



DISTRICT REPORTS.....

Western region



NORTH

The remnants of tropical cyclone Nicholas dropped rain to the eastern and northern fringes of the region around February 21. Some areas have had up to 150 mm of rain for February. Many areas have had significantly less than this with very little in most coastal parts. Again rainfall was patchy with some districts only getting small to moderate falls and the odd storm a couple of km wide delivering a deluge.

Wind is again playing havoc and paddocks with little cover have dust rising from them. These bare paddocks also suffer when heavy rains fall and run-off. Paddocks with good cover close by retain much more of the heavy rain and will grow a better crop in '08 due to the subsoil moisture they now have.

Summer weed spraying is well underway (again) on most properties in the wet areas. The big challenge is getting herbicides.

Triclopyr has been very difficult to source and we are changing herbicide mixes to gain melon control without it. At this stage we are making do, but herbicide supplies look like being tight for most of the year. This could pose the biggest challenge for the year.

So far the year looks promising with much of the lower rainfall areas getting good summer rains. Let's hope that the mythical late April opening rain arrives so we can capitalise on the fantastic grain prices we have on offer at the moment.

Peter Norris, Agronomy For Profit, Geraldton
March 4, 2008

SOUTH COAST

Seasonal conditions have been dry over the past two months with some patchy isolated thunderstorms. Most growers have now finished their summer weed control programs, deep soil coring is showing the stored soil moisture levels are still quite reasonable and should provide a good foundation for the coming crop winter crops.

Growers are keeping busy with machinery maintenance, particularly seeding equipment. Many growers are also spending money on soil amelioration with large quantities of gypsum or lime being spread to address specific soil chemical and texture issues.

Most growers are now hoping that March remains dry and the season break occurs during mid April. This would be ideal to get canola planting underway and hopefully capitalise on the historically high prices.

Quenten Knight,
Precision Agronomics Australia
February 26, 2008

Southern region



SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Weather and rainfall

- February was warm to hot with several very hot days early and mid month. Mean daily maximum and minimum temperatures were generally 1–2°C below average.
- Occasional stronger winds later in the month raised dust in a number of areas, with soils now extremely dry and surface cover continuing to decline.
- There was very little rainfall in most districts apart from a few scattered, light falls in some near coastal areas later in the month. Monthly rainfall varied

from below average to near average in parts.

Crops

- Harvest is now finished in all districts.
- A few cereal stubbles have been slashed in preparation for the coming season.
- There was very little spraying for summer weed control given the dry conditions.
- Reports of a slight increase in cultivated paddocks in some areas, most likely due to increased prices for glyphosate.
- Farmers on Yorke Peninsula used the limited hot weather to get some snail control via cabling.
- High prices and limited availability for commonly used nitrogen and phosphorus fertiliser blends have caused many farmers to review their fertiliser strategies and prompted increased interest in alternative fertilisers.
- Farmers have been taking delivery of fertiliser requirements where possible to ensure availability when the season starts.
- There are reports of canola seed shortages for some of the preferred varieties.
- Total crop area in 2008 is likely to increase marginally, although the crop mix will vary depending on the timing and amount of the opening rains.
- The increased crop area is expected to be mainly for wheat and to a limited extent canola, in response to the current high prices.
- In the South East harvesting of dryland lucerne is largely finished with near average yields, while irrigated lucerne crops are now starting to be harvested.
- Final estimate for season 2007–08: Total crop area of 4.01 million hectares with total crop production of 4.97 million tonnes.

Pastures

- Paddock feed remains adequate in most areas as farmers quit surplus stock. But the feed situation has deteriorated over the past few weeks and many paddocks now have limited surface cover.
- While cereal stubbles are still providing some feed, pasture paddocks are largely grazed out.

- Many farmers are now providing supplementary feed for stock either in paddocks or in some cases using confinement feeding systems.

