistent, highest quality seed and commercially acceptable lint yields.

Mark enjoys being at the forefront of the development of new cotton varieties and taking on the challenges of growing for seed. "I find it exciting to be looking at a host of different things all the time," he says. "I'm not a person that goes looking for accolades but I've felt that being part of the Cotton Industry Awards has been good to get me out of my comfort zone. I think that CSD Farms has something to offer to the awards, it's going to show people what we are all about, and show that we're really doing something important for the industry."

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