Western region

NORTH

Harvest is completed in the North and most CBH receival points have closed.

Crop yields were spectacular for most in the fringing areas but below average in the coastal areas as discussed in my last district report. Damp conditions did delay the harvest but, thankfully, there was very little rain to reduce grain quality.

The Geraldton port zone receivals, to January 2, stand at 2.55 million tonnes. This is made up of (tonnes) wheat 2,076,000; canola 111,000; lupins 212,000; oats 2000; and, barley 148,000. Receival site records are expected at Yuna, Binnu and Northampton.

This is just below the record for Geraldton of 2.56 million tonnes. (Source: Neil Berry CBH Geraldton.)

With harvest over most growers have started holidays and farm activity is very quiet. There have been a few scattered thunderstorms over small areas with up to 30 mm of rain.

Most of the landscape has remained dry with no effective rain. Summer weeds such as melons are already growing on sand soils, particularly on lupin stubble. The boom sprays will need to do some January work on most farms.

Although we were in record grain yields there were many areas that had well below average rain and we look forward to 2009 being a season with an average winter. Happy New Year to all!

Peter Norris, Agronomy For Profit
Geraldton
January 2, 2009

SOUTH COAST

Seasonal conditions on the South Coast have been absolutely terrible over the past two months with rain, rain and more rain. This has created some of the worst harvest conditions ever known for the region.

The whole region has received between 150 mm to 200 mm since the beginning of October. The consequences of this have been varied, with significant grain quality downgrades particularly in wheat. All loads being delivered are now subjected to the dreaded falling number test with a lot of results well below 200 and forcing significant tonnage into the feed grade.

The rain has allowed agronomists and growers to evaluate the sprouting tolerance of all wheat varieties under extreme harvest weather. To date, the standout varieties are Eagle Rock, H45 and Sapphire, which are in general, still maintaining a falling number above 200.

Barley has been a big surprise. Many growers were expecting quality downgrades due to staining. But a high percentage of malt varieties have been making it into the malt 1 and 2 grades with a little bit of help due to relaxed receival standards.

Summer weeds have been the next big issue. As soon as the header leaves the paddock the boomspray is entering. In some cases growers are using aerial spraying over mature crops – to desiccate weeds prior to harvest or control weeds whilst they are small – knowing that they will not be able to harvest paddocks for another three to four weeks.

Grain driers, on farm storage, high moisture stacks and over capitalisation in harvest equipment have certainly paid dividends this year. The growers who are using all or combinations of these tools have made very good progress through harvest with some still managing to finish by Christmas. Others not so fortunate, will still be going well into January.

I suspect many farm budgets going

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Some amazing images of a freak hail storm that swept through the north of Salmon Gums at the beginning of December. Crops were completely destroyed and native vegetation totally defoliated. (PHOTOS: Quenten Knight)

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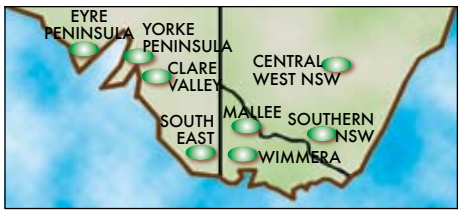
forward will have provisions to speed up harvest with the ability to handle high moisture grain to improve quality, profitability and sanity.

Most growers are now very keen to see the end of 2008 which has been a year of extremes – from a very dry windy late start to a very late extremely wet harvest. Remarkably, the crop yields have been very good. But the quality downgrades and multiple summer weed sprays will take away all the financial gloss. Bring on 2009, at least we will start with good stored soil moisture levels.

Quenten Knight, Agronomist
Precision Agronomics Australia
December 23, 2008

Southern region



SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Temperature and rainfall

Conditions were mostly mild to warm during December with relatively few hot days and mean daily maximum temperatures varying from 0–3°C below average across agricultural districts.

A widespread rain event in mid December brought heavy falls to most districts, with several centres having their highest December rainfall on record.

Monthly rainfall was above average in all districts with totals of 50 mm widespread.

The winter grain season in review

Seeding was largely completed during May and early June in variable moisture conditions. Rapid growth occurred during June, although patchy establishment and frequent strong winds delayed emergence in some areas.

Good rains during July and August enabled crops to maintain growth, although colder, frosty conditions slowed development. Dry conditions in both September and October caused crop yield potential to drop significantly.

Harvest was largely completed by the end of December despite delays from widespread rainfall. Grain yields and quality were highly variable.

Overall, crop yield for the state was estimated to be around 25 per cent below the 10 year average.

Crops

Widespread, heavy rainfall and mild, humid conditions in mid December interrupted harvesting in most districts, with a significant amount of wheat still to be reaped.

As crops dried out harvesting resumed and by the end of the December was around 95 per cent complete, with southern Yorke Peninsula, Kangaroo Island and the Lower South East yet to finish.

Crops suffered varying degrees of weather damage as a result of the rainfall event, with quality downgrading as a consequence. Farmers reported significant variation in sprouting between wheat varieties.

