Property sales have been more frequent in the past three years and land prices have reflected this. Some farmers who don't have children returning to the farm have chosen to get out rather than get bigger. Some property has been snapped up by prospectors coming from other areas, who can see the potential return on capital in the Mallee environment.

Land is valued at around $1000 to $1500 per hectare where in the past it may have only reached $750 to $1200. While cropping country is increasing in value, it may be proportionally more affordable than land in some higher rainfall districts.

Rising fertiliser and chemical prices have been particularly unwelcome following a poor season, but the optimism and character of Mallee farmers is still there and a bumper 2008 season with good prices will restore growers' faith in their lifestyle.

Simon Severin
Landmark – an AWB Company, Berriwillock

New South Wales

South West Slopes & Plains

Overview

The Wagga area had an excellent start to 2007 with optimum planting dates being achieved for canola and lupins. Good pre-sowing weed knockdowns were also generally achieved prior to sowing.

The first frost occurred much later than usual, but when it came, it came hard. Any later (June) sown crops, particularly field peas, emerged very slowly and pasture production slowed dramatically.

Average rains were received through to the start of August when crop potential looked promising and the seasonal forecast at the time gave a positive outlook. On this basis a considerable area of crop was topdressed with urea pending a predicted rain front which only produced three mm.

From that point, the season deteriorated dramatically with no substantial rainfall until the first week of November. This resulted in generally poor grain yields and many crops being cut for hay.

Later planted crops generally suffered the most with poor hay yields and many later crops failing to be harvested. Crops to the south east of Wagga around Holbrook which generally finish later, hung in until the November rains – resulting in some very good yields.

Canola

Around 95 per cent of canola crops were cut for hay with an average hay yield of 1.0 to 3.0 tonnes per hectare in the Wagga area.

Some crops that received an extra storm or two – and were grown in well fallowed paddocks – harvested some canola with yields up to 1.0 tonnes per hectare.

Wheat

About 50 to 60 per cent of wheat was cut for hay with an average yield range of 2.0 to 5.0 tonnes. In hindsight, we possibly cut a little too much.

Of those crops that were harvested, the average was around 1.0 tonnes with a range of 0 to 2.5 tonnes per hectare. Quality was mostly good for a number of cereals as crops only set themselves up for modest yields. Later planted crops did not perform well.

Lupins

Yields of up to 0.4 tonnes per hectare were reported with some crops being a total failure.

Field peas

Peas were virtually grown on soil moisture alone and only achieved between 0.5 and 0.8 tonnes per hectare where harvested.

Trends in cropping/livestock

- There is an increasing area of grain production generally at the expense of new pasture area.
- The pulse crop area is expected to be down with an increased area of wheat and canola.
- Popular wheat varieties like Ventura and Ellison will likely need fungicide applications for stripe rust if we get a decent season. There is likely to be an increase in the area of Gregory and a new variety, Lincoln – with good stripe rust tolerance – which will help to manage input costs.
- There was a lot of summer fallow activity with good early summer rains – general soil moisture levels are down to 15 to 60 cm or more.
- Soil tests indicate good mineralisation of nitrogen in fallowed paddocks and a general trend of increased phosphorous on cropping country after two poor years – the majority of tests show more than 60 ppm Colwell.
- There will be a reduction of starter fertiliser in line with set yield targets and higher soil phosphorous levels – soil testing and nutrient budgeting is critical.
- Many growers still maintain a suitable level of grazing country, or dual purpose crops, to ensure a lower risk profile with the crop/livestock enterprise mix.
- Popular cropping herbicides are under supply pressure which, we are led to believe, will continue into the summer crop, with supply pressure on atrazine.
- Cropping costs have increased between 30 and 40 per cent.
- Croppers are being advised to consider the potential of rhizoctonia and crown rot problems in cropping paddocks after a dry spring in 2007 and early summer rains.
- There are some good new crop protection products out for 2008 including Hombre and Zorro seed dressing, Roundup Ready Canola, Boxer Gold and Crusader wheat herbicides and granular inoculants for pulses.
- Ongoing adoption of GPS assisted cropping technologies, hybrid canola varieties and highly winter active lucerne varieties are setting up an exciting 2008.
- To sum up: We need rain in 2008!

Trends in property values

Comments from Landmark Wagga real estate agent Bill Schulz indicate that enquiry to acquire grain properties in the Wagga area has increased dramatically. Principal demand is for properties that are in a position to produce grain in 2008. Approximately 60 per cent of this market is being driven by interested parties or investors outside the area looking to contract the farming operations.

The remainder of the market support is coming from local growers wanting to expand while they have the opportunity.

Strong commodity outlook for the short to medium term is certainly supporting property demand. Property sales and values dipped in late 2007 – making it hard to meet vendors expectations. But the trend has reversed with sales now occurring.

A very general trend for cropping country south of the river is an increase in approximately $100 per acre ($250 per hectare) per year from 2005 to present – a rise from around $800 to $1100 per acre ($2000 to $2700 per hectare). North of the river, good farming country was off around $100 per acre ($250 per hectare) but has now recovered.

