

The 2019 Season – Continuing dry start to the season

There has been little change in the seasonal outlook since the April 2019 GIWA Crop Report, other than some areas of the Albany port zone in the south which have had enough rain to make a start on cropping programs. For the majority of the Western Australian grainbelt there has been no useful rain.

The lack of sub-soil moisture and opening rains for the majority of the Western Australian grainbelt combined with climate forecasts aligning for a lower than average rainfall this year have resulted in growers making earlier than normal adjustments to their crop areas and seeding programs. There has been a notable reduction in the amount of dry sowing this year. Growers have opted for sowing “cleaner” paddocks first and held off planting “dirty” paddocks with higher weed seed burdens until it rains.

Whilst still early in historical terms, the lack of significant rainfall to date (except for parts of the great southern region of Western Australia), and the prognosis for a dryer and warmer winter has growers already down-grading expectations of an average year.

In the past month the intended canola area before seeding reverted to areas similar to 2017, with 1.4m hectares of canola production planned. This area has been adjusted down and will reduce further if no rain falls over the next two weeks.

The barley area is projected to be up from 2018, continuing the trend from previous years, due to relative profitability compared to wheat. The likely area, close to 1.9m hectares, will be a new record, and in some areas of the State the barley area will exceed the wheat area for the first time in history.

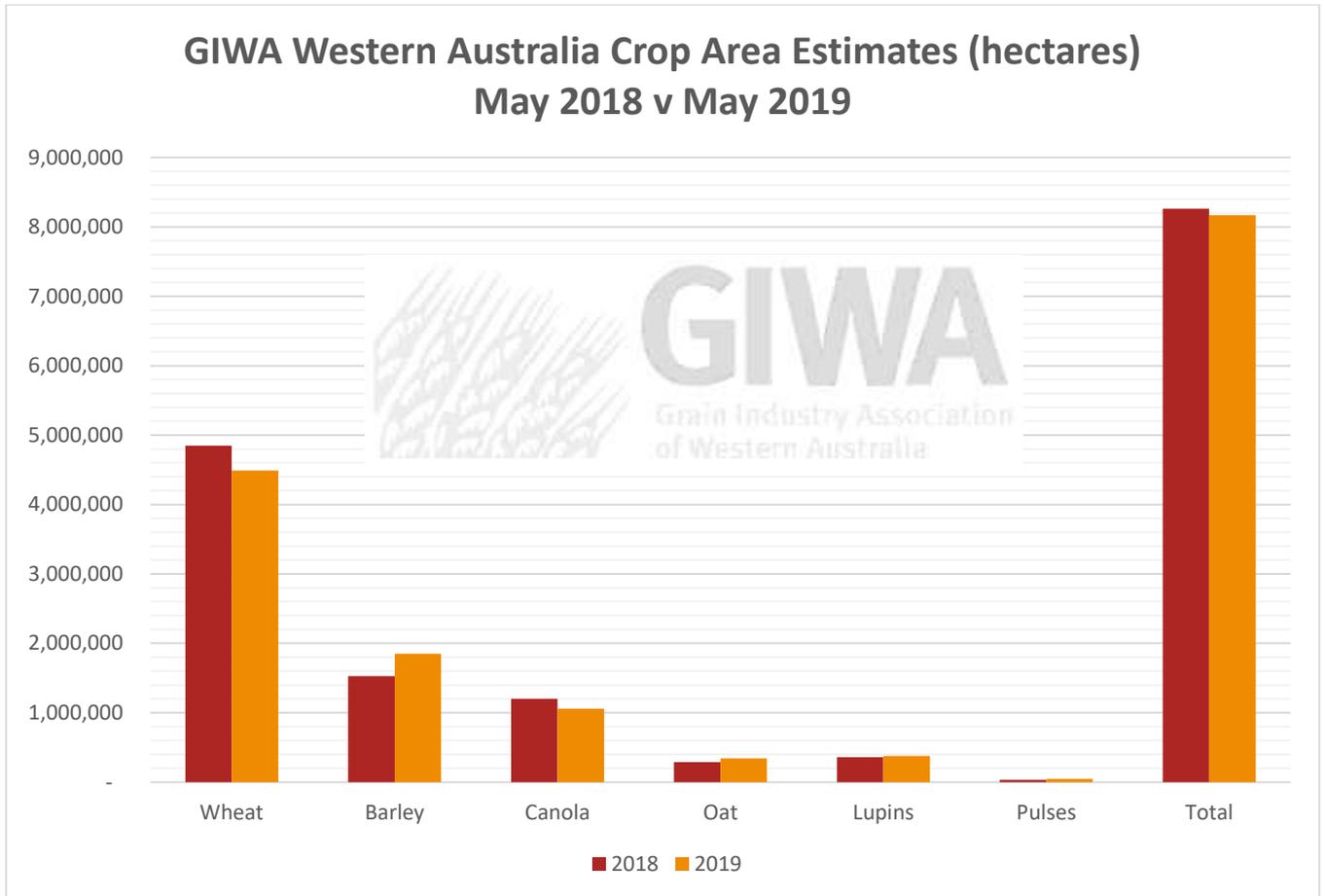
The wheat area could still swing significantly depending on when it rains, as country left out to fallow will mainly be intended for wheat.

