

**DISTRICT
REPORTS**

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of fertiliser applied in recent years. Herbicide resistance will continue to rear its ugly head and growers cannot be complacent about this serious threat.

The good news... many growers have a full profile of moisture already and it has been a cheaper summer this year to maintain fallows, so the outlook is nice and rosey!

*Penny Heuston
Heuston Agronomy Services*

Griffith Rice Report**Overview of the 2008 season**

Coming into the 2008 winter cropping season, growers were much better situated than the previous year as good rains in November (79.8 mm for Griffith), December (58.8 mm for Griffith) and January (51.6 mm for Griffith) provided a good basis to start. February, March and most of April proved to be dry, and the majority of crops were sown on the rain (22.4 mm for Griffith) received in late April.

While the season started well, the latter part of the winter and early spring had below average rainfall and varying extremes of temperatures during grain fill.

Irrigation in the district ceased at the end of April, with little water available for pre-irrigating winter crops and pastures. With the reduced rice area it also meant that little crop was sod-sown after rice.

Winter crops which were either pre-watered or watered up progressed well and were the crops which were watered in the spring, while crops sown on marginal moisture had patchy establishment and were stressed too much by the time water was made available in spring.

Although the majority of rice crops were sown mid to late October, rice sowing started in early October, with growers taking advantage of the warm to hot conditions of early spring. Given the above average weather conditions early on, crop establishment was generally good, although windy conditions played havoc with a number of crops.

With the reduced rice area, duck numbers were considerably high, which put pressure on establishing crops.

Given the drought and reduced water availability, a few growers are again trialling the technique of delaying the application of permanent water to rice to save water and improve water productivity. Delayed Permanent Water is a system where the crop is flushed and the application of permanent water is delayed until panicle initiation (PI). A farmer adaption is to flush to supplement rainfall to keep the crop alive; so the rice is stressed more between flushes.

Early season above average temperatures were followed by cool temperatures in December while temperatures in January and February were above average. Yield potential at the PI stage in early January was rated average.

Irrigation allocations increased in December and January following good rainfall in the catchments (26 per cent for the Murrumbidgee Valley). This was too late to affect the area planted to rice so farmers had to decide on the best use for this water – whether to pre-irrigate winter crops or carryover to the next season for either rice or winter crops.

Winter crops

Rainfall in the district in 2008 was variable and as a result winter crops in the district were also highly variable. Growers had some of their best and some of their worst

crops – often on the same farm. Frost and hot winds caused a lot of yield loss in dryland and irrigated crops.

Stripe rust had a major impact on wheat crops in the area, with crops requiring to be sprayed more so than in previous years due to the earliness of the epidemic. Aphids were also a problem for many canola and cereal crops and required spraying.

Winter crops which were either pre-watered or watered up performed well. Due to a relatively dry spring, and where growers had the water, wheat and canola received two spring irrigations.

Irrigated canola yields were once again disappointing for some with yields ranging from 1.5 to 2.5 tonnes per hectare (most around 2.0 tonnes per hectare).

Wheat yields varied with crops receiving two spring irrigations yielding well over 6.0 tonnes per hectare; one spring irrigation yielding up to 5.0 tonnes per hectare; with the majority around 4.0 to 4.5 tonnes. In some cases wheat yields were surprisingly good considering they received no spring irrigations.

Rice

The 2007–08 rice harvest commenced in mid March. Although one of the smallest rice crops ever grown due to lack of irrigation water because of the worst drought on record, yields were good – averaging 9.0 tonnes per hectare. Most of the rice was grown using bore water and, given the smaller crop size planted, growers were able to manage them under the best of conditions.

To the end of January, seasonal temperatures were well above average, providing excellent conditions for rice crop growth and development. These conditions also contributed to above average evaporation, resulting in above average water use.

Crops benefited from the thundery rain before Christmas and mid January. A short cold spell in mid January may have resulted in slight cold damage for early sown crops, explaining why some crop yields fell below expectations. The well below average temperatures in February may have also contributed to some disappointing yields from cold damage during flowering.

Cropping trends

The focus of irrigated growers in the district has turned to gross margin per megalitre. Growers will be looking at making the most out of their limited water. This will determine whether they sell their water, pre-water winter crops, pre-water for winter cereal grazing, spring irrigate winter crops or save their water for summer crops such as rice.

