Distinguish delegates, observers, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning from a cold but sunny Washington DC.

It feels very strange to be addressing you in front of a camera instead of our normal setting, from a large conference room in one of our member countries. Who could have thought that since our last Plenary Meeting in Brisbane, Australia in December 2019 the world could have changed so much?

It has been more than a century since the world was in the grips of the last pandemic, the 1918 pandemic commonly, but inaccurately, referred to as the ‘Spanish flu.’

Pandemics have ravaged human civilisations throughout history. But in each case global health crises have also sparked progress in culture and society, changing lives for the better. Water and sanitation systems improved, there were innovations to limit the spread of disease as well as innovations in treatments and vaccines.

Governments embraced preventative medicines and social health care systems were put in place. The focus was on the occupational and social conditions that promoted illness, not only to cure but to suggest ways to prevent it.

In short, pandemics lead to huge global change, and we need to be prepared for the changes to come. So, whilst the world ground to a halt and hunkered down, we at the ICAC saw this as an opportunity to raise our profile and extend our influence.

But before we could do that we need to look inwardly at ourselves. We reviewed our everyday practices from the way we communicated, the way we worked and the way we collected data and information to inform decision-makers around the world.

You have heard from the chair about the work we have been conducting to develop an interactive Soil and Plant Health App which can speak to a farmer in his or her own language or dialect and the Virtual Reality training modules designed to teach farmers on best practices in growing cotton and to identify pests and diseases. I am very pleased to announce that the filming on those two Virtual Reality modules was completed last month and those modules will be available for use by our members from February 2022.

As a result of these projects, the ICAC now holds the largest repository in the world of high resolution, verified pictures of insects, diseases and abiotic stresses that affect cotton. Plus we have 2D and VR videos on cotton production that we will be making into short films and which will be available on the ‘Learning Corner’ on the ICAC’s website.

But these are only two of a number of projects that the ICAC has developed and is currently working on. Others include projects in Chad and Côte d’Ivoire working with Olam International, in Zambia working with ITC, in Cameroon and Burkina Faso with GIZ and collaborations in India with our numerous partners there. These projects involve training farmers in best practices not only in conventional cotton systems but also organic and form the basis of our flagship project, ‘Four Simple Steps to Sustainability’, where we guarantee to double the yields for small farm holders in Africa and Asia within 3 to 5 years.

All of this was achieved despite Covid 19 by training farmers and extension workers virtually in group video conferences held by the ICAC chief scientist Dr Keshav Kranthi and our project consultant Dr Sandha Kranthi with translations conducted by our Business Development Manager Caroline Taco.
And it is worthwhile reiterating that the ‘Four Simple Steps to Sustainability’ project has the potential to increase production in sub Saharan Africa by a further 2 million tonnes worth an additional $3.8 billion in additional revenue.

These projects are critically important not only to the small farm holders who benefit from the training given to them but also to the ICAC which benefits in terms of additional revenue - an incredible $2.67 million in funding for these projects has been raised over the last couple of years.

But perhaps a more important benefit to these projects is that it has given the ICAC the platform to show the world that it can apply its immense technical knowledge on cotton practically, on the ground, to millions of small farm holders in Africa and Asia who will see increased yields and better quality and more sustainable cotton.

I am very proud to say that we have led the way in developing projects for Africa and Asia that can have an immediate impact on small farm holders, especially for ICAC member countries.

Looking ahead, that innovation which defines our projects continues with the development of a new program that is not only unique but has the potential to change the cotton landscape throughout Africa by providing better livelihoods for farmers, building resilience against climate change and developing value addition into national economies resulting in greater employment and GDP. That program is the African Cotton Sustainability Programme 2030.

You might be forgiven for thinking that the African Cotton Sustainability Programme is about cotton production, but this is just the start of a much larger and holistic picture. A picture that we don’t normally see as most, if not all projects, are designed to improve one part or aspect of a very complex and long supply chain.

This is what makes ACSP 2030 so very different. It really is designed to lay the foundations for resilience and growth literally from Genes as in the genetics of the cotton seed to Jeans the trousers we wear.

In addition to low yields and complicated access to infrastructure and markets, African small holder farmers face unprecedented challenges from the impacts of climate change as well as the increasing demand for more transparent and sustainable value chains.

It is perhaps ironic that it is these low yields and lack of infrastructure that creates the greatest potential for Africa. Africa is at the beginning of a journey of industrialization so there is a lot that can be done and be done with the benefit of the lessons learned by other developing countries that are already on that journey. And the potential benefits in developing the cotton sector in Africa are far greater than for any other agricultural crop.

A number of factors may explain Africa’s poor yields but obsolete varieties and poor quality seed and inadequate cropping systems are mainly to blame. New cottonseed must be designed accompanied by Best Crop Management Systems (BCMS) . This will benefit the whole sector by ensuring farmers have good, climate resilient seed with high genetic potential and germination quality, which will result in increased yields and sustainable cotton tailored to the needs of the market.

