

# THE YEAR THAT WAS 2019

Above average grain yields across the Wimmera, Mallee and North Central areas made 2019 a terrific year for most growers. But it was also a year where growing season rainfall didn't come close to telling the full story. After a very dry 2018, significant rainfall in December left the region with deciles of seven or higher for that month. This included Decile 7 at Swan Hill and Kerang, and Decile 9 at Nhill, Longerenong, Hopetoun and Birchip. The early months of 2019 were warmer than average, and rainfall varied from very low to average between January and April. The December rain caused issues with marshmallow and heliotrope early in the season. Growers across the region spent the summer spraying in a bid to control weed emergence. Some growers did three or four sprays in the same paddock. Pre-sowing (January-March) rainfall was generally low: Decile 1 at Manangatang, Swan Hill, Sea Lake, Birchip, Hopetoun, Kerang, Warracknabeal, Longerenong, Nhill and Kaniva; Decile 2 at Ouyen; Decile 3 at Murrayville and Decile 4 at St Arnaud and Boort. Dry sowing was in full swing by early April with a welcome autumn break occurring in late April or early May, depending on location. Growers increased plantings of canola and lupins in response to the December rain, with some growers opting to include hay in the rotation due to high prices. The active summer weed control program provided paddocks with ideal conditions for crop emergence. Early crop growth was supported by reasonable rainfall from April to June.

## WINTER

Cereal crops moved through Zadoks growth stages 31 and 39 in July as disease was starting to set in. Wind, showery weather and wet paddocks presented challenges for finding suitable conditions to undertake spraying and spreading activities. Low levels of *Ascochyta* blight were treated in the southern Mallee and Wimmera, and Spot Form of Net Blotch (SFNB) and scald were becoming evident in susceptible barley varieties. *Septoria Tritici* Blotch was found in wheat.

Pest insect activity began, however growers across the Mallee and Wimmera reported the presence of many beneficial insects. By now, the positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) had settled in and the Bureau of Meteorology was warning of the continuing likelihood of drier conditions from August to October.

## SPRING

Across the Wimmera and southern Mallee, soil moisture probe data indicated crops were really on the move and accessing stored moisture at depth. Crops in the northern Mallee continued to struggle under much tougher, dry growing conditions.

Frosts raised concerns in all parts of the Mallee and Wimmera, particularly as crops reached flowering stage. The incidence and severity of damage was highly dependent on location and growth stage and fortunately did not have as much impact as initially feared.

Upper canopy blackleg was observed in canola crops with thick canopies, particularly untreated and early sown varieties. But as the weather dried, the risk of new infection dropped, and yield losses were minimised.

Insect activity was high in September and October but did not always warrant control. Native budworms were active, army worm, aphids and grubs were present and moth flights were observed. Wimmera growers sprayed lentils for protection.

Shearing and feeding sheep kept mixed farming system growers busy and decisions about whether to salvage crops for hay or graze them became a priority in the drier regions.

## **WRAPPING UP**

Most of the Mallee finished with a Decile 1 growing season rainfall and, topped off by a dry spring, crops ripened in quick succession. Further south, heavy water reliant crops were dependent on stored moisture for their finish.

Following the dry conditions in September, October cropping activities included mowing, baling and preparations for harvest. Hay contractors were in high demand, with many farmers across the Mallee and Wimmera incorporating hay crops into their regular rotation. The Mallee harvest began in late October, before being interrupted by rainfall and cool conditions in the first week of November. The Wimmera and west Wimmera followed several weeks later.

Harvest was interrupted with the declaration of a Code Red extreme fire danger as well as several Total Fire Ban days. Fires destroyed a number of hay stacks across the region.

Strong winds in early November caused concerns about yield loss in ripe crops from shattering in canola, pod drop in lentils or lodging and head loss in some barley crops. Later crops benefited from the cooler conditions and rainfall, which added yield and quality to the still maturing crops. What was lost in production could be recovered in marketing, as drought driven demand boosted grain, sheep and wool prices, in some instances to record levels.

## **IN SUMMARY**

The big story of cropping in the southern Mallee in 2019 was the massive rainfall event in December 2018, followed by low to average rainfall throughout the growing season. The story was similar in the Wimmera and West Wimmera where a kind finish to the growing season delivered higher than expected yields. For most growers, 2019 will be a year to remember because of the combination of above average yields and strong pricing. Unfortunately for northern Mallee growers, it will be one to forget.