There have only been small changes in lupin plantings from 2018 and the oat area is likely to be up slightly. The pulse area continues to climb slowly with more experimental plantings in the higher rainfall regions of the State.

GIWA Western Australia Crop Area Estimates May 2019 (hectares)

Port zone	Wheat	Barley	Canola	Oat	Lupins	Pulses	State total
Kwinana	2,500,000	750,000	410,000	160,000	130,000	5,000	3,955,000
Albany	530,000	600,000	220,000	160,000	40,000	5,000	1,555,000
Esperance	510,000	370,000	180,000	10,000	10,000	35,000	1,115,000
Geraldton	950,000	130,000	250,000	10,000	200,000	4,000	1,544,000
Totals	4,490,000	1,850,000	1,060,000	340,000	380,000	49,000	8,169,000

GIWA gratefully acknowledges the support of DPIRD, CBH, CSIRO and contributions from independent agricultural consultants and agronomists in the production of this report.



Geraldton Zone

Apart from a small number of growers on the eastern fringe of the zone who were lucky to receive enough rain to plant, the remainder of the region is very dry. There is no sub-soil moisture and the last few intended paddocks of lupins and canola have been dropped out of the program. Growers have concentrated on planting the “soil modified” paddocks to lupins and canola first, and with no rain to date, will now swap intended break crop paddocks to fallow in the eastern, or barley in the western areas. The combined lupin and canola area for the zone will be down 10-15 per cent from 2018. There may be a further reduction in paddocks planted if there is no rain in the next three weeks.

Most growers are now planning on an average or below average season and are reducing costs accordingly, reducing planned nitrogen fertiliser and other spending where possible.

The lack of any weed germination to date means there have been savings with herbicides although there will be more pressure on pre-emergent chemistry when it rains and potentially more “IMI” herbicide used on tolerant varieties than was initially planned. Many paddocks have been sown dry for several years now and growers are running out of “clean” paddocks to choose from when reducing the area of break crops with the later starts to their seeding programs. This is more obvious in the north of the zone where there are fewer sheep and pasture paddocks in the rotation.

There has been a big reduction in deep ripping and other mechanical soil amelioration in the northern agricultural zone due to very dry conditions over summer.

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Kwinana Zone

Kwinana North Midlands

With no sub-soil moisture, no rain in the last month, and none forecast for the next two weeks, growers are starting to reconsider their original planned programs. Dry seeding is continuing in the region on cleaner country with most now swapped over to cereals from lupins and canola. The canola area has been reduced by one third to a half in the eastern areas, and to a lesser extent in the west. If there is no rain by the third week in May this canola area will not change. The lupin area planted is generally as planned with some growers backing off a little with paddocks being left out to pasture.

