

Rob Houghton

Whitton, NSW

Innovation in irrigation: Fine tuning farming in the MIA

Robert Houghton's family has been involved in irrigation since the 1930s when they drew their farm as part of a soldier settlement scheme. Over time, the property has undergone significant transformation, from early gravity-fed systems to a thoroughly modernised operation with high-flow delivery and full irrigation automation. The farm produces broadacre cotton and cereals, and grows rice when water is available.

Rob's approach to irrigation continues to evolve. He now views it through a completely different lens compared to 10 or even 20 years ago.

"What I feel is exciting is that we can now make quite small step changes to the way we do things and deliver significant gains, because there is so much more capability in the technology we use on-farm."



Using water more efficiently

While productivity and profitability improvements have stemmed from better soil and weather monitoring, laser-levelled beds and infrastructure upgrades, the biggest game changer for Rob has been enhanced automation.

Today, Rob uses automation with greater confidence and precision, particularly in managing irrigation shutdown.

"I can shut water off to the minute, even while I'm asleep. It's a big win for cotton, especially in tight seasons where missing your window could cost you yield."

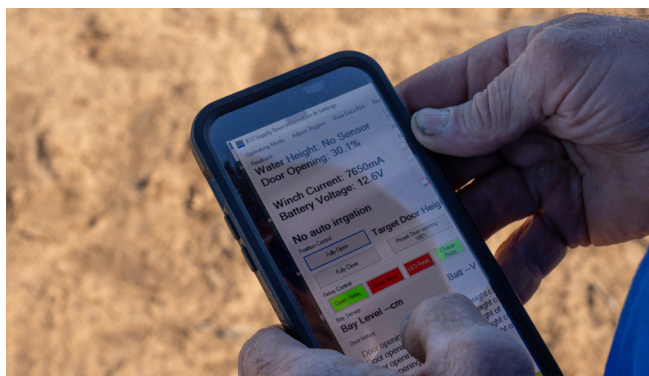


This level of control is helping reduce oversaturation risks and crop stress, especially in cotton crops. The physical night-time task of manually changing siphons has now been replaced by MI Connect, allowing Rob to schedule and monitor everything via smartphone.

The adoption of MI Connect

Rob uses MI Connect as part of his day-to-day operations, describing it as a "great system" and a "significant enhancement." Where he once relied on handwritten notes under rocks or flags at the bay gate, Rob now shuts down irrigation with a couple of taps on his phone, often completing a two-hour irrigation cycle adjustment from the cab of his ute.

The platform enables him to fine-tune flow rates and manage water more efficiently, especially at the start and end of each irrigation. That level of control not only improves crop performance but also reduces water waste and labour.





Sustainability in practice

The shift to smarter systems has gone hand in hand with Rob's commitment to sustainability. He has recently introduced a minimum-till planting system, using a new planter bar that allows cereals and legumes to be sown directly into mulched cotton stubble. This maintains soil cover and helps retain moisture.

Rob has also incorporated cow manure into his rotation to build organic matter and condition the soil, adding a further natural boost to long-term soil health.

The future

While Rob is still exploring the potential of emerging technologies like AI, he sees major benefits already from the automation systems in place.

"Even without AI, we're already able to manage water more accurately and reduce unnecessary movement. That's a massive step forward."

Now, when Rob spots an opportunity to improve, it's more likely to involve updating software or refining a digital setting than shifting dirt. With the right infrastructure already in place, he believes it's the small, strategic changes, guided by good tech, that will continue to make a big impact.

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