



# DISTRICT REPORTS.....

## Western region



### NORTH

Most growers are finishing up their summer weed spraying now with growers on the northern fringes of the region getting 40 to 65 mm just before Christmas. Melons and mint weed were the main problem weeds.

Those who have not had weeds to spray have had their summer holidays and are busy getting ready for the coming season.

Much higher fertiliser prices this year have everyone worried about budgeted input costs but very bullish grain prices have gross margins looking very profitable.

At this stage canola looks to be the most profitable crop with current 2008–09 cash prices.

Again the budgeting season has been challenging. Although 2007 was not kind for most, we all hope that winter 2008 can bring rains close to our mythical average rainfall figures.

**Peter Norris, Agronomy For Profit, Geraldton**  
January 29, 2008

### SOUTH COAST

Seasonal conditions on the South Coast have been typical for December and January. Most of the district received good rain in late December – in the order of 25 mm up to 60 mm – fortunately this rain fell after harvest ensuring no grain quality downgrades.

Most growers enjoyed the Christmas and New Year break. But this was short-lived with many back on the boomspray shortly after New Year controlling summer weeds for moisture and nutrient conservation.

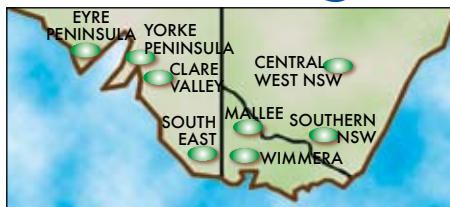
The majority of cropping paddocks have now had at least one knockdown spray. The price increase in glyphosate has many growers concerned and modifying their control strategies. Weeds are being sprayed when they are very small to minimise the glyphosate application rates.

At present growers are busy preparing budgets and cropping plans. This is highlighting the increase in input costs such as fertiliser, some herbicides and fuel. But the high projected grain prices are still providing the opportunity for very good gross margins providing an average yielding crop can be grown.

In general, growers on the South Coast have had their best income year ever during 2007 and are feeling very positive towards 2008.

**Quenten Knight, Precision Agronomics Australia**  
January 22, 2008

## Southern region



### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

#### Weather and rainfall

- Hot to very hot early in January with generally milder conditions later on.
- Mean daily maximum temperatures varied from near average up to 3°C above average in some inland areas.
- Very light falls across most districts with isolated, heavy falls in a few eastern border areas mid January.
- January rainfall varied from below average to near average in some parts.

#### Crops

- Harvest is finished in all districts apart from a very small area in the Lower South East.
- Spraying for summer weed control limited by the hot, dry weather and the increased cost and lack of availability of some herbicides.

- Farmers resorting to more cultivation to control weeds in response to the higher prices and uncertainty of supply of some of the more commonly used herbicides.
- The rapid increase in fertiliser prices and the potential for supply difficulties are of major concern to farmers as they plan for the coming season.
- Snails continue to cause significant problems with grain contamination, particularly on Yorke Peninsula.
- Clay spreading and delving taking place in several districts.
- A relatively large area of lucerne set aside for harvest in the Upper South East to take advantage of the current high lucerne seed prices.
- Total crop area estimated to be 4.01 million hectares with crop production estimated to be 4.97 million tonnes.

#### Pastures

- Feed is generally adequate in stubble paddocks with cereal stubbles holding up in the dry conditions.
- Pasture paddocks are becoming increasingly bare with limited cover in the driest areas.
- Supplementary feeding is now occurring in many districts.
- Perennial pastures continue to provide good feed following the December rains.
- Forage sorghum sown on December rains is providing feed in some parts.

**Peter Fulwood**  
Rural Solutions SA  
February 5, 2008

### VICTORIAN MALLEE

The benefits of stored soil moisture are now clearly understood by those who grow grain in the mallee. With dry springs in recent years, the prior summer rainfall has proven to be the saviour.

While harvest was disrupted by rain in early and mid November, the rain generally followed up in December and January to produce some optimism for the coming season. In 2007 we ended up with 290 mm which is close to average rainfall. But due to the lack of rain

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throughout the growing season, crops did suffer and all heavy soil types produced poor crops.

Again, crops grown on lighter soil or red rising loams shone through. Now everyone is hoping that grain prices will remain high for the 2008–09 harvest.

Last season saw the mallee produce more hay than ever before in an effort to diversify and maximise returns from wintering crops. This proved to be most viable for many and a great deal was learned about the hay production system.

The summer rains have established summer weeds such as melons, bindi eye, heliotrope, and skeleton weed among others.