Peter Fulwood, Rural Solutions SA
March 6, 2008

VICTORIAN MALLEE

January rains led to many paddocks requiring a summer herbicide application to keep such weeds as heliotrope, melons, caltrop and summer grasses from getting beyond control.

A review of herbicide options was essential to keep costs down with the rising cost of glyphosate products. Some have been using Gramoxone while others have reverted to greasing up the wheel bearings on the cultivator or blade plough and resurrecting it.

February was the first calendar month in four years where we haven't measured any rain... Yes we can still break records in the Mallee on how dry it's been. To be positive though we have been prone to getting reasonable falls, just at the wrong time, so there is one dry month out of the way for 2008.

We have been farm planning and the general theme this year is soil test, re-

duce fertiliser rates where possible, and grow more cereals, less canola and legumes. While we haven't had any breakthroughs in new varieties in the past couple of seasons, there has been a keen interest in Peake wheat, Hindmarsh feed barley and Buloke malt barley.

There will again be a solid planting of chickpeas which will replace some of the previous field pea and lentil plantings.

We now await a timely break to get the season underway.

Simon Severin
Landmark Berriwillock
March 4, 2008

WIMMERA

Last year, my January report pencilled in a wet Easter, bogged tractors and urea spreading by plane in the Wimmera.

Well all started on track with a generally wet start to the year and heaps of optimism from district growers. By June or July there was concern over what to do with all the grain to be harvested in the lead up to Christmas.

History shows there was no need to worry. Rainfall ceased in mid winter only to recommence in mid summer leaving

crop yields once again in the doldrums. Most growers were able to get out with costs covered thanks to buoyant grain prices where early contracts had not been entered into.

Further south, growers enjoyed average yields following a Melbourne Cup rain, and were able to cash in on the prices being offered. Now in 2008 it is time to 'go again'.

My prediction for the Wimmera is wall to wall cereals this year as growers minimise financial risk and strive to produce cereal grain to satisfy an over-heated market. Whilst this is a good strategy in 2008, it will invariably lead to increases in root disease and depletion of soil nutrients where adequate fertiliser is not applied.

A better option may be to cash-in on world record oilseed prices by growing new high yielding hybrid canola varieties. Roundup Ready canola is also being introduced in 2008 to provide another option for some growers.

High prices are also overflowing into pulse crops such as peas, beans, and chickpeas, so these crops should also be included in the rotation where appropriate.

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With good summer rains over much of the eastern Wimmera, there is soil moisture available to grow most crops with some confidence. Growers should not throw out good rotations purely to chase cereal markets as root disease and nutrient drain will catch up with them in the near future.

Easter is early this year, so we will possibly not see a wet Easter. Pack up the family and go camping. Bugged tractors and urea by plane are a real possibility if the wet season in northern Australia is anything to go by – so get the crop in early.

Be prepared for product shortages in both fertilisers and chemicals this year as we see world demand for inputs respond to higher commodity prices. Be sure your supplier is aware of your requirements today.

Mike Laidlaw, Harbergers Farm Supplies – March 3, 2008

LEETON

After another winter crop failure and no rice crop for the first time ever for most of the local irrigation farmers, there is now a tentative mood of optimism as grain prices and climate indicators move together in a positive direction.

Rainfall since November has been very variable with 186 mm recorded on our farm. Total rainfall for 2007 was 278 mm which is 70 per cent of normal – however almost half has fallen in the last two months. General security allocations for the Murrumbidgee River are at 13 per cent. But for most irrigators, water paybacks are required to Snowy Hydro before they can access water to provide a start for winter crops.

The summer rainfall generated a multitude of weeds which have been controlled by sprays, but as chemical shortages occurred, the cob webs were blown off disc cultivators and diesel tanks refilled. Caltrop, paddy melon and wireweed were common and all three don't mix well with tined sowing machinery and if not sprayed, have been disced out.

Many farmers were affected by contract wash-out costs, and with no water allocation guaranteed for next season, most are reluctant to commit to the current good prices on offer. Most of the grain grown locally has a domestic market, and the recent approval of the Coleambally ethanol plant and 6000 head dairy, is good news for grain growers

with another market opening for high starch grains.

