



MELANIE JENSON

Future leaders graduate to full house of support

Cotton's emerging leaders showed why the cotton industry is regarded as innovative and progressive at packed event on the eve of the Australian Cotton Conference in August at the Gold Coast (Bundjalung country).

The Australia Future Cotton Leaders Program (AFCLP) program is run by Cotton Australia with support from CRDC. This year, a record 46 people applied for the opportunity, resulting in the selection panel extending the participant number from 15 to 16 due to the number and quality of applicants.

Run by leadership specialist Jo Eady of RuralScope, the course is designed to prepare people for leadership in any sector of the industry. The 2024 cohort featured a record number of cotton growers, along with consultants, merchants, and research and extension personnel. Each participant develops and implements a project of personal interest as part of the course, providing an opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills through real-life scenarios.

As participants are situated over a large area, spanning the cotton growing valleys, the

course consists of interactive online discussions, one-on-one coaching and integration with industry activities and some face-to-face meetings. This culminates with final activities and leadership events at the Gold Coast prior to graduation at conference.

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay said he is excited about the potential of the 2024 graduates to advance the already outstanding reputation of Australian cotton.

"Half of the 16 participants are growers, and they will be able to immediately apply what they have learned to their respective farms and share that knowledge with their local farming communities," he said.

"Likewise, those graduates from other parts of the industry will also be able to positively impact their own areas of focus."

Nothing but praise

Gunnedah (Kamilaroi country) cotton grower George McCalman said he enjoyed learning about leadership.

“The course helped me to fully understand other parts of the industry and also how to be an effective leader, and if I think that will help me to be a better farmer and business operator,” George said. “I created a list of barriers and solutions that I’m sharing by email with all Cotton Grower Association (CGAs) and will then have a zoom call with reps from across CGAs to encourage sharing and uptake of solutions.

“A key one is for CGAs to have a dedicated young person for others to contact, alongside office bearers, as other young people are not likely to contact the current office bearers.”

Jo said George was a great young industry leader, who was a finalist in the Australian Cotton Awards this year with his family business including parents Scott and Jo.

“George is working on supporting his CGA and has now extended to other CGAs also to support them to be more inclusive of young people,” Jo said.

Narrabri (Kamilaroi country) cotton grower Sam Carberry is working on a project to build himself and his family business as an employer of choice.

Growing up on a cotton farm as a fourth-generation cotton farmer, Sam is closely tied to the industry. Keen on improving leadership skills and expanding professional networks, he decided to join the Future Cotton Leaders Program. Pursuing industry advancement, Sam attended Marcus Oldham Ag College under an Upper Namoi CGA scholarship, completing a gap year at a property near Boggabri.

Now managing his family farm’s cotton growing and irrigation, Sam uses his knowledge for sustainable growth. Actively participating in groups like Namoi Water, he understands the importance of youthful representation in steering positive change within their regions.

“I see the AFCLP as crucial for enhancing my role in the family farm business,” Sam said.

“The skills I have gained will not only benefit our farm but also enables me to be more actively involved in upcoming industry initiatives.

“I have developed and am trialling ideas like a monthly photo comp on our farm to encourage a healthy group dynamic between our staff, and engaged in activities like AgCAREERSTART to help build our business as we transition the management from my dad Mike to myself.”

Assistant farm manager Sarah Vivers has a really strong interest in the non-technical skills area, which showed during the program.

“Sarah has done a great project about working out the needs of new entrants into the industry/



cotton enterprise,” Jo said.

“She has also provided input into the Australian Cotton Enterprise Non-Technical Guide for New Entrants that was launched at the conference as part of the CRDC-supported SHIFT project.”

Sarah and her employer, Weemelah (Kamilaroi country) cotton grower Sam Heagney of South Bunarba Ag, also joined a SHIFT workforce panel at conference. Sarah has recently been promoted to Assistant Manager at South Bunarba Ag and as such shared her insights.

Graduate Georgie Flick, an agronomist from Goondiwindi (Bigambul country), said the course was definitely beneficial.

