



DISTRICT REPORTS.....

Western region



NORTH

Dry, dry, dry – Geraldton has had one of the driest starts to the year on record. Strong high pressure systems are keeping the sky blue and soil dry. This in itself is not a major problem but some growers have concerns about very little subsoil moisture.

There are a couple of areas in the south east of the region that had significant thunderstorm rain in mid April and are seeding. This area extends from west Watheroo to north east Carnamah. Some growers have planted crop that is now up and away.

Many growers are seeding dry and making steady progress on their programs. Canola and lupins are the main crops planted to this point but wheat

will probably be underway next week. Heavy 2008 crop residues are posing a problem on many farms when the evening dampness arrives. Some growers are working late morning until late afternoon as dry stubble flows better through seeding equipment.

Many other growers have not started seeding and are waiting on rain to get underway.

The average break of season for our area is around May 20 so there is still a couple of weeks before the season could be classed late. The 28 day forecasts are for significant rain in the last week of May and the first week of June. If this comes off we are still in the running for a bumper season. Send her down Hughie!

**Peter Norris, Agronomy For Profit Geraldton
May 7, 2009**

SOUTH COAST

Season conditions on the South Coast have been mixed during the past two months. There has been rainfall over the entire area but it has been patchy and light. For those lucky enough to get over 10–15 mm of rain, the topsoil and subsoil moisture has joined up very nicely.

Where this moisture has joined up,

seeding has commenced. At this stage I would estimate that 25 per cent of the region's canola has been sown, 50 per cent of the lupins are in the ground and some small areas of barley and wheat,

The earliest sown canola is now at the two to three leaf stage whilst the majority is at cotyledon to one leaf stage.

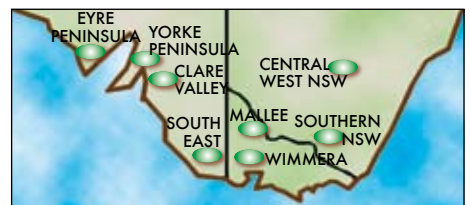
Apart from those growers lucky enough to be seeding, the remainder are continuing to knockdown paddocks, complete the last of burning windrows or chaff cart dumps and continue with last minute maintenance jobs on machinery.

Most growers are still very optimistic about this season. After 250–300 mm of summer rain the whole region has excellent stored soil moisture, with rain forecast for May 10–12, the remainder of the seeding should be completed by the end of May or the first week of June.

The only agronomic problem of concern is the threat of mice, there has been a big build up of mice over summer, it is not uncommon to see two to five mice holes per 100 metres, especially of the lighter textured soils. Baiting may have to commence if damage levels become obvious when crops are establishing.

**Quenten Knight, Agronomist
Precision Agronomics Australia
May 3, 2009**

Southern region



SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Temperature and rainfall

Conditions have ranged from cool to occasionally warm, but cooled noticeably in the last week of April.

The mean daily maximum and minimum temperatures were generally near average.

Strong winds on several occasions as weather fronts moved through.

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Good rainfall throughout most districts late in April provided a very timely start to the season.

April rainfall generally varied from near average to well above average, with totals ranging from less than 10 mm on parts of the east coast of Eyre Peninsula – to more than 100 mm in the Mount Lofty ranges.

In 2008 we experienced a very patchy start, quite good winter rains but an exceptionally dry spring.

The 2009 season to date

Paddock preparation and seeding has commenced in most districts following good falls in late April. But follow-up falls will be needed in many areas to enable seeding to be completed.

For much of the month there were limited paddock activities, with some burning off, cultivation and snail baiting as well as some dry seeding of cereals and pasture for early stock feed.

The timely and widespread April rainfall provided a very good start to the season and paddock preparation for seeding got underway.

The rain has also provided an ideal opportunity for farmers to get an effective early weed kill prior to seeding – at the near optimum time – over the next few weeks.

Cereals for stockfeed are going in as well as canola and beans. There is also seeding underway for some wheat and barley crops for grain, but mainly where there has been good weed control.

Seeding is expected to progress rapidly during the first few weeks of May. But there are many areas – particularly those that received lighter falls – which are drying quickly and will need follow-up rainfall soon to enable seeding to be completed.

The total crop area in SA is not expected to change significantly on previous years. But the area of wheat, durum, canola and chickpeas may be up slightly with a consequent reduction in the area of feed barley.

