

THE YEAR THAT WAS 2020

On a local level, the year that was 2020 started very well. Much of the Wimmera Mallee received good summer rain with Birchip and Longerenong both receiving 95mm from Jan – March. Stored summer moisture meant growers were in a good position – especially as many had experienced a good year in 2019. Many growers got their crops in the ground early and despite predictions of a wetter harvest, generally good conditions allowed many growers to harvest good quality grain crops quickly.

Areas such as Quambatook and Ultima weren't as lucky with rainfall events, but many growers were still able to capitalise on the rain they did receive to gain good grain yields. Unfortunately for the Millewa region 2020 was a year they would rather forget.

CLIMATE/WEATHER

The growing season started with a decent break for much of the Wimmera Mallee with an average of 27mm falling across the region in the first week of April (to the 9th). This set the season up nicely after, in some areas, some sizable summer rainfall totals falling in January across the Wimmera Mallee.

All regions recorded a minimum decile 7 or above April rainfall which meant sowing programs for many were halted.

Table 1. Rainfall (mm) across the Wimmera and Mallee, number in brackets denotes decile for the period.

Duration (mm)	Ouyen	Manangatang	Swan Hill	Sea Lake	Birchip	Hopetoun	St. Arnaud
Nov-Mar	84 (3)	75 (3)	92 (4)	66 (2)	148 (7)	153 (7)	90 (1)
Jan-Mar	48 (4)	46 (4)	64 (5)	33(2)	109 (8)	119 (8)	59 (4)
Apr	84 (9)	81 (9)	47 (8)	75 (9)	95 (9)	61 (9)	84 (9)

Duration (mm)	Kerang	Warracknabeal	Longerenong	Nhill	Kaniva	Boort	Murrayville
Nov-Mar	142 (5)	97 (5)	120 (5)	138 (7)	130 (7)	109 (4)	76 (3)
Jan-Mar	114 (8)	71 (6)	95 (7)	109 (8)	91(8)	70 (5)	50 (5)
Apr	68 (9)	47 (8)	40 (7)	41 (8)	56 (8)	76 (9)	8)

The early breaking rains created a wide window for weed (particularly ryegrass) germination, putting pressure on glyphosate. Resistance appeared to be more widespread than growers and advisers had thought. The moist conditions at sowing however resulted in good efficacy of pre-emergent herbicides.

Winter

There were hints of a La Niña in April and in May the prospect of a likely wetter June to August. Wet forecasts however continued to disappoint. The reality was a drier than expected June July (deciles ranging between 1 and 2 apart from Murrayville (5) and Nhill (4)). The La Niña forecast was backed off with a La Niña only starting to hint again at the end of August. By mid-July topsoils in the northern Mallee were starting to dry up. At the end of July Wimmera growers were starting to notice the effects of moisture stress around tree lines.

With no clear direction as to which way the season was heading and a decile of 1 across much of region for July, it was difficult for growers to make input decisions (particularly nitrogen and fungicides). BCG reminded growers that in many regions, their growing season and summer rainfall was sitting at decile 5. BCG reassured growers that if nitrogen was not used this season ~65% of the applied nitrogen would be available for next year.

In June frosts were becoming common and slowed crop growth. Continued frosty conditions slowed down grass sprays and rolling in pulses.

Much needed rain was received across the Wimmera Mallee in August – a welcome relief for many growers. August also saw some very frosty conditions with temperatures dipping to -5°C at Hopetoun and -4°C at Horsham. Cereal crops were yet to be at the most critical stage for frost damage, while canola was in the early flowering stage with significant time to recover and aided by the recent rainfall.

Spring

By September the outlook for a La Niña was upgraded to La Niña Alert. Members were encouraged to plan their harvest including prioritising crop value and organising extra harvest labour/contractors to help harvest crops before possible damaging rains.

The Wimmera and Mallee experienced frosts in early October in isolated patches.

More rain in October prompted fungicide applications on pulses and urea applications in isolated areas. The Wimmera and Mallee received rainfall totals ranging from 5mm in the north eastern Mallee to 30mm in the Wimmera.