Prolific summer weed populations have emerged and spraying is taking place. But limited cash flow may see only selected areas sprayed with many farmers looking to use stock and cultivation as cheaper alternatives for weed control.

The estimate of total winter crop area remains unchanged at 4.0 million hectares, with total crop production estimated at 4.74 million tonnes.

Pastures

There is sufficient paddock feed currently on offer for stock with stubbles and green pick available – although there has been some deterioration in dry feed quality as a result of the rain.

Surface cover levels are generally quite good, but lighter stubbles and failed crops in drier areas will need to be carefully managed to avoid overgrazing.

Lucerne and other perennial pastures have responded to the rain and are providing good feed in a number of districts.

Peter Fulwood
Rural Solutions SA
January 17, 2009

VICTORIAN MALLEE

Typically, harvesting at Christmas time would indicate a good season in the Mallee. But in 2008, climatic conditions have influenced a stop-start harvest where yields have been relatively poor, and grain quality downgraded due to unseasonal summer rains.

In 2008, Berriwillock received only 128 mm of growing season rainfall. There had only been 180 mm of rain received by the end of October, and an additional 110 mm fell after harvest commenced. The three highest rainfall months were January, November and December.

These summer rains have caused summer weeds to blanket the Mallee requiring early control – the weeds appear to grow under your feet. The main offenders are melons, bindii-eye, heliotrope, and summer grasses. Prickly lettuce, quena and skeleton weed, among others, have also emerged.

Some growers have had to jump from the header to the spray tractor as the rain persisted.

Variable yields

On lighter soil types, barley yields varied but averaged out at around 1.2 tonnes per hectare.

On heavy soils some crops didn't get harvested – but what was harvested, recorded mostly poor yields averaging around 0.5 tonnes per hectare.

Most barley was stored or sold as feed, but there was some malting grade and also a good quantity which came in as no retention malt.

Wheat yields have been fairly similar. The poor crops didn't take long to harvest, and unfortunately, some of the better ones didn't get harvested before the rain caused them to shoot and be subsequently downgraded.

Pulse yields don't warrant great discussion but the prices were good if you had the grain. Chickpeas have been sown again in the hope of proving to be a viable legume. The challenging last two seasons have slowed its progress in getting back into the rotation.

Conversely, the past two dry years has seen vetch prove to be viable as a low input and versatile crop. It can be green manured, used as sheep feed, cut for hay or harvested.

Canola yields have been poor but if the summer rain continues, there will be more optimism this coming season as stored moisture in 2008 is what was lacking.

Due to the lack of bulk in the spring, hay production was down from last year – and that's the way most would like to keep it – in the hope of harvesting a decent grain crop.

We hope the summer rain continues well into 2009 so we can commence our next season on the front foot.

Simon Severin
Landmark Berriwillock
December 24, 2008

EASTERN MURRAY VALLEY

Apologies for the bleak nature of this report. It's pretty hard to paint a rosy picture at this stage, so I'll keep it brief.

We had Decile 1 or lower growing

season rainfall throughout most of the Eastern Murray Valley. While 2006 and 2007 were also Decile 1 years, this has been the worst for most growers. Growing season rainfalls (GSR) were in the 100–150 mm range with some in the northern parts of the region receiving less than 100 mm. This is where 300–350 mm GSR is the average.

But the telling blow came in the critical finishing months of September and October where most received 0–25 mm in total in three to four rain events.

Only the stored moisture from the previous summer allowed something near respectable yields.

An average wheat yield was 800 kg per hectare for most with the good crops 1.5 tonnes per hectare. An odd grower lucky enough to receive near 200 mm of GSR, had crops yield 2–2.5 tonnes per hectare. Canola was either grazed, cut for hay/silage (most still unsold) or harvested as a last resort. Canola yields were only 100–400 kg per hectare for those that harvested.

More recently, the first wave of locusts went through in mid December with the second hatching expected now. As yet minimal damage has occurred on lucerne and the odd summer crop that is around. Of biggest concern is the possible third hatching expected around March which could carry over into early sown winter cereals and canola.

Rainfall of 100–200 mm fell in November and December – after the crops had finished – has resulted in summer weeds and a large summer spray program again. Most growers have completed their first application across the farm.

The drop in glyphosate pricing and significant benefits from summer spraying in the previous two seasons, has made this an easy decision.

Going into the 2009 season, the biggest change in cropping programs will be a significant reduction in canola area. Canola has made up 20–30 per cent of the rotation historically but this is likely to be 10–15 per cent at best this season.

Barley is likely to replace the majority of this area. Pulse crops will again (largely) be shelved.

Corey Uebergang
I.K.Caldwell Corowa
January 9, 2009

MURRAY VALLEY RICE REPORT

This is the third consecutive season that most Murray Valley rice growers have not had irrigation water for rice. There is a hand full of crops in the district, all being grown on ground water, but most 'growers' are forced into having another season off.