Pastures

Paddock feed continued to decline during April with pasture paddocks in many areas having very limited surface cover.

Pasture germination and emergence should be good with the recent rain in the absence of earlier false breaks. But grazing will need to be carefully managed and farmers may need to provide some ongoing supplementary feed for

stock until new pastures are established.

Perennial pastures as well as dry and early sown cereals are starting to provide a good source of feed.

**Peter Fulwood
Rural Solutions SA
May 10, 2009**

VICTORIAN MALLEE

Summer rains for November and December totalled 120 mm presenting a positive outlook for the upcoming cropping season. Following this rain there was no follow-up in January and February, and the confidence began to dwindle. But the months of March and April delivered about 25 mm each with the main falls occurring on Anzac Day.

This created a fantastic opportunity to get sowing on time or wait for a good germination of weeds. After a week there was a good green tinge across the Mallee, as the rains were general and this time, nobody missed out.

By the second week of May there was a lot of country sown, with a bit of sheep feed, oats and vetch sown dry earlier. With warm, moist soils, crops have begun to emerge well. Stored moisture was not high enough to give growers the confidence to sow canola, so this has been kept to a minimum. Input costs haven't helped with oilseed production in the Mallee.

There has been the normal area of chickpeas and lentils, but this year there has been more vetch sown than all the other legumes put together. This is due to the options available in a vetch paddock. It can be grazed, green manured, cut for good quality hay, or harvested for seed.

Many growers will be finished sowing in the first week of June now that we have enough moisture to germinate dirty paddocks.

Now, with the season off to a good start, there will be a focus on the forecast to deliver a long awaited wet season.

**Simon Severin
Landmark Berrillock
May 6, 2009**

**MURRAY VALLEY
RICE REPORT**

The rice harvest was not completed at the time of writing this report (May 6), which was surprising. The crops west of Deniliquin certainly looked dry enough, but were still having problems with high grain moisture.

Harvest east of Deniliquin is completed, with yields mostly exceeding 10

tonnes per hectare, which is a good result for ground water. It is pleasing to see these growers obtaining good financial returns, particularly as they took the risk of growing crops in a year where channel water was not readily available to back-up flows from bores.

Yields west of Deniliquin are also above the average for the higher salinity bore water. Growers using groundwater in this location normally budgeted on yields of eight tonnes per hectare or less. Early indications are that have most of this crop is yielding at least nine tonnes per hectare.

Growers monitoring water salinity levels were often pleasantly surprised at the low readings they were getting in crops this year. These were expected prior to the New Year, given the cooler conditions and November–December rainfall. But there is no obvious reason for the situation in the first three months of this year as rainfall was virtually non-existent and crops encountered some very hot and high evaporation conditions.

Weather conditions for harvest were mostly sunny and dry. The majority of the eastern crops were finished before the late April rain. Western crops have had good harvest conditions in early May and should be all finished by mid month.

The main question being asked by Murray Valley growers is when will they have sufficient water to grow their next crop? No one expected they would have had a three year break and many now fear it will extend for at least another season. Water storage levels are currently very low, inflows have been minimal and the dry weather is continuing (Deniliquin has only recorded 33.2 mm rainfall so far this year).

There is still plenty of time for the situation to turn around.

**John Fowler
District Agronomist, Deniliquin
May 6, 2009**

**GRIFFITH
RICE REPORT**

Irrigation allocations increased slightly in December and January following good rainfall in the catchments (resulting in 21 per cent for Murrumbidgee Valley general security irrigators, with an additional five per cent enhancement for Murrumbidgee Irrigation shareholders).

This was too late to affect the area planted to rice so farmers had to decide on the best use for this water; whether it be pre-irrigating winter crops or carrying

it over for the next season to irrigate rice or winter crops.

Irrigation in the district ceased towards the end of April, with little water available for pre-irrigating winter crops and pastures. Across the district between 15 to 30 mm of rain fell towards the end of April. This was a welcome relief for most growers, although follow up rain will be the key to keep it going due to a lack of subsoil moisture. This rain was the highest falls most had recorded in a long time.

Up to May 5 only 58 mm of rain has been recorded in Griffith for the year, compared to the long term average for the same period of 139 mm. This rain was enough for growers on the lighter soil types to commence sowing winter crops, but on the heavier clay soils (with-out any pre-irrigation) it was marginal.

