

## Cotton

St. George is situated on the Balonne River and has been privileged with not only a wonderful water outlook but also the capacity to have water storages for irrigation purposes.

Irrigation in the St. George district was contemplated as early as 1922. Approval for the St. George Irrigation Project was granted in 1953. The first irrigation farms were opened in 1956-57 and in 1967 the scheme was extended with approval to construct Beardmore Dam. The intensive irrigation scheme comprising some 13615 ha commences 8 km along the Carnarvon Highway south from St. George. In more recent years further development has happened as a result of individual farm Off River storages being built.

Cotton is a natural fibre and makes up nearly half of all the fibre sold in the world. By nature it is a perennial shrub which grows to 3.5m in height. In commercial production it grows to 1.2m and is an annual, planted in October. It is a drought tolerant, tap rooted plant which requires adequate water to produce high quality cotton. The ground is worked and levelled to a certain gradient for irrigation and rows are raised for planting the seed when the soil is warm and wet enough. An agronomist assists the grower to check and control pests, disease, soil moisture and weeds. An integrated pest management approach is used (incorporating the use of beneficial, natural chemicals and chemical rotation). Defoliation occurs in March to remove the leaves and open the bolls (the cotton fruit) ready for picking. Large machines called pickers have a picking "head" for each row and can pick up to 6 rows at a time. The head contains dozens of rotating spindles, which remove the cotton from the plant and put it into the basket of the picker. The cotton is emptied into a module builder which packs the cotton into large blocks, called modules where they are loaded on a truck and taken to the cotton gin.

Cotton was first planted in the St. George area on a commercial basis in 1957. This was done by only a handful of growers without much success. In the following year the Cotton Board and Water Commission set up a demonstration farm and a further eight growers decided to try their luck, planting 200 hectares. In that year and through to 1969 pests played havoc with the crop.

Cotton growers are members of the community and need to manage water and land resources carefully to maintain sustainable farming practices. Farmers are licensed to use a limited amount of water, which is applied when soil moisture tests indicate there is a need. Surplus water or runoff is recycled and stored on farm. Best Management Practices (the cotton industry's quality assurance program), is widely adopted in all cotton growing areas.

Cotton is the biggest selling natural fibre in the world accounting for around 46% of the world market. It is hypoallergenic, long lasting, soft and cool. From morning to evening we use and wear cotton. Shirts, pants, jeans, underwear, pyjamas, sheets, towels, nappies, curtains, ropes, mattress ticking and hundreds of other garments are made from cotton. From a 227kg bale of cotton we can produce 2.2km of yarn or 220 pairs of jeans or 760 T-shirts.

The ginned seed can be replanted, used for stock feed or crushed to make cotton seed oil for human consumption or cottonseed meal for stock. Cosmetics (soaps, body lotion & bath oil) are also made from cottonseed oil.

The linters (short fibres left on the seed after ginning) are used in pulp, paper (including money), cotton balls and buds, candlewicks and cushions.