

## Summary

### The 2016 season

The 2016 cropping season is underway across Western Australia, marking the earliest start to seeding in recent memory.

Extensive rain during late March saturated paddocks in the lower Geraldton, Kwinana, Albany and Esperance port zones. The northern Geraldton zone, north of Three Springs to Ajana and east to Mullewa, has been dry through summer but recorded some rain in the past week with sub-soils throughout these districts remaining comparatively dry. Please refer to the AEGIC soil moisture map on page five of this report.

Whilst not guaranteeing any outlook concerning production potential, this situation effectively removes any prospects of a wide-scale crop failure and lays the foundation for average season potential.

Strong market support will see a rise in the area sown to oats, field peas and lupins. The barley area will rise in the south Kwinana and Albany port zones because of better profit results compared to wheat. Canola area will rise slightly due to the early sowing opportunity. To make way for this general rise, and because of soft pricing, the wheat area will fall. The total cropped area is forecast to rise slightly with the prospect of some proposed pasture paddocks being sown. Pasture growth in all regions is likely to be strong for the next six to eight weeks, reducing the overall area required for stock.

Growers are currently seeding canola in most districts with lupins to be sown in the next week or so. The extent of canola sowing completed by mid-April is likely to be around 70% of the total area, with the remaining 30% to be sown before the end of April. It is expected the entire lupin area will be sown by the end of April, mostly into damp soil but with some dry sowing likely in the northern Geraldton zone. Some cereal sowing will be conducted early but this will be restricted to oats and a little barley sowing in frost prone paddocks and where soils are trafficable.

The early and extensive rainfall also brings risks to cropping this season. Extensive rain was recorded in the lower Albany and Esperance zones in January. This has created a 'green bridge' for insects and has heightened the possibility of aphid borne viruses posing a production and grain quality risk.

In the lower Albany zone, soils are generally saturated. The risk of prolonged waterlogging and delays to seeding and weed spraying is also a significant risk to ultimate yield potential.

Aside from the northern region of the Geraldton zone, the break to season need only provide around 15 mm of rain for growers to be confident of strong yield potential for the 2016 season.

### 2016 WA Crop Area Estimates (hectares)

Port zone	Wheat	Barley	Canola	Oats	Lupins	Field pea	State total
<b>Kwinana</b>	2,386,000	492,000	427,000	153,000	109,000	9,000	3,576,000
<b>Albany</b>	717,000	453,000	312,000	100,000	36,000	6,000	1,624,000
<b>Esperance</b>	490,000	288,000	278,000	6,000	9,000	15,000	1,086,000
<b>Geraldton</b>	873,000	39,000	136,000	8,000	185,000	1,000	1,242,000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>4,466,000</b>	<b>1,272,000</b>	<b>1,153,000</b>	<b>267,000</b>	<b>339,000</b>	<b>31,000</b>	<b>7,528,000</b>
<b>Since 2015</b>	<b>-1.3%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>7.6%</b>	<b>34.8%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>

## **Kwinana Zone**

### **The Midlands**

Rain in the Midlands region has been patchy but widespread during March. Falls range from 30 mm to 80 mm in western districts, to a summer total between 120 mm and 150 mm in eastern districts around Wubin and Dalwallinu/Pithara.

Growers have a lot of confidence in the potential for the season with this level of subsoil moisture and heightened levels of mineralised Nitrogen. Windrow burning, deep ripping and spading was conducted ahead of commencing seeding mid-April. To date only around 2,000 ha of canola has been sown. Activity increased significantly from April 10 and will move to full swing by April 25. The seasonal break need only provide 10 to 15 mm of rain for the crop to be established in excellent conditions.

Weed germinations are substantial and crops are likely to have to deal with strong weed competition.

During 2016, barley will decline by around 5% due to a subdued Malt price outlook producing reduced profit potential and some rotational issues, and canola may decline slightly. Lupins will rise by around 5%, and oats will rise, both for hay and grain. On balance, wheat will decline slightly.

Paddock trafficability is fine on the Moora plains but less so towards the eastern districts. The intensity of the March rain has meant that waterlogging is a minimal issue.

### **Kwinana east**

Rainfall during March was widespread across the northern Central wheatbelt, with typical totals of 35 mm at Nungarin and 60 mm at Beacon. Rainfall was patchy further east to Mukinbudin and Warralackin.

Growers are looking to control weeds rather than commence seeding at this very early stage. Fallow paddocks are being sprayed and will be sown first. Growers are wary of sowing wheat too early, as last year early sown wheat finished worse than wheat sown in May.