The intended small increase in the barley area will probably not eventuate now as the break to the season becomes later. There is also some reduction of the barley area in favour of wheat due to price risk which was not as evident a month ago.

Dropping of planned cereal paddocks to fallow in the eastern areas has not occurred just yet, although the cereal area in the east will decrease if we move into June without rain. Most growers can achieve average grain yields with a June break if there is some sub-soil moisture. With no sub-soil moisture this year and several of the previous years' crops going in without a herbicide knockdown, the reduction of crop area could be significant as the break to the season becomes later.

There has been no major change in the wheat or barley variety mix for this year with intended plantings to noodle wheat varieties and malt barley varieties similar to 2018.

Kwinana West

Whilst very dry in the Kwinana West zone and no rain forecast for several weeks, growers are generally sticking to plans made over the summer. The planned crop area mix had barley up slightly, replacing wheat and this is still the case. For some areas of west Kwinana the barley area will exceed wheat for the first time ever. There has been some holding back of canola plantings to see what happens with rain and these paddocks may go to barley if it has not rained by the end of May, pushing the barley area up by a total of 5 to 10 per cent from 2018. Some of this substitution may go to pasture for extra sheep feed.

Growers are in no rush to sow everything dry and will start to slow down with seeding in the next week or so and leave up to 30 per cent of the program unsown until it rains, ensuring a weed kill. The practice of early grazing of cereal crops has gained greater acceptance across the State in the last few years and has resulted in the crop area remaining the same or slightly increasing, even as sheep numbers have recovered. Growers have opted to spend on improving the quality of pasture paddocks, rather than leave crop paddocks out with less grazing value. This is particularly evident in the Kwinana West zone and has enabled growers to increase profitability by growing more tonnes of grain, as well as carry more sheep.

The lupin area is up between 5 to 10 per cent from 2018. The oat area in the zone will be similar or slightly up on 2018, mainly driven by dedicated hay growers.

Kwinana North-East

Parts of the far-east, south of Merredin including west to Tammin and north of Merredin, received storms around Easter and have crop out of the ground. Most of these areas have now dried up to an extent where growers are waiting on the profile to dry out further before commencing dry sowing. The remainder and majority of the region has had no rain to date.

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The intended increase in canola area for the region has now dropped back to below the area planted in 2018. The lack of sub-soil moisture and lack of rain has resulted in many growers dropping canola completely out of their programs, except for on the better fallowed country.

The substitution of cereals from canola and, to a lesser extent lupins, has been very selective this year, to only those paddocks that are reasonably clean from 2018. The paddocks with heavier weed burdens have been left alone for now and will either go to pasture or fallow as the break to the season pushes into June.

Albany Zone

Albany West

The start to the season in the region is very good and it is looking as good as if not better than this time last year. Most growers have finished sowing canola now and the majority is either up or will emerge on existing moisture. Barley sowing is in full swing with growers chasing moisture to 30mm plus; this will continue until the moisture is too far down for the barley to emerge.

The whole region has enough stored sub-soil moisture for emerging crops to hang on well into June without further rain. This is an ideal situation, as when the winter rains arrive and crops usually become waterlogged, they will have more capacity to handle the wet conditions. This capacity limits yield more than any single other factor.

There have been no major changes to crop area mix from 2018 except for slightly more oats planted by the traditional oat growers.

Albany South

The south coastal area of the zone from Frankland to Wellstead south of the Stirlings has had several rainfall events totalling 25 to 70mm over the past month, with canola plantings now mostly finished. Around 60 per cent of the planted canola area is up and most of the remainder will emerge on existing sub-soil moisture. Growers are now into barley plantings and around 15 to 20 per cent of the intended area is in, with about a quarter of this already out of the ground. It is expected that most barley sown to date will emerge. The heavier country is starting to dry out and will need more rain for crops to emerge, although growers are still chasing moisture on some of the lighter soils.

The canola area is back up to 2017 levels, resulting in a reduced barley area for the region mainly for rotational purposes.

