# Reliable telecommunications a necessity for Aussie cotton farmers

The cotton industry is an integral part of the Australian economy, worth more than $1.5 billion in export earnings for the 2015-16 season and employing on average 10,000 people.

Cotton Australia, the peak industry body for Australia’s cotton industry, is one of ACCAN’s newest members. The organisation is also a member of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition.

As a member of both ACCAN and the Coalition, Cotton Australia has highlighted telecommunications issues many cotton growers experience, including poor to no mobile service, unreliable internet services with speeds and data caps that often mean growers struggle to send an email, let alone capitalise on all the benefits of ‘smart’ agriculture.

This lack of reliable connections means that some growers are unable to take advantage of new and innovative digital technologies that would make their jobs easier and more efficient.

We spoke to Cotton Australia General Manager, Michael Murray, to find out more about the telecommunications issues cotton growers face and what improved services would mean for them.

## Fit-for-purpose telecommunications

The modern cotton industry emerged in Australia in the 1960s, and has evolved into the world’s leading cotton industry – by yield, quality and water efficiency.

According to Cotton Australia, the industry’s success is driven by a culture of innovation partnered with access to research, development and extension, as well as a commitment to a best management practices program which fosters a spirit of continuous improvement.

On-farm technology with ‘smart’ farming applications is developing rapidly. Because of this, Cotton Australia points out that technology and reliable telecommunications services are no longer a luxury, but a necessity to conduct a modern day business able to compete in the global market, as Australian cotton growers continue to do with more than 99 per cent of the crop exported each season.

“Digital technology is said to be behind the next big agricultural revolution, with digital innovation potentially contributing a 25-30 per cent change in business metrics in the future,” said Mr Murray. “Access to reliable and fit-for-purpose telecommunications services is essential for anyone living and running businesses in rural Australia.

“Only if this is delivered can cotton growers take full advantage of the huge benefits of the digital revolution – the possibilities would be endless.”

## IoT and other applications

Cotton growers (and many other Australian farmers) already heavily rely on internet of things (IoT) devices and high-tech applications in the day to day running of their businesses. Unreliable telecommunications can be a hindrance to using these devices.

“Seventy per cent of Australian cotton growers use soil moisture probes, the highest rate among all Australian agricultural industries,” said Mr Murray. “Farm machinery, such as tractors, come standard with in-built computers. Drones are common place and ‘smart’ irrigation systems are being trialled across the industry.”

In addition to ag-tech applications, cotton growers are also running businesses and commonly require access to accounting software and management software, which is often data heavy and cloud based.

“While this new digital era offers exciting opportunities for our members, those without access to reliable telecommunications services are unable to fully engage in this revolution. As technology and services in metropolitan areas are constantly improving, many of our members struggle to get a reliable mobile signal and don’t have access to a reliable internet source capable of meeting the needs of their businesses,” added Mr Murray.

Alongside the direct impact on business, the organisation also points out how poor telecommunications services can affect farmers’ ability to attract and recruit staff, access online training and education, and potentially create safety issues on farms.

“Cotton Australia joined the Coalition because our growers, alongside so many other regional, rural or remote residents, are limited by poor connectivity,” said Mr Murray. “The Australian cotton industry competes in a global market. Our farmers need access to adequate telecommunications services to maximise the potential benefits offered by digital agriculture and remain competitive in a global market.”