

THE YEAR THAT WAS 2018

2018 – A TALE OF TWO CROPPING REGIONS

In summary, areas from Nhill to the South Australian border did well whilst the rest of the state struggled with well below average rainfall and yields. Consistently high prices for all crop types, and also meat and wool made the difference in what could have been a much tougher scenario.

The year started positively with some moisture stored at depth from good rainfall (50-80mm in many areas) in late 2017. Unfortunately, once the clock ticked over to 2018 the tap turned off and there was little rain between January and April. Parts of the Mallee received less than 10mm prior to sowing so most weed control had to be done in-season. At the start of cropping, most growing areas in the Mallee were sitting on decile 0 or 1.

After the big yields of 2017 and early summer rain, there was plenty of grain left in the paddock and mice were a concern. Farmers baited most paddocks straight after sowing and, as has become the norm, most paddocks were sown dry. Legume plantings were down compared to the previous two big years due to the dry start and the tariff imposed by India on lentils last season. Likewise, some Mallee farmers deleted, or at least reduced, their canola sowing program.

GROWING SEASON CONDITIONS

We finally got some rain during sowing, although hardly what you would call a good break. The exception being some areas of the Wimmera which fared much better than the Mallee. Crop germination was consequently mixed.

With limited moisture and cold conditions in early winter, crop growth was slow, and it seemed to take an age for areas across the paddock to get to a consistent growth stage for spraying.

Even by July it seemed like the season wasn't heading in the right direction, however we felt for growers to the north who were coping with the multi-year drought in New South Wales and parts of Queensland.

Of course, one person's misfortune is another's opportunity as demand and prices for hay and feedstocks were very high for most of the year. Much of this was due to domestic demand (with shipments also coming over from Western Australia) but prices were buoyed by concerns over a trade war between China and the United States and the uncertainty and circus of BREXIT along with early concerns around global production.

By the end of winter, crops in the Mallee were struggling; plants were dying off along fencelines, while the yield potential of some of the better crops in the Wimmera took a hit from frosts in September.

Growth was often inconsistent across and between paddocks with growth seemingly dependent on last year's treatment i.e. if the paddock was fallow or on a legume crop. Whilst there was moisture at depth from the late 2017 rain, a lot of Mallee crops never got enough early growth to access it.

It was not only a dry and frosty growing season but windy and finding the right conditions for spraying was difficult. On top of that, increased awareness of inversion layers, increased concerns about future restrictions on chemical use and the much-publicised court cases related to alleged impacts of glyphosate use in other countries meant the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) spray workshops were timely and very well attended.

HAY VS GRAIN

Some Mallee farmers decided to cut their losses by spraying out their worst crops, mainly canola, and in the few cases where growth allowed, they cut hay. A lot of hay was cut in the Wimmera as farmers weighed up the value of the good vegetative growth they already had, the impact of frost, the high prices and the less than positive outlook for a good end to the year.

This was a popular topic at the BCG Main Field Day at Narraport in September where Greg Toomey from Landmark urged growers to make the decision based on economic benefit and to have a plan.

A SURPRISING FINISH

After a hot, windy spell in early September, the next few months were kind (although still windy) and the soft finish to the year really helped grain crops.

In the Wimmera the early stages of harvest were delayed by regrowth of new shoots after late season rainfall which also caused headaches given the large amount of hay on the ground nearly ready for baling.

As harvest progressed, there were many conversations about how well cereal crops had yielded. Cereal grain quality was also better than expected with few downgrades due to screenings. In contrast canola, lentil and particularly chickpea crops were disappointing.

For those in the Mallee who finished in November, harvest was uneventful apart from a couple of total fire ban days. A few green patches slowed things down early on but otherwise most farmers got across the light crops quickly.

LATE RAIN

The year finished with an onslaught of heavy rainfall with Birchip receiving up to 200mm and localised flash flooding, which affected 20 local houses. Most areas received well over 100mm and some places got more in that week than they had for the rest of 2018.

Areas in the south still harvesting had a tougher time of it with delays after the big rain, cold weather, frosts and total fire ban days really limiting suitable harvest days. However, the long harvest was rewarding with every extra tonne well worth the effort, especially for faba beans with record high prices due to low global stocks.

Whilst the humid weather after the big rainfall event raised concerns about grain quality in unharvested paddocks (there were a few issues with falling number tests) it also helped with spraying conditions as many farmers tried to get over their paddocks before a well-deserved break in the new year.

There was some opportunistic sowing of sorghum and forage crops as the year finished.

LIVESTOCK

Those farmers with livestock spent much of the year feeding them. It started with the dry summer and lack of a real break, then continued with the mixed germination followed by slow growth rates in late Autumn. Sheep were kept in containment areas for longer than normal. After two very busy years, mixed farmers continued to feel the time pressures of continually feeding out hay and grain.

That said, the amount of time and money spent on supplementary feeding was rewarded with consistently high prices for much of the year for both meat and wool. At one stage the Eastern Market Indicator rose above 2100 cents/kg, and whilst it was back to 1800 cents/kg by the end of the year, wool was still very profitable.

Coming into spring, lamb prices were exceptional and the price of mutton also very good. For growers wanting to reduce flock numbers to save on feed costs, they were able to do so profitably. The challenge for the industry will be to re-build flock numbers which dropped significantly over the year. Overall 2018 was one of the strongest years for livestock in recent times.