With the reduced rice area little winter crop has again been sown after rice. The rice harvest started mid/late March and yields have been variable, and in most cases disappointing due to the record heatwave conditions of late January/early February.

It appears crops sown early are likely to have been effected by high temperatures during flowering which caused sterility. Rice is susceptible to high temperature damage at flowering when temperatures reach 38°C. This was particularly the case with crops flowering around February 7 in the hot windy conditions.

Following on from this hot spell there was cold weather with a number of night time temperatures around 13 and 14°C. This may have caused some cold sterility in many of the very late sown crops which were going through microspore at this time.

Despite these disappointments many growers would still consider saving water and growing rice next season if they were guaranteed a good rice price.

Rachael Whitworth
Extension Agronomist
NSW DPI, Griffith
May 7, 2008

SOUTH-CENTRAL NSW

Rainfall has yet again been very isolated over the past two months, with falls ranging from nothing to 100 mm. Areas lucky enough to have been under the right rain cloud have capitalised on the moisture and canola, lupins and wheat are now out of the ground.

Areas with higher rain events are achieving up to 60–70 cm subsoil moisture and good moisture at seeding

depths. Those areas that have missed out range from 0–30 cm subsoil, with the main issue being very marginal moisture in the top 10 cm. This is making planting decisions difficult.

Planting is about 50 per cent completed, with a reduction in canola area due to lack of subsoil moisture and rainfall. Canola is being substituted with chickpeas and wheat. There are some growers interested again in chick and field peas with an increase in planted area expected.

Weed burdens are not overly high at the present. There have been many reports of changing weed spectrums over the past one or two seasons. Most common 'new' weed problems are fleabane, bindweed and milk thistle becoming the most dominant.

The crops which have already emerged have again illustrated the importance in keeping adequate ground cover. Paddocks with greater than 60 per cent ground cover are planted and emerged but neighbouring paddocks with less than 20 per cent cover are still too dry to plant.

Press wheels again have shown their worth 10-fold with crops planted on very marginal moisture achieving 80 per cent plus establishment.

With everyone banking on a major rain event in late May, we will see the majority of the intended planting go in over the next two weeks.

Let's hope the rains find us all!

Jim Cronin
Landmark Agronomy, Forbes
May 12, 2009

CENTRAL WEST

The sowing rigs have enjoyed an early start this year. Lovely rain was received at Easter time with falls of up to 100 mm, although this decreased markedly as you go further west and south. Starting moisture varies between 30 cm to 120 cm, depending on summer fallow management, ground cover and of course the amount of precipitation received.

It is the best early break we have had this century, and farmers are 'Big Kev-ed' (excited) about this. So much so, that the biggest challenge has been to slow farmers down from sowing too early – 'cool you jets' being a common call by many agronomists around the place! Our farmers have a strong belief in global warming and the frost incidence is going to be less this year!

Crop mix has changed a little to reflect the early break. The area sown to lupins

and canola has certainly risen. Early wheat varieties have been popular, with a move to main season cultivars taking place at the moment.

Chickpeas are also being planted at the start of May, and hopefully they will have enough moisture under them to produce some pods and not just vegetation – at least they should have some height at harvest time this year, as opposed to our June sowings of late.

The longer growing season could put the crop under even more pressure from the dreaded *Ascochyta*, as disease levels will be very high after 2008.

Barley areas will be down due to its low commodity price and the earlier break – some early sown malt might go in against this trend.

Cotton harvest is just about completed with the area planted somewhere around the 4600 hectares – far short of the 50,000 that can be sown on full water. Yields are quite good but the extreme temperatures in January didn't help this cause.

Penny Heuston
Heuston Agronomy Services
May 8, 2008

Northern region



DARLING DOWNS

Overview

The later summer crops are being harvested and cotton picking is in full swing, with many respectable yields being recorded despite such a dry second half to the summer. The winter outlook is still waiting on rain – so far only isolated falls have been received.

Summer

Sorghum has performed well with most of the crop planted and harvested early. The early sowing has once again been the best option, mainly because of the rainfall distribution, but late crops have been fair, with fewer standability issues this summer. But the Chinchilla area only had average yields with less rain through the area.