So what in particular will cotton seed development achieve? The cotton seed is the key to unlocking the potential for cotton in Africa. By producing high yielding, sustainable and climate resilient seed
varieties we set forward a chain of events that results in increased farmer profitability and greater food security for farmers and their communities.

Not only will working and living conditions be improved but there will be stronger regional trade and collaboration but most importantly are the job creation and GDP growth opportunities created by the programme and in particular by Private Sector investment in Value Addition and diversification.

So why is this programme different and what makes it unique? Just like any project, it needs the seed of an idea to develop a concept and it is perhaps apt and at the same time even ironic that the key to Africa’s success lies in a cotton seed – perhaps the one area where we have not put any real attention to in the past.

Why unique? Because it brings together three major organisations, all pooling their different skill sets – the ICAC, CIRAD and African Cotton Foundation as well as other key partners such as ITC and Organic Cotton Accelerator, African Cotton Association and Aproca).

It actively involves the private sector and will encourage private sector investment in the value chain and it is pan-African which means that every cotton producing country that signs up to this programme has the potential to benefit as well as those countries that wish to become cotton producing countries.

The programme is already attracting a great deal of support from governments and the private sector and not only will it provide the foundation for a robust and resilient value chain but also, and most importantly, it will provide the building blocks for increased profitability, job creation and industrial growth.

So what is this value addition worth and how many jobs does it create?

Working on the accepted figure that for each tonne of cotton produced employment is created for 4 persons in the cotton and textile value chain. This means that by increasing production to the world average of 780 kg/ha of lint this would create an additional 6 million jobs in West Africa if the cotton was able to be consumed internally so just imagine if you were able to develop the textile value chain in Africa on the back of this increased production. By doing so there is the potential to create value addition worth billions of dollars and for West Africa that would equate to an additional $63 billion and south and east Africa an additional $12 billion.

So, we start with getting the seed right in order to increase yields and profitability and employment. However, this is just the beginning of a much larger story that literally can lead you from GENES to JEANS.

This is most probably the single most important cotton programme ever developed for Africa and what we need next is for African countries who are interested in the Programme to engage with us to help us develop the Programme in their country and to help secure funding for it through their support.

This program also highlights the importance of cotton research in developing new climate resilient varieties and the role of cotton researchers in helping us to implement this program, as well as our other projects, in their particular country. I continually talk about the fact that research is the lifeblood of cotton which leads me nicely to talk about our aspirations for Cotton research.

I have previously mentioned about our desire to set up a regional cotton research network in West Africa and I hope that along with our colleagues in CIRAD, that this will be achieved in this financial
year. This will be a really important addition to our regional network of cotton researchers and we are developing ideas on how research organisations in developed countries can collaborate and assist those researchers. Key to this will be our collaboration with ICRA – the International Cotton Researchers Association.

I’m very pleased to say that ICRA has seen a resurgence of enthusiasm under the new leadership of Dr Negm from Egypt. The past year has seen the ICAC along with ICRA develop a program of monthly webinars featuring the world’s most prominent cotton research scientists. Dr Negm has also led the way, as Chief Editor, in producing a monthly newsletter called ‘Cotton Innovations’. The newsletter covers a wide range of topics focusing on innovative research developments or ideas related to cotton. And, after two years of postponement, October 2022 will also see the world Cotton research conference being held in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt.

This year has also seen another major change in the structure of the ICAC. Earlier this year the steering committee approved the setting up of the Private Sector Advisory Council. This was a major initiative, supported by Mr Peter Wakefield the Chair of the Private Sector Advisory Panel, designed to bring together international, regional and national private sector organisations from throughout the whole of the value chain under one umbrella.

Previously the Private Sector Advisory Panel consisted of some 33 individuals with a much more narrow focus. He will be talking some more on this initiative in a moment, but I would like to say that this initiative will connect governments to private sector organisations and that the inclusion of these organisations under the ICAC umbrella means that cotton and textiles will have a greater and more powerful voice moving forward. This will be especially important when considering some of the major global issues affecting cotton and textiles.

We have already experienced the power of this collaboration with the private sector with the promotion of World Cotton Day. Just in case you did not know, World Cotton Day was a proposal put forward by the ICAC to the WTO, ITC, UNCTAD and FAO in 2018. This led to the launch of World Cotton Day at the WTO headquarters in Geneva in October 2019 attended by over 800 persons from around the world including 14 ministers. And this year, I am delighted to inform you, that a resolution put forward by the C4 countries to the United Nations to adopt world cotton day on the official UN permanent calendar was accepted.

So every year on the 7th October we will celebrate world cotton day. But this is more than a chance to just celebrate cotton, it is also an opportunity to shine a spotlight on cotton, to shout about cotton and to promote all that is good about cotton, thus increasing demand for cotton.