The crops that have been sown are looking variable. Crops east of Deniliquin are mostly quite good, though there were some establishment concerns encountered by a couple of growers. Crops west of Deniliquin are mostly grown on heavier soils with higher salinity water, so their yield potentials are lower.

All in all, I think that most growers are happy with progress to date, in spite of the cooler December temperatures.

Growers seem to be mastering the art of growing crops with ground water. Most monitor water quality and are more inclined to drain crops when salinity levels exceed recommended guidelines. The above average rainfall in November and December certainly helped keep salinity levels low prior to panicle initiation. But the crunch time will come during flowering when temperatures are likely to be much higher and rainfall unlikely to contribute substantially to crop water demand.

Weed control has been good and most crops look very clean. There was some incidence of leaf miner, as you could have expected given the cool, windy conditions.

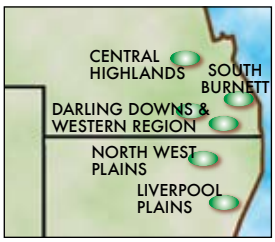
Murray Valley general security irrigation allocations are currently sitting at four per cent, rising above zero for the first time in over two years. While this is totally inadequate for supplying usable quantities of water, it has enabled many growers to cover their annual fixed water charges by selling for quite good prices, on the temporary water market.

Most traditional rice growers are actually more focused on the coming winter crop season, rather than rice. District properties generally received between 100 and 150 mm rainfall during November and December. This has promoted prolific summer weed growth and spray contractors have been kept very busy. The persistent windy conditions caused considerable delays in herbicide application, though most potential winter crop paddocks have now been sprayed.

All growers remain strongly committed to the rice industry and are looking forward to the time when they can sow their next crop.

John Fowler
District Agronomist, Deniliquin
January 6, 2009

Northern region



DARLING DOWNS

Overview

Rainfall for November and December was good with most of the Downs receiving over 300 mm spread over the two months. This has filled the grain of the early sown crops and allowed a strong December plant to go ahead.

Sorghum

The drop in feed prices has reduced the amount of sorghum planted late, but it is still the dominant crop across the Downs. The early sown paddocks are ripening and harvest will start before the end of January. The bulk of the crop is now in head, with the late sown crop starting to put down secondary roots.

Heliothis have returned this summer with levels up to 10 per head, but insecticide control has been good when correctly related to grub size and population.

For the later crop, we expect to see an increase in the natural predators but midge are starting to get active, and

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their control will not be conducive to beneficials. Some of these crops are beginning to look for a drink, but may have to wait a couple of weeks yet according to forecasts.

Yields should be fair to good – seed size will be good but harsher conditions early on has reduced the head size and amount of tillers in some crops.

Cotton

The cotton area is double last season's and at this stage the crop is looking very good. Heavy heliothis pressure is being absorbed successfully by the Bollgard II varieties, but the steady mirid pressure needs control. Crops are up to full flower at 16–18 nodes and receiving their first irrigation now, with most growers having enough irrigation water for their crops.

If the dryland cotton receives another rain before February, these growers will expect above average yields.

Maize

Silage corn is starting to be chopped under good conditions with growers optimistic about yields, and early grain crops have filled well.

Pulses

There has been a significant increase in mungbean plantings due to the drop in cereal prices and the potential improvement with the new variety Crystal, and summer planted crops have emerged well. Most of the planting is into dryland country.

Irrigators have led the move back to soybeans, helped by a couple of potentially better new varieties and some attractive prices. Early crops are looking good, despite heavy heliothis and looper pressure at the vegetative stage.

Sunflowers

The spring planted crops are now drying down with some good potential yields. Insect pressure has not been too heavy, with Rutherglen bug numbers low so far, and heliothis mainly attacking the face rather than the back of the head. Cockatoos have probably been the major pest so far.

Hugh Reardon-Smith
Agronomist Landmark, Pittsworth
January 9, 2009

ANSWER TO IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

The Mystery Tractor is a Model L Case – which was the forerunner of the popular Model LA. Powered by a 40 hp 4 cylinder petrol/kero engine the big tractor retained a chain drive transmission – a carryover from the early part of the twentieth century. This particular early 1930 example is on display at the Warracknabeal Wheatland's Museum. (Photo IMJ)

SOUTH BURNETT

The South Burnett has experienced the full range of climatic influences.

Most of the area has had enough rain to get most planting done. The rain continued to the south of Kingaroy and eased to the north. We have some areas too wet to finish planting and other areas too dry. We have had hail storms and violent winds, very hot windy drying days and quite cool showery days. No monsoonal type rains yet. No more run-off into Bjelke-Petersen Dam.

But overall the potential is there for a quite reasonable season – but there's a long way to go.

Key issues

- Increased area to beans – mung, soy and navy.
- Shortages of Flame and Basagran for weed control in beans and peanuts.
- Largest area of cotton for a couple of years, but still smaller than long term area.
- Some crops showing the effects of underfertilising due to high prices.
- Some heliothis spraying in sorghum and early mungbeans.
- Big grower concerns regarding grain prices.

Keep the rain coming.

Ian Crosthwaite