SECTION 3
DISTRICT REPORTS
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Western Australia

Northern

The 2007 season was another very dry year in the Northern WA wheat belt. Growing season rain ranged from highs of 220 mm down to under 90 mm. The patchy areas that received good rain did have reasonable crop performances but they were still well down on average yields.

Most areas had no useful seeding rain until the last week in June. Many paddocks had to be sown after this date to get cover back onto paddocks. After the very dry 2006, the landscape has been extremely bare and wind erosion has been a constant threat.

The region did get some late rain that enabled the low yielding crops to fill grain well. CBH crop estimates were exceeded due to September rain.

The CBH estimate was for just under 400,000 tonnes for the port zone and receivals tallied just under 450,000 tonne. This port zone usually produces more than two million tonnes.

Many CBH sites were not opened to take grain in 2007. Low harvest heights also gave delivery problems with soil contamination for some growers.

Many growers who hedged grain prices during 2007 have had difficulties meeting their hedge commitments.

It has been very expensive for many farm businesses to wash out hedge positions and many farmers will probably stay away from risk management tools in future. The changes to 'limit up' amounts on futures contracts and the hedge funds 'playing' in futures markets mean a grain grower can get a long way out of the money in a hurry.

Many will opt to produce first and sell only when they have grain on hand.

AVERAGE YIELD ESTIMATES FOR 2007

Crop	Western Zone	Central Zone	Eastern Zone
Wheat & barley	1.0–2.5 t/ha	0.5–1.6 t/ha	0.0–1.6 t/ha
Lupins	0.8–1.2 t/ha	0.3–1.0 t/ha	0.0–0.4 t/ha
Canola	0.4–0.9 t/ha	0.3–0.9 t/ha	Nil grown.
Rainfall April–Sept	160–220 mm	125–180 mm	80–160 mm

Windrowing canola in WA's Geraldton district.

Tanami canola.

Wheat

Better yields came from paddocks that were sprayed out in 2006. Much of the eastern zone only had 300 to 500 kg per hectare yields and many paddocks in the south east of the region were abandoned. Grain quality was surprisingly good with very few screenings. This was probably due to the late start and very little nitrogen being applied to these crops.

Barley

High protein and high screenings were an issue in malt varieties with very little making quality. Feed varieties did OK but generally, barley did not handle the dry conditions as well as wheat.

Lupins

Yields were well down and many crops were sprayed out. The poor prices offered for lupins are a major threat to this crop staying in farm rotations.

Canola

Crops were generally only grown in western areas and on deep soil types. This produced reasonable yields given the season. With high canola prices, this crop gave the highest gross margins on most farms where it was grown.

Livestock

Sheep are leaving the landscape in droves. There are around 20 per cent of the numbers there were two years ago. With little cover on paddocks, and wind erosion events common, they will not be back on many farms in the next few years. Many properties that have bred sheep in the past will move away from them totally in the short term but may trade in and out of them as seasons allow.

Cropping trends

The move away from stock, and the landscape being bare, means many farms will be sown fence to fence in 2008. Cereal crops will take up most of the extra area but the canola area will also be up.

High grain prices mean crop area will increase in 2008 and other enterprises are coming under pressure to stay in the farming system.

Land sales

Property sales have been stagnant with very few properties selling. Vendors have generally had to reduce their price expectations to get properties to move. Quality country is maintaining the recent high prices but eastern areas have seen prices drop marginally. A good season will again see prices on the upward trend.

Peter Norris, Agronomy For Profit and Synergy Consulting, Geraldton.

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South Coast

Overview

The 2007–08 season started very wet with a big January storm dumping between 100 to 200 mm over the entire region. So once again this rain brought on a big summer weed spraying program but it also provided soil moisture reserves which were extremely beneficial later in the season. The season opening occurred during mid April with good rains which continued well into May – most crops were well and truly sown by the end of May.

Crop establishment was excellent and there were very few agronomic problems, in fact the season was almost textbook. Rain continued to fall at the right times and the region was looking at a decile 8–9 year. But history does repeat itself at times. The spring was starting to be very reminiscent of 2006 with poor finishing rains, but fortunately 2007 did not have the hot north winds of the previous season. In the end, crops finished very well with no major frost problems. Most growers at least achieved average yields. Grain prices were very good, and coupled with good yields, resulted in most south coast growers having the best financial returns that they can recall.

Wheat

Yields ranged from 1.5 to 4 tonnes per hectare, which is in line with five year averages. The lower yields came from the lower rainfall zones or areas that experienced frost damage.

Barley

Yields ranged from 1.8 to 5.5 tonnes per hectare – again in line with five year averages.

Canola

Yields ranged from 0.7 to 2.5 tonnes per hectare. The best yields came from high rainfall areas to the east of Esperance which experienced a better spring than most areas.

Pulses

Lupin yields ranged from 1.0 to 2.8 tonnes per hectare; field peas 0.2 to 2.5 tonnes per hectare; and faba beans 1.8 to 2.8 tonnes per hectare.

Cropping and property trends

There is a trend to more crop area on the south coast. The area sown to canola will increase at the expense of pasture or livestock and to some degree other legume break crops such as peas and lupins.

Wheat area will also increase at the expense of barley with more wheat-on-wheat. Growers are unsure of forward barley pricing and are more confident with forward pricing of wheat.

Growers are starting to look more closely at variable rate fertiliser application with the record high fertiliser prices.

Property values are up once again – a property 65 km to the north east of Esperance in 450 mm rainfall country, recently sold for $2700 per hectare. The property has average wheat yields of 3.2 tonnes per hectare and canola around 1.4 tonnes. Another property 90 km north of Esperance in 375 mm rainfall country sold for $1500 per hectare with average wheat yields of 2.2 tonnes and field pea yields of around one tonne per hectare.

Quenten Knight
Precision Agronomics Australia

South Australia

Overview

2007 was the warmest year for South Australia since statewide records began in 1910 and the 15th consecutive year of above average temperatures.

Winter-spring rainfall for 2007 was the lowest on record for the state and continued the below average rainfall seen over the past 10 years.

Crop yields were extremely variable even at the most local level, ranging from those paddocks struggling to return seed through to above average yields in some of the later areas on Kangaroo Island and the lower south east.

Severe frosts in the upper south east in early October had a significant impact on some crops, particularly canola, with estimates of up to 30 per cent yield loss in parts.

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 2008 winter 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 was completed by late March with near average yields.

Total crop area in 2007 was 4.01 million hectares with crop production of an estimated 4.97 million tonnes.

Western Eyre Peninsula

Harvest was completed before the rains could affect grain quality.

Eastern Eyre Peninsula

Generally 90 per cent of the harvest was finished in eastern areas around Arno Bay through to Rudall by the start of December.

Yields varied from 0.5–1.0 tonnes per hectare for wheat and were similar for barley, although there were a lot of barley crops with boron toxicity problems given the extremely dry conditions in spring, with some of these areas being non harvestable.

Pea crops yielded poorly with some also not harvested and left for livestock grazing.

Around Mitchellville was very poor with reports of farmers not even being able to recover any seed and a similar situation around Buckleboo.

Because the 2007 season started reasonably early, there were significant areas of pulse crops (predominately peas with smaller amounts of lupins and beans) planted. Cash flow demands will make this less likely to occur in 2008 for all but the more reliable areas, as farmers seek to recover from the past two seasons.

Other than the wetter parts of the Cleve hills, not much