The PSAP promotion subcommittee, chaired by Mr Bruce Atherley from Cotton Council International, has led and coordinated promotion efforts across the globe which saw organisations in at least 60 countries participate in this year’s event and the #worldcottonday and #cottonforgood being viewed by nearly 4 million people and generated more than $340,000 of exposure which is the amount of money we would have had to spend to on advertising to get the same coverage.

This year, as part of our contribution to World Cotton Day, the ICAC produced two videos. The first was about cotton and climate change. Cotton has a number of unique characteristics that make it a valuable ally in the fight against climate change and the video explains why cotton has a negative cotton footprint and also what we have to do in the future to protect cotton from climate change so it can keep protecting us!
The second is called ‘Why Cotton for Good?’ which was the theme for World Cotton Day 2021 and this video highlights the benefits of cotton such as poverty alleviation, keeping plastic pollution out of the environment, women’s empowerment and cotton’s negative carbon footprint. It’s a tribute to the many wonderful things cotton brings to our lives on a daily basis. Both of these videos are available for your use and can be found on the World Cotton Day website www.worldcottonday.com

Finally, I would like to thank our committees and their Chairs and in particular Mr Peter Wakefield as Chair of the Private Sector Advisory Panel for his work in the creation of the Private Sector Advisory Council and Mr James Johnson, who has been involved in cotton for 22 years and has diligently led the subcommittee on budget for the most of that time. He will be retiring from USDA in February 2022. James, or Jim as he is known, is well known to all of you and has been a pillar of support and advice to the Standing Committee as well as to a succession of ICAC Executive Directors. We wish him all the best in his retirement from USDA and the ICAC.

There is a saying in cotton, that once you are in cotton you only ever leave it in a box so I am sure that even in retirement in his new home in Minneapolis he will continue to keep in contact with the many friends he has made over the years and continue to keep his eye on how we are doing at the ICAC.

As for the other committees, work continues in the background and we are using this opportunity to rejuvenate both the SEEP – the expert panel on the Social Environmental and Economic Performance of Cotton led by Mr Allan Williams and the CSITC – the ICAC Task Force on the Commercial Standardization of Instrument Testing led by Mr Andrew Macdonald.

My thanks must also go to the Chair, Mr Anshul Sharma, the Vice Chair, Mr Patrick Packnett, and the other Officers and members of the Standing Committee who have continued to support the many initiatives and changes to the organisation to enable it to become a more effective and financially secure organisation fit for the future. These changes will ensure that you as Members continue to get more and more value for money from your membership and are supported by the very best team of cotton professionals.

Which leads me nicely to talk about that team of cotton professionals and the recent changes in the staffing structure. I am delighted to welcome four new members to the team over the past year.

Following the departure of the ICAC Statistician to join USDA, it was decided that this would be an ideal opportunity to upgrade that position and look to the future and how we can best communicate the vast amount of statistics and technical information we have as well as upgrading our IT systems. I am therefore delighted to welcome Mr Matthew Looney as the ICAC’s first Cotton Data Scientist.

Matthew joins us from Texas Tech University and is literally in the last stages of his doctorate which is focused on consumer choice and firm behaviour within the beer industry in the United States and specifically how the ethnic composition of a market influences beer consumption and brand choice. A subject I know which is important to many cotton people in particular.

You will also recall that one key performance indicator in the Strategic Plan was to create a value proposition for ICAC consuming members and potential members by recruiting a Head of Textiles.

This was another key appointment which attracted a large number of high quality candidates and I am delighted to welcome Mr Kanwar Usman to the team to fulfil this key role. Usman has a wealth of knowledge and experience about textiles having started his career in spinning mills and finally in a policy role as Director General (Textiles) at the Ministry of Commerce in Pakistan.
Another newcomer is Mrs Alex Preston, who joins us as the ICAC Accountant. Alex joins us from the UK where she worked for a charity and previous to that within cotton. She is a qualified management accountant and her appointment meant that we could move from using external book keepers who worked for us about one day a week to having a fully qualified accountant who was available every day thus giving us greater oversight of the accounts and allowing us to make fundamental changes to ensure greater transparency and oversight.

And last, but not least is our youngest member of staff, Ms Parkhi Vats, who joined us permanently in November 2020 from the WTO as the Commodity Trade Analyst.

All four of our new members of staff have already had an instant impact and along with our existing members of staff I am confident that you now have a team of cotton professionals who are second-to-none and who will provide the foundations for growth in the future.

In conclusion, the ICAC has most probably had its busiest year to date and despite Covid-19 has achieved over 80% of its strategic key performance indicators. That is remarkable in these times. One thing we can thank Covid for is that it has given us the opportunity to look at ourselves, our processes and procedures and enabled us to innovate and ensure that we are fit for purpose for the future.

I would like to think that ICAC is leading the way in this regard.

Thank you