While chemical prices, and availability have dampened growers enthusiasm, weeds have required spraying or cultivation. Most paddocks have had at least one spray or been worked up.

Paddock planning is underway and many will soil test and use their fertiliser conservatively where production was poor last year. There will not be a lot of canola grown unless there is more early rain. Legumes will be again kept to a minimum with seed supply being a bit of an issue.

Wheat and barley will again be the main crops planted for 2008.

**Simon Severin**  
**Landmark Berrwilllock**  
**January 25, 2008**

**SOUTH WEST SLOPES & PLAINS**

It has been a comfortable summer around Wagga so far this year. We have received some good summer storms for the north east, with Wagga BOM recording 150 mm (6 inches in the old language) over December and January. Heavy isolated storms have delivered considerably more in some areas.

The summer storms have resulted in widespread summer fallowing, targeting predominantly heliotrope, melon and hairy panic, and so on. The widespread demand for summer fallow chemistry has coincided with an increase in glyphosate prices and shortages of many summer herbicides including glyphosate, Garlon, LV 680 Ester and Amicide.

Some growers have opted to cultivate as part of their fallow program this season to reduce fallow herbicide use. It is still critical in my opinion to conserve summer moisture where possible for our winter programs.

A large amount of cereal and canola hay that was cut last spring has seen many growers confronted with difficult storage issues. Last season has highlighted the need for more research to manage the process of hay making and storage of failed crops.

Forecasts for grains prices in 2008 remain strong which will hopefully offset the increase in fertiliser and herbicide costs this season.

Particular focus will be on the following in preparation for winter crop 2008:

- Stripe rust management in wheat varieties including Ellison and Ventura;
- Availability and bulk-up of suitable resistant replacement varieties;
- Matching lowest starter phosphorus rate with target crop yield, MAP and DAP ex-works now quoted at \$1000–\$1050 per tonne;
- Reviewing target plant numbers and general crop management to suit target yields and expected growing conditions; and,
- An average wheat crop last season cost approximately \$250 per hectare to produce – it is now closer to \$300.

Growers will be looking to capture opportunities offered by the strong grain market forecast, whilst managing risk of high input prices and variable cropping returns from the past five seasons.

Hope everyone had a good break at the south coast and look forward to a decent start to the cropping season – as is currently predicted.

**Warwick Nightingale**  
**Landmark Wagga Wagga**  
**January 29, 2008**

**EASTERN MURRAY VALLEY**

The 2007–2008 winter crop harvest in the region saw a similar to slightly better result than 2006–07 – pretty crook! But sitting here now things are very different to 12 months ago.

About 95 per cent of the canola was cut for hay and approximately 30 per cent of the wheat. This time last year it all sold well out of the paddock. At the moment, 50 to 70 per cent of the crop hay is still in the paddock unsold with a fair proportion of this weather-damaged. My client feedback is saying most have not yet covered last year's costs. So the sale of the remaining crop hay at a reasonable price is critical to achieving close to or a profit of some kind.

The wheat that was left for harvest did generally give us some positive surprises. It's incredible here in a winter

dominant rainfall area that a wheat crop can achieve 1.5 tonnes per hectare with a total of 15 mm from July 10 to the end of the growing season.

Wheat crops in the 500 mm zone of the region averaged 0.75 to 1.25 tonnes per hectare on around 150 mm GSR. Those fortunate growers in the higher rainfall (600 mm) zones had crops up to and above 2.0 tonnes per hectare on around 200 mm of GSR.

But at the moment it's a different story.

Significant rainfall events in each of November, December and January have resulted in large populations of summer weeds. A large proportion of paddocks are now being sprayed for the second time in late January. The irony is some districts have had 200 mm plus since the end of the growing season.

At least the positive is that we should have 50 plus mm of stored moisture and some confidence going into 2008 planting.

Soil testing is in full swing at the moment with large numbers of paddocks being tested. Colwell P results are increasing at a rapid rate due to the recent poor years. It's now rare to find a Colwell P below 40 mg/kg and not unusual to find tests over 100 mg/kg.

Paddocks with a five to 10 years' continuous cropping history are testing around 50–60 mg/kg. This is giving growers confidence to significantly reduce phosphorus fertiliser rates.

The best word to sum up grower attitudes this year is 'nervous'. And it's easy to understand given two poor seasons in a row, inflated phosphate prices, and significant volumes of glyphosate sprayed at inflated prices – not to mention hefty grain contract losses from 2007.

**Corey Uebergang**  
**I.K.Caldwell Corowa**  
**January 30, 2008**

**MURRAY VALLEY RICE REPORT**

January weather was very favourable for rice production in the Murray Valley – it's just unfortunate that there is almost no crop to take advantage of the conditions.