For 2016, there will be more lupins and less Roundup Ready (RR) canola sown, a slight increase in chickpea and field pea, and an increase in oats. Overall though, the program is mostly unchanged. April 25 is the target date to start seeding in earnest, and with the current subsoil moisture, around 10 mm of rain will be sufficient to start.

### **Kwinana west**

There is a mix of moisture status soils across the central wheatbelt with the western districts being dry, central districts being wet (75 to 80 mm) and soils further east being damp.

Currently Triazine Tolerant (TT) canola is being sown on higher paddocks which are trafficable. Half of growers are not ready to start seeding or are not yet confident to venture into canola so early. Those with a positive experience in 2015 have started and are likely to have finished their canola programs by mid-April. The majority of growers are looking to control weeds and/or putting in a small patch of canola to test the system. Growers are testing long season hybrid canola in the eastern wheatbelt. If there is no rain over the next 10 days some barley and oats will go in, mainly in frost prone paddocks.

North of Great Eastern Highway, lupins are going in with less lupin activity further south.

For 2016, wheat and barley areas will be similar in size, with the canola area up slightly, at around 10 to 15,000 ha. More pasture will go to crop with the early break and excess feed potential.

Current soil moisture lays the foundation for an average season. Widespread rain at the 'break' is still needed. Substantial falls are needed in western districts but light falls will suffice in central and eastern districts.

There is a lot of confidence around for 2016 with the opportunity for farm businesses to make profit based decisions around early sowing experiences during 2015.

## **Albany Zone**

The Lakes region has received extensive and heavy rainfalls with 50 mm in western districts to 150 mm from Newdegate to Ravensthorpe. A third of growers are seeding canola, aiming to plant 50% of their area, with the rest cautious of early seeding and/or waiting for weeds. Some lupins are going in as well, but the majority will start in the next fortnight. Some oats will start going in and barley in a fortnight, mainly in frost risk situations.

For 2016, the canola area will be similar; oats will increase in area but from a low base; barley will be up 5% with wheat area reducing slightly.

This is the third year of early spraying for weeds proving good for grower confidence of reduced weed burdens to challenge yield potential.

These early sowing opportunities mean the entire crop tends to go in a bit early as it's hard to slow/delay seeding once you get started. However, growers are less worried about frost than about the effects of a dry spring. Experience with early sowing is minimal in the region and some experimentation is taking place this year.

Weed spraying has commenced on the drier paddocks, and places where ryegrass has a second leaf emerged. Paddocks are trafficable where there was 50 mm of rainfall, but waterlogged where there was 150 mm.

As a consequence of the early rainfall a lot of windrow burning has not been completed.

In the lower Albany zone, 150 to 300 mm of rain in January followed by 90 to 130 mm over Easter means the region is wet. Being able to drive over paddocks for weed control or early seeding is fraught with danger and activity is quiet generally. Weed spraying is the main activity where the paddock is trafficable.

For 2016, the canola area will decline and oats will rise. The wheat and barley area will be similar.

As paddocks dry out some barley and canola will go in soon, but not much. Canola Blackleg resistant varieties with a rating of 6 to 7 have been chosen for 2016. Lupins may be sown in the next two weeks with cereals being planned for May.

Growers with stock are sowing oats and barley for early grazing with the possibility of taking the crop through to harvest. Pasture growth is very good.

Pest pressure is likely to be high in 2016 with Green Peach Aphid and associated viruses a big risk due to the extended green bridge.

Prolonged waterlogging in early winter is a big risk with soils already saturated. Windrow burning has been affected by the rain and excess stubble residues may be an issue for seeding without dry weather for the rest of April.

### Esperance Zone

Soil moisture across the Esperance port zone is at high levels after extensive and regular rain throughout summer. Easter rainfall totalled 140 mm at Ravensthorpe, 120 mm at Hopetoun and 40 to 60 mm at Cascades producing close to saturated soils.

In the Mallee region, deep soil moisture is excellent, but topsoils are drying and further rain is needed. In the eastern districts to Condingup and further, soils are mostly wet after 30 to 40 mm of rain. Further rain in a true 'break' to the season is needed.

The western districts out to Ravensthorpe are facing a threat of prolonged waterlogging. In 2013, this same situation occurred and grain production was very low.

Across the Esperance port zone canola sowing is in full swing and growers aimed to finish the canola program by April 18. Barley will be the next crop sown with longer season varieties favoured initially with a small area of La Trobe also to go in early.

