

# Farm Business Resilience Program

## Overcoming Paperwork Paralysis Pays Dividends

Saunders Farming "Plantation" in St. George, south-west Queensland, stands as a testament to a rich legacy in the cotton industry. Established over 50 years ago by industry pioneers Alan and Lenore Saunders, the farm has evolved under the guidance of their son, Craig Saunders, and his wife, Sharon.



*Craig Saunders of Saunders Farm, St. George*

In the past two decades, the farm has expanded to over 900 green hectares, focusing primarily on cotton cultivation. Craig and Sharon Saunders embody a commitment to innovation, experimentation, and the adoption of cutting-edge technologies to enhance resource management.

With a motto of 'better and easier,' Craig takes pride in maintaining an engaged workforce employing modern machinery and advanced farming practices. The Saunders family's dedication to cotton cultivation is underscored by the active involvement of the third generation, with Craig's daughter, Brooke, and her husband, Lucas Wuersching, contributing to the family operation.

The Farm Business Resilience Program is jointly funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and the Queensland Government's Drought and Climate Adaptation Program.

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## The challenge: improving water use efficiency

Water access, water reliability and variable climate conditions are some of the main challenges facing Saunders Farming.

“Drought is a part of our landscape, and we value innovation and collaboration to help improve our water use efficiency to take us further through the dry times.”

Saunders Farming is constantly pushing to improve its water use as it is a limited and expensive resource.

Craig realised the [Farm Business Resilience Program](#) was the opportunity to convert to bankless flood irrigation, which uses less water to grow more cotton.

## Farm Business Resilience Program assistance

Saunders Farming is one of the first cotton growers to use the Farm Business Resilience Program to help fund their conversion from siphons to bankless irrigation.

Craig said when his accountant first showed him the paperwork for the program, he was dubious about taking it on.

“As farmers, we hate paperwork, and when I saw all the criteria, it looked like a bit of effort.”

“My accountant, Dan Chappel from Synergy Consolidated, helped me through the process, and under the program, there was grant funding through the Farm Management Grant to cover his fees.”

Irrigation designer Glenn Lyons was commissioned to develop the bankless bay flood irrigation system for Plantation.

The Saunders Farming bankless system sees more than two megalitres a hectare of water savings compared to siphons.

Saunders Farming is also collaborating with Padman Stops, developing the infrastructure to successfully take their large-scale flood irrigation bankless system to full automation.

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*Gate automation was shown in action at a recent farm walk*

Automation to open and shut gates at optimal timing will be a game changer as moving the water on and off the paddock quickly provides the best results.

Eager to share their findings, Saunders Farming regularly hold farm walks to demonstrate how the new bankless system works.



*Local growers at a farm walk to demonstrate how the new bankless system works.*

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## Expert advice delivers increased yields

Irrigation designer Glenn Lyons has dedicated his career to improving growers' water use efficiency to deliver better profitability and sustainability in an arid and drought-prone environment.

Over the past two decades Glenn has become one of the foremost bankless and bay irrigation authorities.

For Saunders Farming, the move away from siphon irrigation to the [GL Bays Bankless system](#) is providing fresh opportunities to strengthen their operation by reducing their water use while increasing their yields.



*The new bankless system has delivered water efficiency gains of up to 20%*

## Drought Preparedness Grant funding

On completion of the Farm Business Resilience Plan, Craig Saunders accessed [the Queensland Government funded, Drought Preparedness Grant](#) of \$50,000 to contribute towards the bankless irrigation system development.

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Bankless irrigation systems water the fields from both ends by employing head-ditch inflow and tailwater backup, creating a more uniform crop yield than conventional siphon-fed systems.

Converting to bankless is around \$1500 a hectare. For growers to do a normal regrade and reform of beds, they spend about \$500 a hectare. So, Craig says it costs him an extra \$1000 a hectare for the conversion to bankless.

However, the cost of the Plantation New Development Drought Preparedness Grant Project blew out considerably due to rain delaying the earthworks and diesel and freight prices skyrocketing.

The total cost of the finished product was more than \$300,000 as the contractor who levelled the field was operating in wet conditions and used 50% more diesel and more time to shift the dirt.

The cost blowout saw Craig going to his bank to source the funds needed to finish the project.

But even with the additional costs in mind, the Drought Preparedness Grant reduced the cost of the project to the business by 17%.

## Reaping the benefits

Craig Saunders says the new bankless system delivers precision irrigation times, increases yields and machinery efficiencies, and reduces labour requirements and water use.

“We can grow more with less, which positively affects our local environment and communities.

The neighbours have been looking over the fence during this current dry time of limited water supply.

Realising Saunders Farming is now producing better crop yields with less water. The neighbours asked Craig if he had any spare paddocks to grow forage sorghum for them.

“They picked the right year. Usually, I wouldn’t have country available, but being dry, we did. So, they put their water into my dam, and I’m growing their sorghum.”

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Craig has never grown sorghum in his life and is enjoying the collaboration.

“I think it’s pretty neat how this project has created unexpected opportunities. I’m getting to grow a crop when I normally wouldn’t have been able to, and my neighbours are getting more hay for their shed. So, the project has supported more than one business in building their drought preparedness”

Another unexpected bonus of the program was the need to address succession planning.

“While challenging at the time, it has opened up some crucial conversations inside our business.”

## Advice to other growers

The [Farm Business Resilience Program](#) is a fantastic tool for farmers to really look at their operations and think about what they could do better to survive the next drought.

I would recommend farmers finding an accountant or industry support to help guide them through the application process.

## Bankless irrigation delivers water saving efficiencies to St. George cotton growers



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