General security irrigation allocations remain at zero, for the second year in succession. There are about half a dozen rice crops in the district being grown on ground (bore) water. Some bore pumpers who grew rice in previous years have switched to growing maize for the stock feed market this season.

The few crops that are in the district encountered good temperatures during early microspore, our most cold sensi-

tive growth stage. Minimum night temperatures fell below 15°C on only one occasion for the period 18 through 30 January.

**Panicle initiation**

Top dressing decisions were made this season without the benefit of satellite imagery to guide the sampling for tissue testing. It is amazing how quickly we came to rely on this technology and how greatly it is missed when not available.

The main concern will be keeping water salinity levels below the 2 dS/m (about 1300 ppm) threshold during flowering and grain development. This can only be achieved by draining significant quantities of water off the crops to use elsewhere (mainly on shirohie millet) – but growers are usually reluctant to do this. The above average summer rainfall has been a great benefit in this regard, topping up bays with fresh water.

In summary, although crops grown on groundwater in the Murray Valley are normally lower yielding, the good temperatures and rainfall have led to prospects of good yields.

**John Fowler**  
District Agronomist, Deniliquin  
January 30, 2008

**GRIFFITH RICE REPORT**

With zero irrigation water allocation at the beginning of the season it meant very few summer crops were sown in the area (with only a few rice crops, a few maize and grain sorghum crops and some forage maize and sorghum being sown). These crops have mainly been grown using bore water. For rice, temperatures have been well above average providing excellent conditions for growth.

Following good rains in the catchment before and during the Christmas period, general security irrigation allocations increased on January 15 from the pre-Christmas allocation of 3 per cent to 9 per cent. For growers who had a Snowy Hydro borrow from the 2002–03 season, this water will go towards their payback.

The summer rainfall, which to date has seen 59 mm for December and 47 mm for January (in Griffith), has meant a lot of emphasis has been placed on controlling summer weeds and maintaining clean fallows. The aim is to build the soil moisture profiles for 2008 winter crops.

**Rachael Whitworth**  
Extension Agronomist, NSW DPI,  
Griffith  
January 30, 2008

**Northern region**



**SOUTHERN LIVERPOOL PLAINS**

Summer sorghum, maize and sunflower crops are shaping up to be the best we have seen in many years which are following on from what was a very successful winter crop harvest. The Liverpool Plains has been luckier than most areas during the run of dry years, but we have been unable to string a good summer and winter crop together until now.

Some very timely rain in August, and then again late October, resulted in winter crop yields of up to 5 tonnes per hectare plus of bread wheat, durum and barley and 2.5 tonne crops of chickpeas. These yields coupled with historically high prices, has meant some very impressive cropping gross margins.

Summer crops have had a dream season so far with very mild summer temperatures and almost weekly rain. The early crops are at the early/mid grain fill stage with plenty of moisture in the profile for them to reach their potential.

The later crops, that are either booting or flowering, may require another good fall of rain for them to reach the same potential – this is because we are sure they will cop some roasting summer temperatures during February.

Insect pressure in the crops has been low so far, other than the odd heliothis in sorghum and sunflowers which is in contrast to what other regions have experienced.

Fingers crossed that this great season continues.

**Adrian Nelson**  
Pursehouse Rural Pty Ltd, Quirindi  
January 29, 2008

**LOWER NAMOI AND LIVERPOOL PLAINS**

The finish of the 2007 harvest was drawn out with intermittent showers and storms delaying harvest and causing some weather damage in later crops. With reasonable yields and good prices for all crops, growers were generally happy with their winter cropping efforts.

Even the weather-damaged feed grades sold for above average prices.

Favourable weather has continued throughout December into January and the summer crops are performing well. Sorghum crops are generally in the flowering to mid grain filling stage and have good soil moisture profiles.

With the return to 'normal' seasonal conditions many growers took the opportunity to late sow sorghum crops – these are also performing well with heads almost starting to emerge from the boot.

With the good prices being forecast late in 2007, a large area of sorghum was sown. This decreased the mungbean area dramatically.

Insect pressure has been light although Helicoverpa species have started to build up and monitoring is in full swing. Many sorghum and corn crops having had one insecticide application prior to the end of January.

Cotton crops were established in irrigated fields this season with little to no dryland area sown. Most crops consisted of genetically modified Bollgard and Roundup Ready varieties which have relished the good seasonal conditions. Most have only required their first irrigation in mid to late January. Low insect pressure has also led to varieties performing well and looking to have very good yield potential.