*Rachael Whitworth
Extension Agronomist, Griffith*

Queensland**Darling Downs****Overview**

The winter crop in 2008 appeared to have great potential in April, but with limited planting rainfall the final area was only 70 per cent of that expected. This was followed by one of the coldest winters for many years, but good subsoil moisture led to some good yields until rain during harvest caused major downgrading.

On the other hand, the good November and December rainfall set up the summer crop for growers planting early. Later plantings have a varied potential according to where the storm rain has fallen.

Winter 2008

Wheat was the major crop with plantings well up on 2007. Chickpeas also increased, while barley and oats were back in area. Establishment was good but 16 consecutive frosts in August slowed growth of all crops, killing some plants outright, especially in the chickpea crops. A couple of experimental crops of canola were grown and performed well, with more planned for 2009.

In-crop weeds were fairly controllable, but fleabane in the fallows caused problems and continues to be one of the most difficult weeds to control.

The main pest attacking winter crops was mice and a large number of crops were baited for control. Heliothis, as usual, needed control in chickpeas.

The most significant development was the visible spread of stripe rust throughout the area. Early applications of fungicide may have assisted wheat crops, but the supply of fungicides was very tight. Varieties with adult plant resistance coped much better. Overall, dry conditions in the second half of winter meant the disease did not reduce yield as much as expected, but it is now regularly expected on the Downs.

The blemish for winter came during harvest when rain started and continued, causing all the wheat not harvested to be downgraded to feed and in some cases to shell out, leading to total crop failures. It was a tough blow right at the end of the season.

DARLING DOWNS WINTER CROP YIELDS IN 2008		
Crop	Dryland	Irrigated
Wheat	0–2.0–3.5 t/ha	5.0–6.5 t/ha
Barley	1.5–2.5 t/ha	—
Chickpeas	1.1–2.0 t/ha	2.5–3.0 t/ha

Summer 2008–09

Early summer saw a strong planting of dryland sorghum and irrigated maize, followed by an increase in the cotton area due to better price and water outlooks. As the projected markets moved around, growers switched plans away from sorghum to mungbeans, soybeans, sunflowers and late dryland corn. Growers have matched plant population to stored moisture this season and paid attention more to required traits, especially standability.

Heliothis pressure was steady for the first half of the season, with sucking pests the main issue in the second half, especially mirids and green vegetable bugs in the pulse crops. One exception have been loopers, causing some serious leaf loss at times. There has also been an increase in powdery mildew.

The early planted grain crops have yielded above expectations, even with the second half of the season being dry. Part of the reason was a reduction in the planting rate for sorghum, allowing it to compensate for the conditions. Corn has performed well so far and even the late planted crop – which has undergone moisture stress – looks to be hanging on well.

The new variety of mungbeans, Crystal, has been commercially planted for the first time, with growers hopeful of improved yields over existing varieties. But all the mungbeans have struggled for moisture, and early yields are disappointing. The increase in soybean interest has seen a few crops grown dryland, and on the far eastern Downs there are some excellent crops, but harvest is still some weeks away.

DARLING DOWNS SUMMER CROP YIELDS IN 2008–09

Crop	Eastern Downs grain	Western Downs
Dryland sorghum	4.0–10.0 t/ha	3.5–6.0 t/ha
Irrigated maize	8.0–12.0 t/ha	
Dryland maize	3.6–7.5 t/ha	
Silage maize	35–60 t/ha depending on amount of irrigation water	
Mungbeans	0.5–1.2 t/ha	
Soybeans	Potentially to 5.0 t/ha	
Cotton	Dryland 3–7 bales/ha Irrigated expected 8–12 bales/ha	

Winter outlook for 2009

Soil testing for the winter crop is underway and many of the fallow paddocks have good stored moisture. Planting rain for oats has been patchy to date. Prime Hard wheat has the best potential gross margin for this winter, but rotational crops such as chickpeas and even canola will encourage some interest.

Vale Greg Cochrane

Mention should be made of the tragic loss of one of the Down's ag pilots in 2008, Greg Cochrane, while applying mouse bait. He is very much missed by the Eastern Downs farming community.

Hugh Reardon-Smith, Agronomist
Landmark, Pittsworth

Central Queensland

The issues

The difficulties of controlling feathertop Rhodes grass is easily the most discussed issue when Central Queensland farmers gather. Other issues include problems with grain delivery and storage and the price of glyphosate and fertiliser – especially nitrogen fertiliser.