There has been very little burning this year as severe wind events from the 2018 season are still fresh in growers' minds. There has been unprecedented snail baiting occurring from the first rains right through to post-sowing. There is concern that growers may still have problems at harvest with the new and tighter snail tolerances in receival standards, particularly for growers who are less experienced with snail mitigation.

The region has reasonable areas of pasture, however many of these paddocks have suffered from a classic "false break", where the emerged pasture legumes die off due to limited follow-up rain. Due to this false break phenomenon, more crop paddocks may be left out to pasture if it remains dry for an extended period.

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Albany East (Lakes Region)

The Lakes district is very dry and even though some areas received up to 10mm of rain around Easter, very little crop has emerged. The lack of sub-soil moisture combined with a terrible year for canola in 2018 and to some extent in 2017, sees the canola area being reduced by up to 50 per cent from 2018. Most growers consider it too risky to grow if not emerged by early May. The canola area is being taken up by barley and to a lesser extent pasture. It is projected that the barley area in the region will exceed wheat plantings for the first time ever. The canola area percentage in the rotation for the region will be below 20 per cent for this year.

As is the case for most of the grainbelt, cropping programs still have a few weeks to go and most growers are not going “flat out”, preferring to hold back a little and wait for rain. The lupin area is in and has little change from 2018. The pasture area will probably be up 5 per cent. Oats for hay is down a little, barley is up a few percent and wheat down a few percent from last year.

Esperance Zone

The Esperance port zone is in slightly better shape than the majority of the State, except for the west and south Albany zone, due to handy falls of 10 to 30mm around Easter. There are small areas of canola crops up on the good sandplain in the medium and higher rainfall areas closer to the coast. There is still canola being planted dry on the better canola soils and more reliable rainfall areas. Growers in the north and east of the zone have reduced their intended canola plantings and these areas will be substituted by barley. The green peach aphid problems of last year on early emerging canola has not been a problem this year due to the absence of a “green bridge” over summer (a weed burden created by summer rains).

The majority of faba bean and lentil crops have been sown, although most will need rain to emerge. There is likely to be a swing to more field peas as the start to the season becomes later.

Wheat plantings are likely to remain unchanged from 2018.

The western areas of the zone are still very dry and water for livestock and cropping programs is a real concern.

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Season Outlook, May 2019

Ian Foster, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

Most of the Western Australian grainbelt and eastern south coast have received below normal rainfall for the past six months. Rain for April has been near-average or slightly below for much of the agricultural area and south west. Exceptions have been parts of the central grainbelt and lower south west, where conditions were wetter. Rain to date for May has been mostly over the south west and south coast. Accordingly, soil moisture storage is low over much of the grainbelt; see Figure 1.

DPIRD's Statistical Seasonal Forecast for May to July 2019 shows a below normal outlook for much of the great southern region and northern grainbelt. Far eastern parts of the grainbelt and eastern south coast show enhanced rainfall chances, similar to the current Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) outlook. Over three quarters of international climate models also have a preference towards drier than normal conditions in this period, with the remainder having a neutral rainfall outlook.

BoM seasonal outlook summary

- The climate outlook, issued on 26 April 2019, indicates May to July is more likely to be drier than average for the lower west of WA, with a wetter than average outlook for inland and northern WA, see Figure 2. Many of these areas typically receive little or no rainfall at this time of the year, meaning only a small amount of rainfall is needed to exceed the median.
- Warmer than average days and nights during May to July are very likely (greater than 80 per cent chance) for large parts of northern and eastern Australia, with chances reducing in the south west.
- The Bureau's climate model suggests a short-lived El Niño may develop in the coming months. If El Niño does develop, it would increase the chances of drier conditions over eastern Australia.