The demand is swinging in favour of grain production properties over livestock. General pricing for cropping country with average rainfall of around 475 to 500 mm is $1000 per acre ($2500 per hectare). More productive properties with average rainfall of more than 500 mm, are fetching up to $1500 to $1700 per acre ($3700 to $4200 per hectare).

Leasing activity on cropping country has been strong with a recent lease south of Wagga reportedly going for $90 per acre ($220 per hectare).

Warwick Nightingale – Senior Agronomist
Landmark Wagga Wagga

Central West

I don't really want to relive 2007 – my therapist has told me not to go back to the 'dark year'! One word to aptly describe 2007 was horrible.

The Central West had a similar story to most regions in that the year started off OK. Slightly below average rainfall at the start of the year but then in May–June useful falls were received and with a year of average rainfall being forecast, off we went again all guns blazing. This was also a response to that other horrible year (2006). Growers were out to recoup some of the cash lost in previous crook years.

Then the rain stopped.

I had some crops that didn't get any rain from the day they were sown until a week before harvest. Oh, did I mention that we then got up to 200 mm in November–December to rub salt into the wound. The best thing about 2007 was midnight hitting on December 31.

I would estimate only around 40 per cent of crops were harvested in the Nyngan–Warren area. The bulk of these

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Liberty Barden and her four legged mate, Bonnie Heuston, in a crop grown on long-fallow at Warren.

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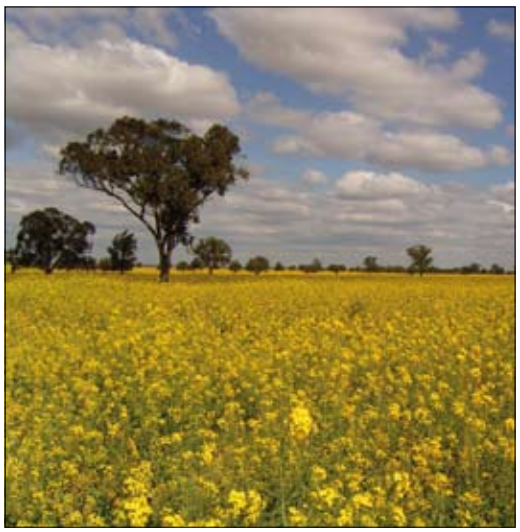

One of the good canola crops – south of Nevertire in the Central West.

crops were only viable to harvest because of the high grain prices. Even crops as low yielding as 0.2 tonnes per hectare were stripped.

Farmers were talking about yields in how many tipper loads they got off per paddock as opposed to how many tonnes you can fit on a road-train in a good year!

The only exceptions to this could be found around the Narromine district where some huge yields were very gratefully received.

Canola

Very few crops were sown in this part of the world as subsoil moisture levels were not great and farmers weren't willing to take a punt with this higher input crop. Of those crops that were sown, most were cut for silage or grazed off.

Wheat

The golden grain (wheat) was of course the popular pick in 2007 with much of it sown dry. Fertiliser rates were skimped on or non-existent. You could spot these crops even when they were very small as they had a poor colour and poor vigour. And yes, lots of these crops were also destined for animal's throats via hay or grazing.

This is how Warren district crops looked like in 2007 before they died. Photo taken at 'Barkers' owned by Peter McKay.

After the good-ish start to the year, the early crops set themselves up well with plenty of bulk, which saw them crash harder when the dry hit. The flip side to this was that at least there was some bulk to bale.

Hay-cutting decisions were very tricky when one looked at the Chicago future prices on a daily basis. Some crops that looked to be total failures did actually make some grain. It amazes me what a tough little critter the ol' Triticum can be!

The later sown crops just didn't get the rain to get the secondary roots going and consequently struggled all year.

Crops sown on rotation paddocks or on long fallows were the biggest winners. These cereal crops took advantage of the moisture left at depth from the previous legume crop. Paddocks performed better where fallow management was sound.

Barley and oats

Not much of either barley or oats was sown and their fate closely followed that of wheat. Oats proved it is probably not as tough as wheat or barley.

Chickpeas

Chickies continued to enjoy their resurgence, but gave growers little joy at the end of the year with crop height being one of the main problems. Headers just couldn't get low enough to get all the pods. This wasn't helped at all by deep furrows created at sowing to get seed separation from herbicide. Adequate rain didn't fall to melt these huge crevices.

But chickpeas did handle the dry very well due to their low moisture requirement earlier in the season, saving it up for the crucial flowering period. Some farmers had chickpeas come out with a higher gross margin than their wheat paddocks.

Other legumes

Small areas of field peas and lupins were sown, but few crops were stripped, although those growers lucky enough to harvest grain have enjoyed some great prices. Heliothis were in very high numbers with some crops being sprayed twice.

Lessons learnt

So what have we learnt from our *annus horribilis*? Timely fallow spraying is imperative, fertiliser use is essential, chickpeas are tough little critters and crop rotation is king (and we never want to live through that again!).