The presence of feathertop Rhodes grass (*Chloris virgata*) (FTR) in CQ cropping areas especially on lighter clay, scrub and duplex soils has increased rapidly in recent years particularly in zero till farming systems. FTR establishes, seeds and wilts quickly, which leads to poor chemical uptake when sprayed.

A number of factors have caused an increase in FTR. These include a run of wet summers, and the adoption of zero till that creates a fine tilth allowing better establishment. Weed seed is no longer buried as it was in conventional tillage systems, thus allowing more seed to establish.

Farmers' experience is that throwing more glyphosate at FTR isn't working.

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MASSEY FERGUSON



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SECTION 3

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Challenger

Wheat and chickpeas 2008

Early planted wheat (April) in CQ normally has the highest yield potential but in 2008 only small areas were sufficiently wet to plant. Growers who had the planter capability to moisture seek and deep plant wheat did so early. Some of the CQ wheat crop was planted in late May, but the majority was planted in June, and excellent rain was received in June and July 2008.

A few farmers even planted wheat in late July and early August (a rare event in CQ). Regrettably many of the early planted crops suffered weather damage (black point, sprouting and low falling numbers) prior to harvest and were downgraded to feed quality. Frost caused considerable damage and yield decline in most wheat paddocks across CQ.

The major cause of lower than expected yields and protein (and quality down grades) in wheat crops was insufficient nitrogen even when yields were low to moderate. Yield expectations for late planted crops were low but many were pleasantly surprised.

The ability of chickpea to fix its own nitrogen – and a one in 30 year rainfall event in July 2008 – contributed to higher than expected chickpea yields for most CQ farmers. Good soil moisture late in the season enabled frosted crops to compensate for lost yield by setting new pods and with sufficient soil moisture, to finish the crop.

Depending on marketing options selected, CQ grain growers were either disappointed or devastated, in the price crash for grain following the highs of the 2007 season.

An example best demonstrates the massive price slide of Prime Hard wheat delivered to Gladstone Port. At harvest 2007 – \$400 per tonne; multigrade contracts in August 2008 – \$380 to \$400 per tonne; and in mid-November 2008 – \$258 per tonne.

The story for chickpeas was similar, with the price quote for delivery Gladstone Port, at harvest 2007 – \$600 per tonne; August 2008 – \$470 per tonne; and in mid-November 2008 – \$420 per tonne.

To add to their marketing woes, delivering grain to the local depot was a frustrating procedure for many growers.

Summer 2008–09

The 2008–09 summer rainfall in CQ has been above average in nearly all farming areas with some districts experiencing almost double the long term average during January–February 2009. The area south of Emerald was generally wetter than most other districts.

Considerable erosion occurred on some farms even in paddocks with good wheat stubble cover. Runoff is inevitable when the soil moisture profile is full and intense storms occur. Contrasting this is a relatively small area south of Bauhinia Downs in the Dawson Valley which is experiencing severe drought.

Sorghum 2008–09

A larger than normal spring sorghum crop was planted in CQ, estimated at about 25,000 hectares – a decision driven by a full soil profile, not price. Yields were good to excellent aided by good rain and milder summer temperatures.

While many growers considered planting less area in summer than normal because of the low sorghum price, the total area for sorghum this summer finished at about 200,000 hectares.

The majority of the crop (planted January 2009) is at or close to flowering and the yield potential looks even better than the past few years although some paddocks will struggle to finish a big crop. The 2008–09 sorghum crop has not suffered severe nitrogen denitrification as happened in many paddocks following the big wet in January 2008.

About 33,000 hectares of forage sorghum was planted this summer.

Mungbeans 2008–09

Many farmers in CQ especially in the Callide Valley choose to plant mungbeans with an above average area of 12,000 to 14,000 hectares planted. Most crops have been or are close to harvest and farmers have generally been pleased with the yield and quality (around 1.5 tonnes per hectare).

Cotton 2008–09

Cotton picking in the Emerald Irrigation Area is almost complete with yields close to average (8.5–9.0 bales per

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hectare) with a few crops doing better (over 10 bales per hectare). Some quality issues due to extended periods of cloud during the growing season and rain at picking, were experienced especially in the later crops.

Picking in the Dawson Valley has started with very good but variable yields occurring and fewer quality issues. The Fairbairn Dam at Emerald is 93 per cent full (1.23 million megalitres) providing assured water for at least two seasons which has allowed those Emerald cotton farmers who planted other irrigated crops when the dam was low, to once again forward sell and focus on cotton.