Fertiliser prices appear to be good for shareholders. But as the shock of current prices for DAP hit home, the local 55,000 head cattle feed lot has run out of composted manure as growers switch to other forms of phosphorus. Lower rates will obviously be used on paddocks where crops failed to make it through to harvest last year.

Our peak summer harvest months of March and April will be very quiet with the closest small rice crop about 15 km away. Hopefully it will be the last time we are in this situation with extra time to prepare for winter cropping and holidays at Easter.

The Irrigation Research and Extension Committee (IREC) is having a strategic planning day on April 1 to map a way forward given the reductions in research funding which are happening as a function of the drought. All farmers are welcome to contribute.

Peter Draper, Leeton March 5, 2008



Ready for planting at Leeton.
(Photo Peter Draper)

SOUTH WEST SLOPES & PLAINS

Last couple of weeks have been dry with the start of autumn bringing some quite warm days. Well managed fallows have stored good levels of soil moisture.

Summer conditions this year have provided favourable levels of mineralisation with good levels of nitrate showing up in soil tests.

It is also pleasing to note that the general trend for soil phosphorus is up with many paddocks recording in excess of 50 ppm Colwell.

The number of paddocks being tested for phosphorus has increased this season, with growers attempting to allocate their precious starter fertiliser supply with great care.

The run on fallow chemistry has subsided recently, but many herbicide suppliers are warning of potential shortages

in mainstream herbicides like atrazine, simazine and trifluralin.

Some new products released for winter crop 2008 include:

- Roundup Ready Canola varieties from Pioneer, Pacific Seeds and Nuseed;
- Crusader post emergent herbicide for wheat from Dow;
- Hombre and Zorro seed dressing from Bayer;
- Granular inoculant from Becker underwood and Philom Bios; and,
- Boxer Gold pre emergent from Syngenta

Growers are planning their winter crop programs with cautious optimism. It appears at this stage that both cereal and canola areas will increase slightly at the expense of newly sown pastures. The season forecast is currently indicating drier weather for June, which will be OK if we receive the predicted above average rainfall for April and May to get the crops in.

**Warwick Nightingale
Landmark Wagga Wagga
March 5, 2008**

CENTRAL WEST

A rosy report from the central west NSW where the tables have most definitely turned – yeah! Above average rainfall has fallen for the calendar year and this added to the great rain received in November and December 2007, has led to robust moisture profiles. Ducks are still swimming on paddocks in some cases!

Nyngan has received 170 mm for the year so far and Dubbo close to 200 mm, being summer storms, many individuals have totals a lot higher than this. The Mara region, north of Warren/Nyngan has had 250 mm this year alone.

So the consequences of this? A busy summer of weed control. Some farmers are up to their fourth spray so far and sowing is still six weeks away. Chemical shortages have caused a fair bit of grief and some interesting combinations of chemicals onto to paddocks in an effort to control problem weeds. Couple this with the price hike in glyphosate, and summer has been expensive.

It is disappointing to see so many devils tools (disc ploughs) in paddocks this year. Prickle and Kelly chains are all the vogue at the moment – 'The Kelly Gang' I heard them referred to the other day! Remember these are still a tillage implement and have left us with some scary hard set red soil paddocks – use with caution I say from my soap box.

For many, a make or break year

Farmers' sentiment this year is one of quiet optimism and/or fear. For many, this year is the last roll of the dice, but as one farmer put it to me he hasn't seen a start with such potential since he was two foot tall! And commodity prices are booming.

Fertiliser is a burning (in the pocket) issue this year, but can you afford not to use it? Some growers are talking of putting no starter fertiliser on which to me is false economy. Rates are understandably being cut as the price has tripled. There is also a lot of interest in more biological approaches to fertiliser and soil health.

