

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TO SET THE AUST COTTON SUSTAINABILITY TARGETS

Australian cotton growers have been quietly and collaboratively working to improve their sustainability performance for decades. In 1991 cotton became the first Australian agricultural industry to benchmark its environmental performance, and more recently it has worked to develop sustainability targets.

Environmental assessments

- 1991: [First Independent Environmental Audit](#). Recommendations made to reduce the industry's environmental impact.
- 1999: [Second Independent Environment Audit](#). Found all 44 recommendations from the First Audit had been implemented, and provided new recommendations.
- 2012: [Third Independent Environmental Assessment](#). Six recommendations for improvement, including more regular reporting on environmental impacts.
- 2020: [Fourth Independent Environmental Assessment](#) due to be commissioned.



Developing sustainability targets

- 2014: [First Sustainability Report](#) provided data on 45 social, economic and environmental indicators.
- 2016: Sustainability Working Group (SWG) formed to oversee the industry's ongoing commitment to sustainability reporting and implementation.
- 2016-2019: Priority sustainability topics developed by the SWG through technical advice, research, stakeholder consultation, and validation.

In 2016, 35 internal and external stakeholders attended a [Cotton Sustainability Stakeholder Forum](#) to provide guidance and feedback to the Australian cotton industry on sustainability issues, draft targets, indicators and reporting. Other stakeholders were contacted directly.

Feedback from this Forum was used to refine targets and release a [Background Reference Paper](#) later in 2016 that outlined eight sustainability topics and associated indicators, and provided rationale for their selection.

In 2018, feedback was sought on draft sustainability targets from stakeholders representing customers and retailers, suppliers and service providers, interest groups, agriculture RDCs, all levels of government, community groups, employment representatives, cotton industry representatives (including Cotton Grower Associations and Cotton Australia member representatives at Cotton Australia General Meetings), the Cotton Innovation Network and the research community. Key issues raised in this feedback process and the SWG's response to them are below.

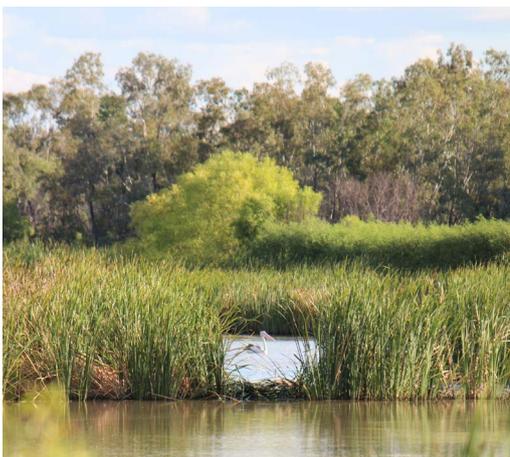
Stakeholder issue	SWG response
<p>Level of ambition. The targets were seen by most to be very challenging, but worthy. Some recognised the merit of setting stretch targets, but thought the targets were too ambitious and wondered what the implications were of not meeting them. In particular, theoretical limits to continual improvement – for example in yield or water use – may in future make the targets not possible to achieve.</p>	<p>We know it's tempting to set targets that are easier to achieve, but to be global leaders we think we need to set targets that take us beyond business as usual. At the same time, we will monitor progress annually and aim to be transparent with all stakeholders on the work we are taking to achieve targets. If it becomes apparent that, despite our best efforts, targets need to be refined, this will be done in consultation with stakeholders.</p>

Stakeholder issue	SWG response
<u>Data quality.</u> Some of the indicators rely on grower surveys (for example, for yield, nitrogen use and area of native vegetation) or on Census data (which only takes place every five years and does not capture the cotton industry in its entirety). A single source of truth is needed for all indicator	The targets and their indicators are a starting point. The source data is the best we currently have, but we acknowledge not all data is perfect and will likely be improved over time. Any changes to baselines or indicator data will be in consultation with stakeholders, and clearly reported.
<u>Absence of herbicide.</u> Some stakeholders suggested the pesticide hazard target focused solely on insecticides rather than considering pesticide use as well.	The Environmental Toxic Load indicator used to measure pesticide hazard monitors the toxicity of pesticides on four species, including algae, which is a measure of herbicide usage. ETL for herbicide is now included as an indicator.

2019: Second Sustainability Report for the five years to June 2019 provided data on the eight priority social, economic and environmental topics. Data gathered report allowed us to compare our performance in priority topics from 2014 to 2019. This highlighted we are on track in some topics, and in other topics we can do better.

2020: Sustainability targets finalised. Small expert groups reviewed data from 2014 and 2019 Sustainability Reports. This process has resulted in draft targets for several priority topics. It has also shown other priority topics need more time to develop indicators or targets, especially those that have a high degree of crossover with other Australian agriculture sectors. Having consistency with other agriculture sustainability frameworks is very important to the cotton industry.

Stakeholders are being consulted on draft targets from mid-2020, before they are finalised and published.



Achieving sustainability targets

A Sustainability Strategy developed by the Sustainability Working Group coordinates industry work to achieve the targets.

Engagement with stakeholders on sustainability will be ongoing and integrated into how we operate and respond to sustainability issues.