Roundup Ready flex cotton crops have performed extremely well and it is likely that this technology will be adopted on a larger scale next season with the release of more varieties to choose from.

Spring sown sunflowers are ripening off now with some impressive looking crops in the area. But again, late planting will only be a small area this year and insect pressure light.

Following for the 2008 winter crop is well underway, with large areas chemically fallowed. Due to high chemical costs many growers are considering mechanical tillage – but performing it as a last resort. With good rainfall and thick stubble cover, many fallows have stored a reasonable amount of soil moisture for the coming season.

Land values have increased slightly in 2007 with recent sales ranging from \$3000 per hectare for dryland country and \$7500 per hectare for irrigated farms.

**Chris Farlow**  
Landmark Agronomist, Gunnedah  
January 25, 2008

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**DARLING DOWNS**

**SUMMER CROP**

Rainfall is again the deciding factor for this season's summer crop, and this time the Western Downs farmers are doing the best as they catch continual rainfall, and even have some paddocks too wet to work. East of Dalby moisture stress is becoming an issue as the early crops fill grain, with many growers having received less than 15 mm over the past five weeks.

**Sorghum**

The first crops are being harvested in the Western Downs with yields up to 7.5 tonnes per hectare with the average expected to be around five to six tonnes. Quality is good so far, and crops are standing well. There are areas which have had such good rain that there are a few concerns about sprouting. Some late crops of sorghum and millet are still being planted.

Most of the early season planting is now at the spray-out stage, but crops on the Eastern Downs are struggling to maintain grain size as the dry conditions bite, and some ripening crops will not have enough green leaf to spray out.

There are also some extra problems in the Eastern Downs with standability a

concern and Rutherglen bug build ups of both adults and nymphs needing control in some cases.

Heliothis pressure, which was high in the early sown crops, dropped after the initial outbreak and has recently only been an intermittent problem. But sorghum midge have needed control for a few weeks and there are some isolated incidences of ergot.

The second wave of planting is now at late flowering to early grain fill, with the third plant in the vegetative growing stage. These crops will need rain very soon to maintain potential, as subsoil moisture is limited.

**Other crops**

Most of the early corn was grown on good dryland or limited irrigation country and has grown well. This has produced good silage yields or reasonable potential grain yields – but the late corn will need good rain.

Cotton is possibly two weeks behind this season, with the cool weather. Irrigated crops are looking fine but dryland crops need rain soon.

The mung bean acreage is again lower than hoped for, but the crops are growing well although still in the vegetative stage. Most were summer planted – the odd spring planted crop did struggle with wet weather leading up to harvest.

There has been an increase in millet and sunflower crops, with again early crops at this stage coming off best. The later crops need rain.

**Hugh Reardon-Smith**  
Agronomist Landmark, Pittsworth  
January 25, 2008

**SOUTH BURNETT**

I'm finally happy to report that it's a real change at the moment with the area being green instead of brown.

Some farmers have the audacity to actually complain about the wet weather. Most of them are trying to make hay when the Bureau's forecast was for fine conditions.

Overall the summer has been very mild with temperatures for virtually all of December and January well below average. It has meant that the rainfall received has been very effective with low evaporation rates. Most of the rain has been soaking rain rather than heavy runoff falls. Excellent crop and pasture growing weather – but not good for filling irrigation storages.

Some isolated small on-farm dams have been filled but there has been no

significant flows into Bjelke-Petersen and Boondooma Dams.

The area sown to peanuts is significantly down from previous years. The wetter conditions have meant foliar fungicide applications to control leafspot. Heliothis were widespread but little spraying occurred as peanuts have a very good ability to compensate for lost flowers.

Sorghum crops are generally very good. Heliothis has been patchy with a few crops sprayed. Ergot is the big concern at the moment. Early crops planted in October have virtually none, but later crops that have flowered during cool, overcast conditions are starting to show sign of ergot.

Corn crops are also looking good.

We have a few navy, mung and soybean crops that have been planted in January.

Overall the potential is good, but we still have little subsoil moisture and a week of heat wave conditions could make crops suffer. Most have had very soft growing conditions so far.

If these mild summer temperatures are typical of global warming, then bring it on!

**Ian Crosthwaite**  
BGA AgriServices, Kingaroy  
January 30, 2008

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**ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ**

This is an identical tractor, also located in New Zealand. It is owned by Lionel Donaldson of Valetta and was photographed at the same rally as the Mystery Tractor. It is a 1937 Australian McDonald Imperial single cylinder two stroke, valveless, crude oil tractor.  
(Photo IMJ)