Crop mix will be more greatly dominated by wheat than is the norm. This is obviously due to the high commodity price for this product, the need for cash flow and the decreased stock numbers due to the drought.

Many farmers are reluctant to grow too great an area to rotation crops due to the increased risk and possible high returns from wheat.

But if commodity prices are to stay buoyant into 2009, and high yields are aimed for, we need rotation crops in the system. Don't cut off your nose to spite your face peoples!

Rotation crops will include an increased area of canola. This would not be hard after the past number of drought years and late breaks, the result has been a shortage of planting seed for canola.

Chickpeas will continue to increase in area, along with a few field peas and lupins for good measure.

Threats this year will come from diseases. Stripe rust will be aggressive with such a mild, wet summer with volunteers present providing the green bridge over warmer months. Be wise with seed dressing choice. Yellow leaf spot could also rear its ugly head if wet conditions continue – ascochyta in chickpeas also falls into this category.

Although plenty of rain has fallen, our catchment hasn't been so lucky with only moderate increases. Irrigators have been given five per cent allocation so far.

There are some lovely dryland summer crops in the district, sorghum the winner there. Some huge bulks have been coming off forage sorghum crops that have been cut for silage. Very limited plantings of irrigated cotton and corn, mainly limited to those farmers with bores in the Narromine area.

Penny Heuston
Heuston Agronomy Services
March 5, 2008

Northern region



DARLING DOWNS

Overview

What a pleasure it is to report after some decent rainfall events, with February's rain in many cases being double the long term average, and improving the later summer crops and lifting prospects for the upcoming winter.

Summer crop

The sorghum harvest is now about 70 per cent completed. The quality has varied, with the earliest crops being mainly sorghum 'one' and yielding around five tonnes per hectare plus.

But the second wave of planting saw crops which set grain for a big yield but ran into dry weather producing screenings – some in excess of 50 per cent. The next wave of harvesting returned to better quality and yields have been good to excellent.

The best yields have been in the areas of highest rainfall, such as Dalby, Chinchilla and other pockets such as south of Pittsworth. Many crops in these areas have averaged 6.0 to 7.5 tonnes per hectare, but overall yields have varied between 3.5 to over 10 tonnes per hectare, with most around five tonnes per hectare.

Small grain has been the main quality issue, but on the western Downs there has been a small amount of shot grain.

Spring sown corn crops went mainly for silage with yields very dependent on in-crop rainfall, whilst summer sown corn is ripening now. Mung beans could be heading for one of their best seasons for a while with varied pest pressure, with mirids and green vegetable bugs being the main problems, along with powdery mildew.

The cotton crop is slowly progressing but suffering from the cool conditions and amount of cloudy days this summer – dropping the day degree totals – as it approaches cut out.

Winter crop

The good rain through the summer, and the consistently improved indicators, have encouraged most growers to plan

to plant more winter crop this year. Most fallow paddocks now have a full profile of moisture, and wheat will be the dominant crop. There may also be some paddocks double cropped on the Western Downs after their heavier rainfalls.

Some oats are being planted now but the barley area will be much less than the wheat, and the chickpeas probably only partially up on last season. This is mainly due to the gross margins favouring cereals.

Landmark's gross margin calculations show that despite variable costs rising 25–30 per cent this season, the improved cereal prices have still increased gross margins by 20–50 per cent over last winter.

The only major crop with a lower gross margin this winter is chickpeas, as its price remains static.

Supply and cost issues

We have seen some major rises in the costs of fertiliser, seed and herbicides, particularly glyphosate, and this is leading to some growers who are not set up for full zero till, returning to cultivation for weed control.

On top of that the supply of products is not guaranteed with periodic shortages expected, so despite the better prices and potential returns, this will still be a challenging period for growers across the Downs.

Hugh Reardon-Smith
Agronomist Landmark, Pittsworth
March 4, 2008

SOUTH BURNETT

Rain has continued to fall on the South Burnett. So much so that we have commented on all the rain rather than complaining about it!