Additional information can be sourced from:

[DPIRD: Seasonal Climate Information](#)

[DPIRD: Soil Water Tool](#)

[BoM: Seasonal Rainfall Outlook, next 3 months](#)

[BoM: Decile rainfall for November 2018 April 2019](#)

[BoM: Landscape soil water balance](#)

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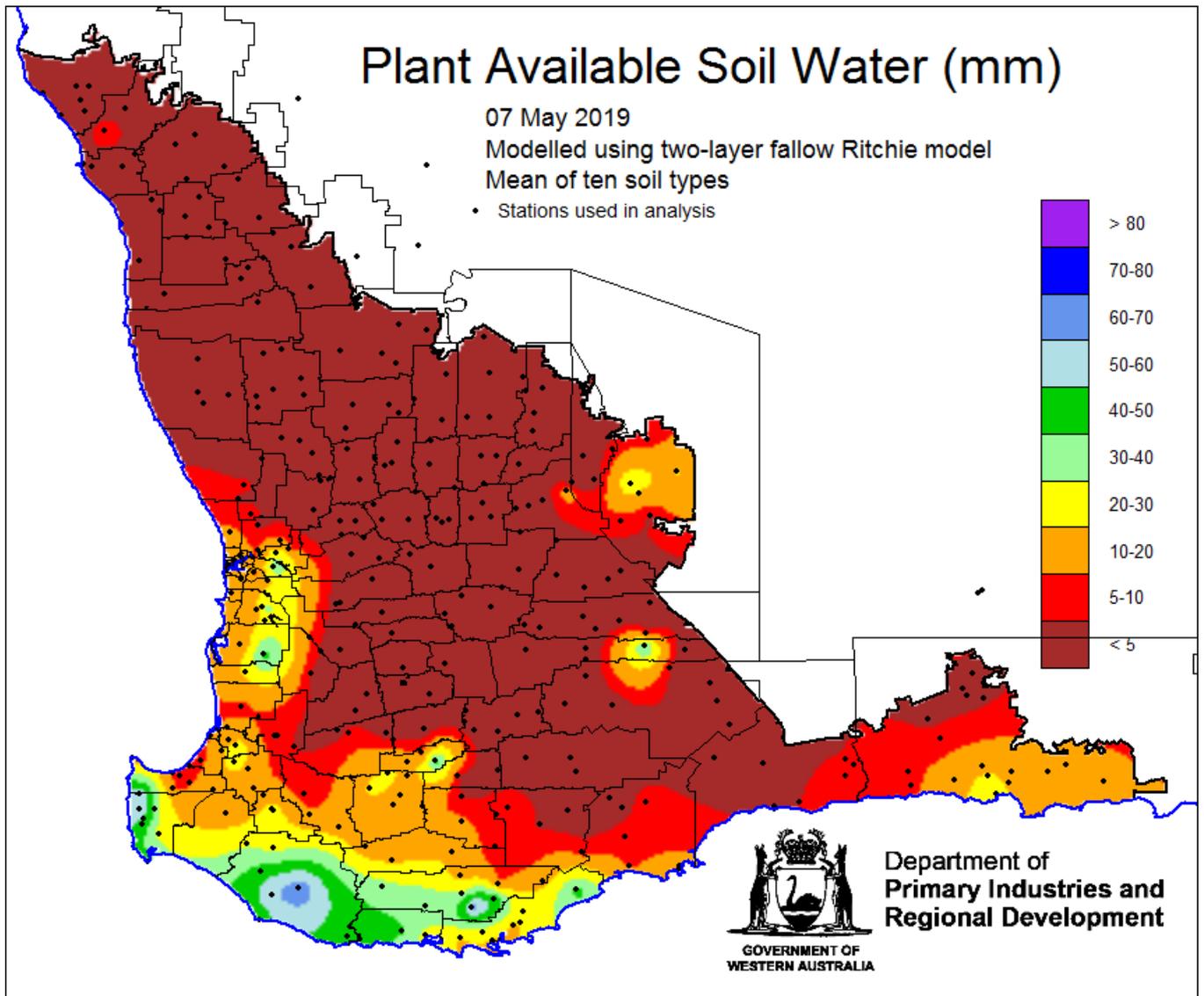


Figure 1. Estimated plant available soil water at 7 May 2019, averaged over 10 typical soil types and assuming a fallow water balance. From DPIRD.