Sunflower 2008–09

The area planted to sunflower (6000 hectares) in CQ this summer, almost all of which is on the Central Highlands, is still lower than in past years (50,000 hectares) but up slightly from last year (5000 hectares). Factors that keep the sunflower crop low include price, the presence of tobacco streak virus and low stubble cover provided by sunflower in a zero till system.

Wheat and chickpeas 2009

A good soil moisture profile in March is an excellent start for what is expected to be a larger than average area planted to wheat (over 250,000 hectares) and chickpeas (over 50,000 hectares) in 2009. The capacity to deep plant chickpeas and its ability to fix its own nitrogen is likely to mean farmers will increase the percentage of chickpea in their winter crop planting. Some northern highlands farmers will begin deep planting chickpeas in early April in the Kilcummin district.

Central Queensland's status as an Ascochyta Blight-free chickpea cropping area is under threat following confirmed outbreaks in chickpea crops during the 2008 season. The property owners, DPI&F and Pulse Australia took action to ensure that the disease was contained, controlled and 'eradicated'. This should serve as a warning to complacent CQ farmers, ensuring they source all chickpea seed from CQ, all seed is treated pre-plant and good farm hygiene is practiced – especially for all machinery that is brought on-farm.

*Maurie Conway
QDPI&F Emerald*

South Burnett**Overview 2008–09 cropping year**

The 2008–09 summer cropping season started well. Crops were planted and were doing very well until the end of February. The potential of the season would have been a one year in 20 type of season.

As usual, the wheels fell off and most crops have hit the wall due to lack of moisture. Crops to the north of Kingaroy have been the worst affected. Rainfall modelling indicates that in seven out of 10 years there will be a dry finish to the summer cropping season.

Cyclone Hamish at the start of March was the turning point. Rainfall of at least 100 mm was predicted and all we got was a lot of wind to reduce the soil moisture even further.

In the 2008–09 cropping season, peanuts, corn and sorghum were the main crops planted. Smaller areas of millet and sunflower were sown. The area of bean crops – soy,

mung, adzuki and navy – has been the highest for many years. This was driven by the high fertiliser prices and the early season contract prices for pulses.

The winter of 2008 saw a moderate plant of barley and wheat. Virtually no chickpeas were planted.

Irrigation water is a big issue. No irrigation allocations have been allowed from Bjelke-Petersen Dam. At the end of March, Bjelke-Petersen Dam is only at nine per cent.

The South Burnett is still drought declared and farmers are eligible for Exceptional Circumstances assistance.

Peanuts

The 2008–09 peanut crop will go down as the crop that had heaps of potential. Harvest has just started and the early crops that had the better rain will yield well, but these will be the minority. Yields will range from 4.0 down to 1.0 tonne per hectare. Kernel size will be down due to the dry finish and so crop value will be down. Aflatoxin risk is also increasing and peanut prices are declining.

Corn

Loose grains on large cobs that had heaps of potential is the feature this year. It is not uncommon to find cobs with more than 800 kernels and a second cob with 500 kernels in dryland crops. This means a potential yield of 7.0 tonnes per hectare but shrinkage will reduce this significantly.

The drop in grain prices and slow demand will reduce profit from corn this year, especially due to the high fertiliser prices.

Sorghum

Sorghum yields were generally good as most crops were planted early and were finished before the real dry hit. Yields from dryland crops have been from 3.0 to 6.0 tonnes per hectare. Quite a few crops showed the effects of reduced fertiliser inputs.

Heliothis were quite prevalent. Sorghum grain price and fertiliser inputs were big issues.

Pulses

The area planted to pulse crops in the Burnett is the highest for quite a few years. This is due to the high prices offered and the high nitrogen fertiliser prices.

Mungbeans would have the greatest area followed by soybeans, navy beans and adzuki beans.

The dry finish has affected many crops. Mirids, heliothis, loopers and pod sucking bugs have been significant problems.

Winter cereals

Wheat and barley crops had a reasonable season with dryland yields from 1.25 to 4.9 tonnes per hectare.

It was the first year that stripe rust had been sprayed in the Burnett. Blotches in barley were also significant. Mice were a problem, but bait supply was an issue.

Cropping and livestock trends

More cropping country is also going under pasture by both cropping farmers and blocks bought by 'lifestylers'.

Property values

Prices for bare cropping land can be up to \$6400 per hectare. With the current returns from cropping, it is impossible to justify these prices.

*Ian Crosthwaite
BGA AgriServices, Kingaroy*