

Submission on “Rural Skills Training and Research”

Cotton Australia Ltd

Cotton Australia supports Australia’s cotton farmers and represents and advances the interests of the industry to governments, non-government organizations, and the public. It focuses its efforts in the areas of environmental management, industry standards, occupational health and safety, communications and public affairs and the development of educational and promotional programs.

Over 80% of Australia’s cotton farmers contribute voluntarily to Cotton Australia’s funding by way of a bale levy. There are 28 members of Cotton Australia Ltd. including 16 grower associations and 12 cotton processor organizations.

The executive staff of Cotton Australia is located in the head office in Sydney while 8 grower service managers are located in regional offices at Emerald, Dalby, Goondiwindi, Moree, Narrabri, Gunnedah & Narromine.

**Cotton Australia Ltd
Level 2, 490 Crown St
Surry Hills NSW 2010**

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1.0 Introduction.

Cotton Australia welcomes the opportunity to make comment to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into “Rural Skills Training and Research”. The comments will be particularly in the area of training and the style and availability of training to rural industries.

To this end this submission will be focussing on those issues embodied in the Terms of Reference clauses 1, 2 and 4.

2.0 Availability and Adequacy

Cotton Australia would contend that a description of the vocational training intended for agriculture is far from being “available” and “adequate”. The training agenda that has been generated by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) during its lifetime has given rise to a beauocracy that has become self-generating and extremely distant from its client – THE EMPLOYER.

Rather, the focus of ANTA, and its now numerous training delivery clones, is one of concentrating on the trainee and shaping that person into that which is assumed is required by industry, rather than talking with the client and determining what may be required for employment. The end result of this beaurocratic process is that the trainees – THE PRODUCTS – are not being employed as the industry has no demand for their particular set of competencies and the client is facing staff shortages as well as skills shortages.

Why then has industry not demanded a more improved product from the training agenda?

A simple answer to this would be to stand in front of a group of producers and attempt to discuss training with them. The almost instantaneous “glazing of the eyes” is an indication that they have been numbed by the jargon and beauocracy that now surrounds the Vocational and Educational Training (VET) agenda.

Cotton Australia in an attempt to overcome this dis-enfranchising of the employer took a decision some two years ago to adjust the agenda and have the VET system work for the industry. Therefore to attract the attention of the employer, the concept of talking in terms of using the jargon: e.g.

Certificate II in Agricultural Production

*With Modules RTCA2705A Work effectively in the industry
and RTC2801A Participate in workplace communications,*

has been dropped in favour of having a simply branded position called –

“Cotton Basics”.

As with an industry recognised *ChemCert Certificate*, the employer will recognise immediately that a young person who presents themselves with a *Cotton Basics*

Certificate can do just that – undertake basic operations on a cotton farm – e.g. start a tractor, start a siphon, knows some first aid, etc. There also exist the opportunity to have on the reverse side of the *Cotton Basics Certificate* the particular “jargon” description as currently utilised; but in small print and of use only to the beaurocratic process – not to the employer.

The development of the Cotton Basics Course has been supported by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and is now able to be delivered by trainers attached to a Registered Training Organisation, both in group work or on-farm and in high schools where school-to-work programs are being included. Cotton Australia’s own field staff – Grower Services Managers – are all qualified trainers and are able to deliver Cotton Basics as and when required by the cotton grower.

With respect to the on-going VET agenda and the ability to impact and implement change, there exists at this point in time no better opportunity than that presented with the demise of ANTA and the return of the handling of the VET agenda to the Department of Education, Science and Training. The Minister, the Hon. Brendan Nelson has an ideal opportunity to implement changes that will see the delivery of realistic and usable training and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – the Hon. Warren Truss – has an opportunity to deliver against the needs of rural industries with respect to manpower and skills shortages.

Recommendation: *That the Committee call on the Minister for Education, Science and Training to review the current vocational education and training agenda to ensure that focus is brought to bear on the **client** of the training process – the employer – to meet the needs of the workplace, rather than the **product** of the training process – the trainee.*

3.0 Skill sets required for Rural Industries

To-date rural industries have been the subject of numerous “skills shortages surveys”. This is now entering the realm of the ridiculous as employers continue to fill out *surveys* – beaurocrats continue to analyse *surveys* – and nothing seems to come from the *surveys*.