Most areas would have had between 250 to 400 mm, so far, in 2008. The season has certainly been characterised by very mild temperatures. We probably have had a week of summer this year, most days are more typical of mid autumn temperatures.

There has actually been some runoff rain with Bjelke-Petersen Dam at 18 per cent instead of two per cent and Boondooma Dam at 50 per cent.

Crop areas are peanuts down, sorghum up, corn slightly down, beans (mung, navy and soybean) up from a very low level.

Crops are generally looking very good, but the good season has bought its share of issues:

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- Waterlogging in some crops of corn and sorghum;
- Ergot in sorghum;
- Grain sprouting levels of up to 50 per cent in some sorghum crops;
- High numbers of green vegetable bugs in bean crops;
- High numbers of soybean loopers in bean crops;
- Extremely high numbers of beet web moths;
- Moderate numbers of mirids in mungs;
- Very high numbers of heliothis in early sorghum crops, but natural NPV has kept later numbers down;
- Leafspot in peanuts has been the worst for many, many years; and/or,
- Hay making has been a nightmare for most haymakers.

Crop potential is good, just waiting for the wheels to fall off. It's a bugger to have that pessimistic attitude, but we now expect it.

Ian Crosthwaite
BGA AgriServices, Kingaroy
March 4, 2008

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

After an extremely wet start to the year the outlook for 2008 is very positive.

In the north around Clermont, falls for the year total 459 mm whilst in the south, falls for the year have totalled upwards of 224 mm in some areas. The projected plantings have resulted in a summer crop area of 150,000–200,000 hectares across the Central Highlands

With the rain making some later plantings difficult to get in under the wet conditions, the decision for some growers has been to hold off planting a late summer crop and wait for a winter crop.

Wheat prices at the moment are making this a good decision.

The rain has stopped falling allowing the sorghum harvest to get underway, and there have been mixed results around the district. Spring sorghum plantings have been extensively damaged in some areas with an estimated 15–20,000 hectares weather damaged with a severe loss of grain quality and weight. Some so severe it will either be slashed or ploughed in to allow a winter crop to be planted.

The best of the spring sorghum is yielding up to three tonnes per hectare but is either sprouted or mouldy and marketing this is proving to be very difficult.

But later planted sorghum has fared a bit better with some crops looking very good with harvest due to begin within weeks. The majority of the later planted sorghum is one to two months away from harvest.

Mungbeans have fared a little better with very little Tobacco Streak Virus (TSV) damage reported, which is pleasing to see. The rain has actually helped to suppress thrips numbers (the vector responsible for transmitting TSV). These crops are currently being sprayed out and are likely to yield 1.0 to 1.5 tonnes per hectare. Weather conditions at harvest will be critical in determining quality of the mungbeans.

There has been an increase in sunflower planting from that of the past few years, with the earlier plantings only just out of the ground now and the latest being planted now. Early indications are that it may be very risky with reports of silverleaf whitefly damage and the prospect of further TSV damage later on combined with a lack of ground cover due to the heavy rainfall. It is estimated that around 6000 hectares have been planted.

The prospect of a good winter crop is looking very likely with most soil moisture profiles full. Even if no rain is received between now and late March to early April, chickpeas can be deep planted into moisture.

The extended wet weather has caused an extensive germination of weeds so control of weeds will be the highest priority for most farmers. Feather top Rhodes is becoming an increasingly important weed on more and more farms across the highlands. It is proving to be a difficult and expensive weed to control. A taskforce of scientists, consultants and farmers has met to pool knowledge on what works, what doesn't and determine 'where to from here'.

William MacSmith,
DPI&F Extension Officer, Emerald
February 26, 2008



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ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

The Mystery Tractor is a magnificent unrestored example of an International W 30. During the years preceding and immediately following World War 2, these reliable American machines were the top selling broadacre tractors throughout the Australian wheat fields. This particular example was discovered by the author in the Gunnedah district of NSW and very smartly became part of his collection. (Photo IMJ)