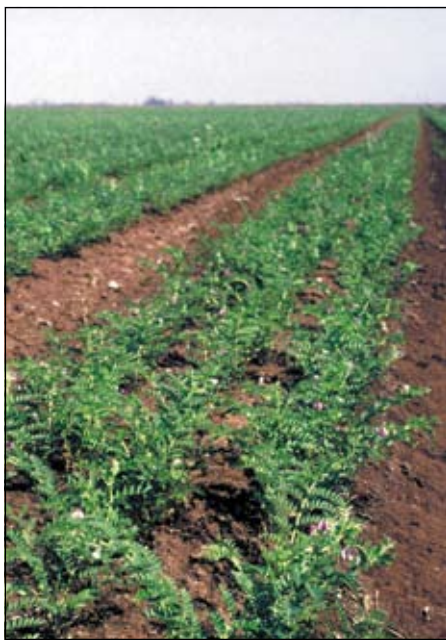
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Early maize was good but a large mid summer planting of dryland maize is approaching harvest and most probably storage, as markets have tightened up. Silage maize has yielded well for the conditions, and gritting corn has been more successful planted early, with some disease issues on later crops.

Pulse yields have generally been below expectations, mainly due to the lack of rainfall and shortages of irrigation water for a dry season. Mungbean yields were below par, with soybeans very dependent on late irrigations. But some of the new varieties with enough water have yielded in excess of 5.0 tonnes per hectare.

Cotton yields have been good with good quality, and dry conditions are aiding harvest. Dryland yields have been good and irrigated production also very good in areas.



Winter

The choice of winter crop varies across the Downs. On the Eastern Downs most growers are talking APH wheat as their main crop with some interest in chickpeas, but most of the sorghum country is too dry to double crop into chickpeas. Some oats have been planted and are growing on the isolated showers that have been around.

West of Dalby there is strong interest in chickpeas provided fresh paddocks can be found with enough of a buffer from last year's crop. Ascochyta in chickpeas and stripe rust in wheat are major concerns for all growers, and there is a lot more interest in a fungicide management program for the winter.

Despite low feed prices at present, there is a fair interest in barley as a rotation on wheat country. Overall the winter crop area is expected to be similar to last winter.

**Hugh Reardon-Smith
Agronomist Landmark, Pittsworth
May 8, 2009**

CENTRAL QUEENSLAND

In Central Queensland, a very wet January–February 2009 was followed with no rain in March and patchy rain in April. Falls of 30–50 mm were common but were variable with some farmers receiving less than 20 mm and others more than 60 mm. One farmer at Clermont said the 60 mm of rain they received has probably added between 0.6–1.2 tonnes per hectare to his sorghum crop and will ensure there are no screenings and minimal lodging.

Springsure to Rolleston is very dry and Emerald to Clermont is dry in patches. The Dawson Valley is also quite dry.

More than half of the sorghum crop south of Emerald – including the Dawson and Callide Valleys – has been har-

vested but most of the sorghum north of Emerald is yet to come off. While many sorghum crops in CQ suffered severe denitrification in 2008, which resulted in lower yields, sorghum crops this summer are good to excellent. Yields of 2.5–3.5 tonnes per hectare across the farm have been achieved with a few paddocks doing 5.0 tonnes which is excellent for CQ.

In most cases the quality is good with only a few reporting some pinched grain in the 'patches' that missed the April rain.

Feathertop Rhodes grass (*Chloris virgata*) continues to be a major problem and has caused yield losses of greater than one tonne per hectare in 'good crops' and complete failures in the patches where FTR dominates.

A large area – probably 70,000 to 100,000 hectares – of wheat has been planted. Establishment varies from excellent to 'send me rain quick so as to make me a good farmer'. There is potential for another 100,000–150,000 hectares of wheat to be planted if good rain – 50 to 100 mm is received in the next month.

A significant area of chickpeas – 35,000 to 40,000 hectares has been planted. But most is still to emerge and much of it has been deep planted to get to moisture.

**Maurie Conway
QPI&F Emerald
May 8, 2009**

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ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

The tractor is a 1920 Canadian 14-28, manufactured by The Alberta Foundry & Machine Company of Medicine Hat, Alberta. The horizontal two cylinder engine developed 28 HP. Both the single rail chassis and the rear wheel spokes were manufactured from Canadian hardwood. The photos were taken in Canada and are of the only two remaining examples. The green tractor photo shows the author at the controls.

