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# FLOOD RECOVERY

## Starting from scratch in the Dawson

*Vast, flat areas of land are a dream come true for irrigators, because it means distributing water can be done very efficiently, which is a huge advantage.*

### Inundated in Dawson

The downside of flat farming landscapes is that when a major flood occurs, inundation is uniform and very soon every inch of the farm is submerged, completely destroying crops and washing away precious soil.

This is what happened on two properties owned by Debbie and Mike Austin. Harcourt, which is 1575ha in size and the 730 ha Riverland, are neighbouring properties on the banks of the Dawson River in the Fitzroy Basin.

Both are used predominantly for farming, with cotton, grains and cereal the primary crops. Harcourt also supports grazing with up to 300 head of store heifers.

Debbie Austin remembers how extraordinary rainfall in the summer of 2010 led to disaster, ruining 650ha of irrigated cotton planted at Harcourt and 250ha of dryland cotton planted at Riverland.

“The season was progressing normally until, on the 19th November we measured 51mm of rain; this was the first little bit of over 450mm we were to receive in the next six weeks,” she said.

“By 21st December 2010 we were totally isolated by road, and when on the 23rd, we received another 94mm of rain on top of an already flooded catchment, we realised that we were in trouble.”

### The damage done

The Austins’ levee banks breached on Christmas Eve and they awoke on Christmas morning to a totally flooded farm.

With conditions becoming dangerous and more rain predicted, they decided to call a helicopter to evacuate them.

When the Austins were able to return home weeks later they found everything covered in silt, infrastructure severely damaged, most crops destroyed and livestock stranded.

“Laser-levelled fields had giant silt bars through the middle of them, rendering them useless for irrigation. Ten of our 11

pump sites had been under water, meaning that they had to be dismantled and rebuilt,” Debbie said.

Debbie said they managed to harvest 500 bales of cotton out of a projected 6000 bales, and fortunately suffered no major damage to their ring tanks or the family home.

But she said the flood had changed the family’s perspective. “We feel somewhat violated and have a sense of unease, which is new to us, now we know that our beloved river can turn nasty.”

### Helping hands aid in recovery

As well as support from Cotton Australia, government grants, Anglicare, friends and relatives, the Austins worked with Fitzroy Basin Association (FBA) to develop a successful project under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.

“The grant money allowed us to make some changes to improve water quality on-farm,” Debbie said.

She said the grant, and the extensive damage to the farm, offered the chance to start from scratch and implement improvements that had previously seemed too expensive and time-consuming.

The Austins said they also got value from attending myBMP workshops supported by FBA, for both learning about the best way to apply on-farm improvements and the social aspect.

“It was part of the healing process, talking to others who have been through just what you have been through, talking through issues and brainstorming a way to be able to move forward, and providing volumes of information,” Debbie said.

She said the flood cost them about \$5million and there was still work to be done to repair the physical damage more than two years later.

“A family operation such as ours does not recover from that in a hurry, and it will probably take many years yet. And while some days it all just seems too hard, we are doing something we love to do, and the majority of the time we are very happy and looking to the future, for new adventures.”