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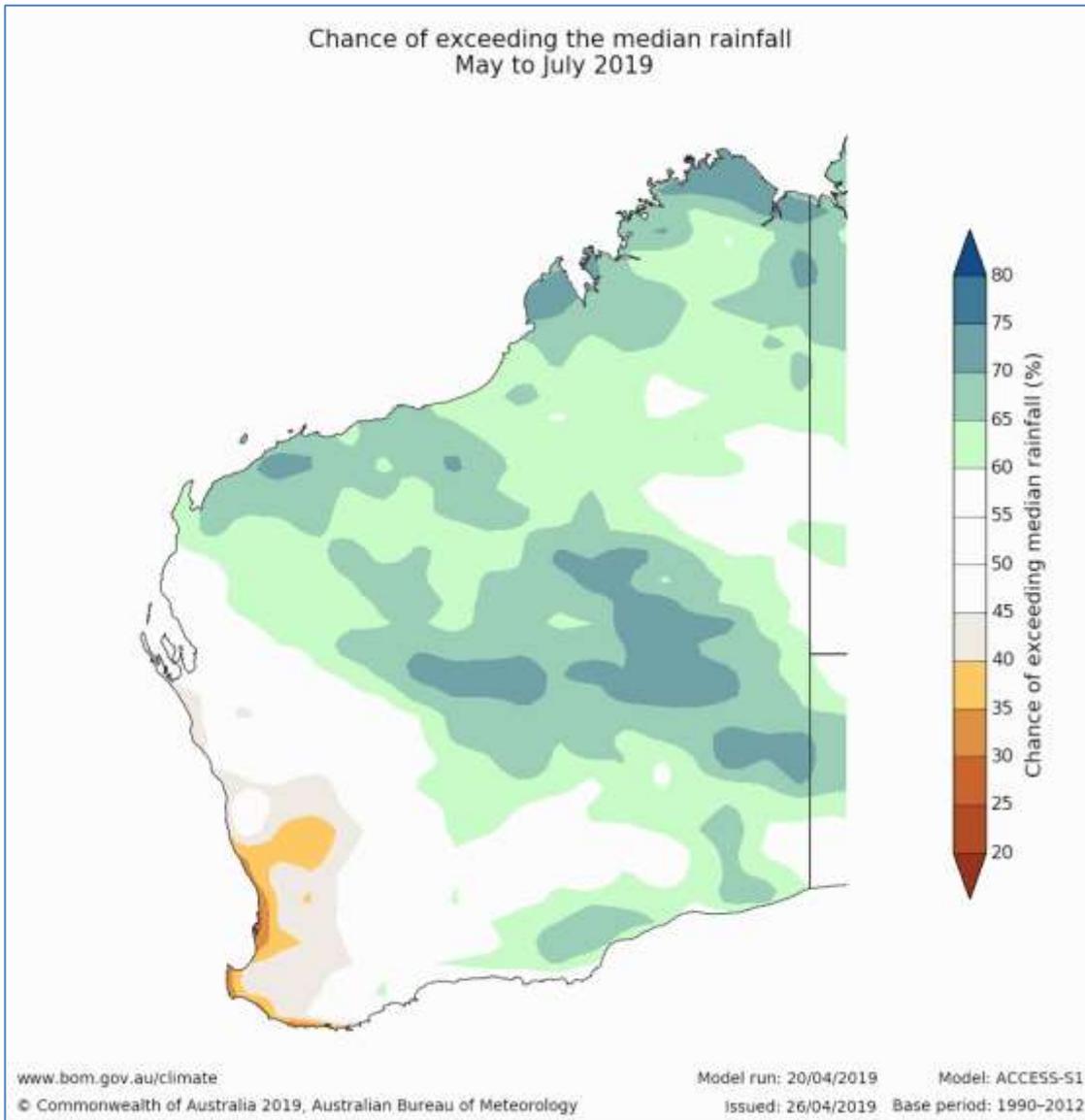


Figure 2. Seasonal rainfall outlook for May to July, from Bureau of Meteorology.

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