For 2016, the commodity mix will remain similar to previous seasons.

For canola, less area will go to RR canola, with an increase in the TT area, principally Benito. The reasons include: less yield than anticipated with RR canola; the \$50/t discount in the market makes TT canola more profitable; weed burdens in many paddocks are now reducing the need to use RR canola to knock weed numbers down; the up-front extra cost to establish RR canola is a deterrent compared to the cheaper TT system.

The early sowing opportunity, which brings the potential for higher yields, is very welcome with the current soft market support for canola and cereals.

The common question in this situation is 'How early can we go?' It is really difficult to pull back the speed of seeding once the machines get rolling. Growers are being encouraged to spread their sowings throughout the usual window in April to mid-May, particularly in the southern and western districts where soil moisture will remain at very good levels for some time to come.



## Geraldton Zone

In the Coorow/Carnamah/Three Springs region, 50% of growers are sowing canola. One grower has already finished and has moved on to lupins. This is after around 150 mm of rain in March.

The northern Geraldton zone, north of Three Springs, has seen little to no summer rain and dry sub-soils. Eradu has recorded only 10 to 15 mm since November 2015. Rain in the past week has totalled around 25 mm for Yuna and Mullewa, and 30 mm for Ogilvie.

The central districts of Three Springs, Mingenew to Morawa have recorded rain in the past week and some seeding is occurring. However, growers are in need of further falls to boost sub-soil moisture levels to enable germinated crops to survive should there be any prolonged delay to a true season 'break'.

The southern half is very wet after extensive summer rain, Easter rain and good falls again mid-April. Growers in the northern districts are looking for weed germination as the lack of subsoil moisture makes early sowing risky. Dry seeding of canola and lupins in the northern districts may start on April 22 if there is no further rain. The canola area may be scaled back without an April break.

Carnamah to Perenjori, Morawa to Dalwallinu is wet and canola is being sown. One canola crop is reported to have germinated within 36 hours. Canola currently is reported to be at the three leaf stage and ready for the first post emergent herbicide application. No wheat is being sown at this very early stage.

For 2016, lupins are still shaping as the best profit crop and the area will rise slightly for the third year in a row. This rise will mainly beat the expense of canola. The oat area will increase on the back of on-going market support with the crop being planted further north than usual. Milling Oats is very attractive for potential profits but only with the right soil type.

The next rain for the north needs to be substantial. If so, light rain in May will be okay. For the southern districts, light rainfall in the next six weeks will be sufficient.

## Season Outlook

**Dr David Stephens Australian Grains Export Innovation Centre (AEGIC)**



The seasonal outlook for the next six months to October is for an average to above average season. AEGIC's ENSO Sequence System is predicting a high chance of strong El Niño transitioning into neutral conditions for the rest of the year and a low chance of La Niña. Historical data analysis shows there is a high chance WA will experience a good season in a neutral year after an El Niño year.

Current conditions influencing our weather include

- Warm water in the north-west Indian Ocean which is producing moisture for the still-active upper level air stream.
- Strong high pressure systems to the south west of WA.
- Warm water in the Indian Ocean west of Perth (which works against a wet winter).

The current pattern of high pressure systems around Antarctica, and principally to the south and south west of Australia, will restrict the potential for a typical winter cold front to develop during April, so the active upper level troughs and northerly rains look to offer the best prospects for rains in the short term.

The soil moisture map, shown on the next page, shows very high levels of soil moisture across most of the WA grainbelt. Recent rain in the northern districts of the Geraldton zone has lifted soil moisture marginally.

## Bureau of Meteorology

### Rainfall outlook

- April to June rainfall is more likely to be above average across the Gascoyne region in WA, throughout SA, extending into NSW and the far western corners of Queensland and Victoria. The far northern parts of Australia are more likely to have a drier than average three months.

- The current outlook reflects a combination of a weakening El Niño, very warm Indian Ocean temperatures and warm sea surface temperatures around much of the Australian coast.
- Historical outlook accuracy for April to June is generally moderate to high over most of Australia.

### El Niño summary

- El Niño is steadily declining, with models forecasting a return to a neutral pattern in late autumn to early winter. During the breakdown period of the El Niño cycle, warmer days tend to persist over northern and eastern Australia, with warmer nights across much of Australia.
- In addition to El Niño, there are widespread warmer than average sea surface temperatures across much of the Indian Ocean, as well as waters surrounding Australia, while waters off the WA coastline are closer to average. The warmer waters are likely to reinforce above average temperatures in coastal regions.