Trends for 2008

Survival is the major objective for 2008. We have a wonderful opportunity this year with full profiles of moisture and good commodity prices. Lakes are still quite common around Warren. It's a good start when you see ducks swimming in your paddocks!

Of course with rain comes weeds and more weeds and thanks to China for holding the Olympics and running the price of glyphosate up!

Some farmers are already on their fourth spray and others have opted to use the devil's tools (read as disc ploughs) in paddocks this year. Prickle and Kelly chains are all the rage at the moment – but they are still a tillage implement and it makes me cry to see plumes of dust (alias topsoil with lots of nutrients in it) blowing off paddocks.

Fertiliser is a burning (in the pocket) issue this year,

but can you afford not to use it? Some growers are talking of no starter fertiliser, 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.

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

Penny Heuston
Heuston Agronomy Services, Warren

Griffith

Overview of the 2007–08 season

Although very dry coming into the 2007 winter crop season, there was a reasonable start, with most crops sown on the rain received at the end of April and May. Unfortunately in-crop rainfall was very poor, with only 136 mm (compared to 256 mm long term) falling at Griffith.

No significant rain fell after early June and there was a hot, dry, windy end to winter (with record breaking temperatures at Griffith of up to 30.3°C) which devastated crops.

With only a few winter crops either pre-irrigated, watered up or sod sown into rice stubble on irrigation in 2007, the majority were reliant on subsoil moisture and rainfall to get them through. Most crops were moisture stressed and due to limited yield prospects were either cut for hay or silage.

Coming into the 2008 winter cropping season, growers are better situated as good rains in November, December and January have provided a good basis to start. For example, fallow rain coming into the 2007 season was under 55 mm compared to the 217 mm which has fallen already for 2008 (at Griffith).

For the 2007–2008 rice season, seasonal temperatures have been well above average. This has provided excellent conditions for rice crop growth and development, although the crop size is very small. Harvest began in late March.

Wheat, barley, oats and canola in 2007–08

Irrigated cereal crop yields were extremely variable due to the various watering regimes, with spring irrigations ranging mostly from zero to two waterings.

Soft wheat which received two spring irrigations yielded over 6.0 tonnes per hectare. With one spring irrigation, soft wheat yielded up to 5.0 tonnes, with the majority around the 4 to 4.5 tonne mark. In some cases wheat yields were surprisingly good even when crops received no spring irrigations and survived on water from rice which was abandoned in early November the previous year.

Milling oats yielded over 5.0 tonnes per hectare where they received two spring irrigations. Barley generally received one spring irrigation and yielded 3.75 to 4.0 tonnes.

Canola yields were again disappointing with yields ranging from 1.5 to 2.25 tonnes per hectare with one spring irrigation.

Although it was a small harvest for most winter crops in 2007, rain caused a few interruptions.

Rice in 2007–08

The 2006–07 rice crop yielded above expectations with an average yield of 9.9 tonnes per hectare. This was the third highest yield on record, but the crop was the smallest for 50 years. Most of the crop was grown in the Murrumbidgee Valley.

There was a short cold snap at the end of January which had a minor impact on yield.

Lack of rain, above average evaporation and tempera-

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tures, and the small crop resulted in an early finish to the harvest, which was completed by the end of April, 2007.

Cropping trends

Given the scarce water situation and current commodity prices, more emphasis in recent years has been placed on the winter cropping program. Wheat will again be the main winter crop grown in the area in 2008, although barley has been seen as an alternative to wheat as it requires less water in the spring.

Canola will also be grown as a break crop as opposed to faba beans – also due to less water needed in the spring.

Rachael Whitworth
Extension Agronomist, Griffith

Queensland

Darling Downs

Overview

The winter season in 2007 had some early promise but with the lack of in-crop rainfall – until too late – yields were disappointing.

But the spring rains heralded the start of a much better summer with many growers receiving good in-crop falls and producing some excellent yields on ground with limited subsoil moisture. The use of zero-till has certainly assisted this summer, and fallows set aside for winter 2008 now have good potential.

Winter 2007

June rain allowed an increased planting of cereals compared to 2006 but with limited subsoil moisture, chickpeas were reduced in area. There was a strong planting of winter forage crops, especially oats and barley. Follow-up rain came in August and all winter crops took off dramatically, but with little subsoil moisture to support them, yields in the end were disappointing.

Interestingly, there were unusually high numbers of heliothis in many winter cereal crops, although in most cases they didn't cause significant damage.

DARLING DOWNS WINTER CROP YIELDS IN 2007

Crop	Eastern Downs	Western Downs
Wheat	0.6–1.0 t/ha	1.0–2.5 t/ha
Barley	1.0–2.0 t/ha	—
Chickpeas	Failure–1.0 t/ha	—

Summer 2007–08

The August and early September rain heralded the start of a much more optimistic environment for the summer crops, and encouraged some early planting of grain sorghum. Irrigation water supplies though were very thin.

What water was in storage was mainly used on grain crops such as maize and some sorghum rather than for cotton, which had its lowest area for many seasons.

October and November had good rainfall which arrived just in time for the early sorghum crops, and allowed further plantings right through to January.