Heat stress in the Wimmera Mallee in early October was also flagged with temperatures reaching 30°C – 35°C.

Harvest

Despite predictions of a wetter harvest, generally good conditions allowed many growers to harvest crops quickly. Grain quality was generally good.

PESTS

Mice

Mice populations were high, particularly in the Wimmera after a bumper 2019 season. In some area's crops needed to be resown due to mice damage. In July numbers had decreased but growers in the southern mallee baited flowering canola crops. Some canola crops in the area were affected in September.

Worms

Cutworm activity in June in the Wimmera was reported in isolated pockets. **Armyworm** in the Wimmera was reported in July and causing concern in early September.

Moths

Heliothis: Isolated hotspots of *Heliothis* were recorded around Rainbow and Quambatook in early September. Numbers also started to build up around Ouyen and Ultima. Warm nights and northerly winds in early October resulted in spikes in moth catches through the Wimmera and North Central regions.

Changes to law

From July 1 2020 pain relief must be administered to sheep undergoing mulesing.

DISEASE

Aerial blackleg: The 2020 season was very conducive to blackleg with crops flowering early putting them in the higher risk window for aerial blackleg infection. In late August there were many observations of stem splitting in canola. It was thought the increased incidence this year was due to large plant uptake of nitrogen following recent rainfall on the back of a dry winter. This split may act as an opening for disease in the plant.

Stripe rust was found across the Wimmera Mallee. Weather was conducive to the disease development with small frequent rainfall events received over the month of August. It was found in paddocks regardless of prior fungicide treatment.

SHEEP

Wool markets took a slide as COVID-19 impacted global supply and consumer supply chains with the AWEX-EMI closing at 1287ac clean/kg in the first week of April. On 25 December the AWEX-EMI closed at 1157ac clean/kg.

Sheep meat: In early April markets traded high volume and prices due to COVID-19 panic buying and selling, buying eased off as freezers became full.

Shearing during the pandemic required wool producers to have COVID safe plans and shearing operation protocols.

With conducive conditions, **Flystrike** was also an issue which needed monitoring in spring and summer.

GRAIN PRICES

Table 2. Indicative wheat, barley and canola port prices for (old and new seasons crop) Geelong port zone as at 6 April 2020.

APW wheat	\$400	\$340
CAN non-GM	\$660	\$640
BAR1 barley (F1)	\$310	\$275
Faba Beans (delivered Wimmera)	\$700	\$500
Lentils (delivered Wimmera)	\$810	\$700

Prices started to fall away slowly in May. Prices continued to drop away before building back up to similar levels (albeit approx. \$40 lower in most crop types apart from faba beans which fell away sharply to end at \$390) at the end of October. For December 2020 grain prices see page 28.

ON A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

After the black summer of bushfires, Australians were abruptly hit with COVID-19 with the World Health Organisation declaring a global health emergency on Jan 30.

National borders were closed on 20 March. Australians went into lockdown.

A second wave of infections emerged in Victoria during May and June. This wave occurred in Melbourne and was more widespread and deadlier than the first. Victoria underwent a second strict lockdown which lasted almost four months.

Impact of COVID-19 on Agriculture

On 19 April Foreign Minister Marise Payne called for a global inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, including China's handling of the outbreak in Wuhan.

On 18 May Beijing imposed an 80 per cent tariff on Australian barley imports. Growers yet to plant barley crops had to make the decision to keep their planned barley hectares or reduce their barley to mitigate the possible fall outs of the hefty tariff.

Australian wine, lamb, beef, coal, lobster and timber also had trade interruptions with China. Wheat was also earmarked for "enhanced inspection".

Supply chain issues

The availability of fuel, chemical, fertiliser and labour coming into the 2020 growing season was unknown. BCG members were encouraged in March to plan for all input requirements.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2021

The La Niña growers had been hoping for, finally started to show its colours in late December. With conserving summer moisture over the past two seasons proving to be imperative, growers began managing summer weeds in the hope they could still capitalise on the La Niña that almost got away...