“I really improved my communication skills and how to be effective with varying personality types in the industry,” Georgie said.

“What I gained will help my career because I will be better able to serve the local cotton community.” Some of the participants could already be considered leaders in their field, such as Dr Alison McCarthy. Alison is a former CRDC-supported PhD student and mechatronic research engineer in irrigation and cropping systems within the Centre for Agricultural Engineering at the University of Southern Queensland. She has developed novel sensor processing algorithms to automate irrigation in cotton and pasture, and machine vision systems.

Alison received the 2021 International Young Professionals Award and was a co-recipient of the 2018 Cotton Seed Distributors (CSD) Researcher of the Year Award. So what does this course offer such an accomplished scientist like Alison? She says this program has given her an opportunity for self-reflection and personal development to enhance her leadership into the future.

“The program has enabled me to step back and take the time to focus on understanding my life and career goals, core values, strengths and opportunities for growth,” Alison said.

ABOVE: Grace Griffiths was one of the emcees for the evening, which included a guest speaker and panel session.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Celebrating the future with their graduation (at rear) Angus Whittaker (grower, Darlington Point NSW), Hayden Petty (crop consultant, Leeton NSW), Sam Carberry (grower, Narrabri NSW), Georgie Flick (crop consultant, Goondiwindi Qld), Angus Marshall (cotton extension, Katherine NT), Rhys Herbert (grower, Warra Qld) and Jack O’Neill (grower, Narrabri).

At front: Prue Byrnes (grower, Rowena NSW), Sarah Vivers (assistant farm manager, Weemelah NSW), Alison McCarthy (cotton researcher, Toowoomba Qld), Grace Griffiths (grower/consultant, Goondiwindi), Jacob Booby (merchant, Narrabri), Kate Lumber (crop consultant, Moree NSW), Brendan Murray (merchant, St George Qld) and George McCalman (grower, Gunnedah NSW).

Absent: Greg Pearce (crop consultant, Goondiwindi).

“This culminated in me developing a five-year research plan and identifying strategies to achieve these goals to maximise impact of my research for the cotton industry.”

History of success

Previous AFCLP participants have moved into senior positions within Australian cotton, with many former graduates on boards including Cotton Australia, CRDC and CSD, as well as CGAs and other industry committees and projects.

Held every two years, the AFCLP is run and coordinated by Cotton Australia with funding from CRDC. The program, designed for emerging leaders, has produced 116 graduates since the concept was devised back in 2006. Leadership is one of the key priorities in both the Cotton Australia and CRDC five-year Strategic Plans, showing the importance of building human capacity to the industry. CA and CRDC jointly support the AFCLP, and other leadership programs, including the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation’s TRAIL and Australian Rural Leadership Programs, and Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarships. One of the 2024 ARLP graduates, crop consultant Kate Lumber, has recently been announced as cotton’s latest Nuffield scholar (see story page 29).

CRDC’s Innovation Broker Rachel Holloway oversees human capacity and leadership projects

A panel session at the graduation included Cotton Australia’s Paul Sloman, Nuffield Australia’s CEO Jodie Redcliffe, current Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) participant Sam Lee, ARLF Chief Executive Matt Linnegar, workplace researcher and SHIFT creator Dr Nicole McDonald, grower and Nuffield scholar Renee Anderson and Cotton Australia Policy Manager Mike Murray.

“Leadership is one of the key priorities in both the Cotton Australia and CRDC five-year Strategic Plans.

and said it was fantastic to see the AFCLP graduation event so well supported.

“The buzz from this next generation is inspiring,” she said.

“Future leaders are certainly lining up for this program, and graduates thoroughly enjoy being part of it which is evident in the program evaluation – 100 percent of participants would recommend it to others.

“CRDC congratulates the 2024 participants on their graduation and their leadership projects that will make positive impact on the industry.”

For more

Profiles for each of the 16 current participants can be found here www.cottonaustralia.com.au/2024-australian-cotton-leadership-program-participants



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