The time has well passed when industry involvement in the development and delivery of vocational training needs to be recognised by government at all levels and rather than the current cursory consultative approaches, a sound “kitchen table” thinking and logic brought to bear in a matter that is rapidly becoming a workplace “joke”.

The Commonwealth Government needs to be supported in its thrust to become involved in the delivery of VET in the workplace and in particular the election policy calling for the creation of the Australian Technical Colleges (ATC). However, while this is essential for the skills delivery required by the major urban-based industries, little has been done to recognise the needs being faced by rural industry. Indeed, in an attempt to have rural included in one of the few “rural” based ATC’s, the Departmental response was, that while it was recognised that rural was not a part of the ATC agenda, the support for rural activities would be better sought from other programs – “*don’t bother us now, please approach the Department later!!!*”.

Cotton Australia recognises that the significant effort that has gone into the preparation of the numerous competency based modules under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and the overall need for training in rural industries is a given, however, as already stated, the time is now here when the “cold shower” needs to be taken and the spotlight of reality applied to this agenda.

Recommendation: *That the Committee recommend to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – the Hon. Warren Truss – that an industry based Reference Group be formed to advise the Minister or his Parliamentary Secretary on matters relevant to VET development and delivery in rural industry.*

Recommendation: *That the Committee recommend to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – the Hon. Warren Truss – that, on advise from the industry based Reference Group, a Ministerial Taskforce, comprising Ministers Truss, Nelson and Hardgrave along with Parliamentary Secretary, Senator the Hon. Richard Colbeck be established to review the development and delivery of VET to the rural sectors and in particular to review and assess the effectiveness of government investment in vocational and educational training in those sectors.*

4.0 Viability and Sustainability of Australian Agriculture

Much debate exists as to the sustainability and viability of agriculture within Australia in this day and age. Many themes have been followed in the debate and these have included environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and viability; whether productivity or profitability is the pathway to follow, all of which are worthwhile argument, however none of which can address the issues now facing the long-term success of the individual farming enterprise.

A serious discussion now needs to be had on the impact brought to bear by the “culture” of the prime decision maker on the rural enterprise and where that person “sits” in relation to asset development and triple-bottom line accounting. It is now all too easy for that decision maker (who in some of our rural industries is approaching the 55-60 age bracket) to take an avoidance position and say it is all too hard to deal with issues of the training and development of the rural enterprises major asset – its people.

This then gives rise to another significant issue and that is the intergenerational relationships. In Australia, there currently exists a generation of “baby boomer” employers who are looking for staff/employees from among the “X”, “Y” and “dotcom” generations. The employing generation has a work ethic that sees a long-term employment position being essential and that the employee is expected to do as they are told and do it for a long time. However, on the other hand there is now the employee who has had instilled in them by society that they are to question and seek higher ideals! A position that sees them take short-term views of employment roles.

How does Australia come to grips with this dilemma?

Is this the dilemma that may be behind the current manpower and skills shortage that exists in rural industry?

Recommendation: *That the Committee calls for a review of the current state of knowledge of cultural issues relating to intergenerational transfer of rural enterprise decision making and the level of knowledge of current decision makers with respect to human resource management.*

Recommendation: *That the Committee calls on the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – the Hon. Warren Truss – to ensure that government investment strategies, such as the Farmbis program, give adequate consideration to business management and human resource management in training programs that are seeking government support.*

5.0 Conclusion

Cotton Australia would once again thank the Committee for the time it has taken to consider these comments and Cotton Australia would be pleased to address the Committee to further develop some of the issues and concepts contained within the submission.

Recommendation: *That the Committee give consideration to hearing evidence and comment from rural industry in a rural setting and that the Committee consider the Moree/Tamworth/Narrabri triangle as a suitable example of an area where the issues contained in this submission are being faced.*

Ralph Leutton
Program Manager – Policy and Legislation