

CROP REPORT

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The 2023 Grain Season – Recent rain has fired up the seeder's

The recent rainfall across large portions of the Western Australian grainbelt has resulted in many growers taking the opportunity to get started sowing canola. Whilst there is some hesitancy around what to do due to the seasonal outlook being drier than average, those that have had more than 40mm of steady rain, particularly in the central and southern regions of the state, are taking the opportunity to get as much canola in the ground as they think will safely emerge under current moisture and temperature conditions.

The northern regions of the grainbelt have had some very good falls of rain along the eastern low rainfall corridor and growers took the chance on sowing several paddocks to canola before the soil surface dried out.

The central medium to low rainfall regions of the state received higher rainfall totals on the whole and the falls were steadier and soaking, so anything from half to two thirds of intended canola plantings will go in the ground on the rain received. This is a golden early planting opportunity for those growers and should ensure yield levels that will be profitable irrespective of what happens during the winter.

The rainfall totals dropped off closer to the west coast from Geraldton to Albany and along the south coast to Esperance. The Esperance port zone, except for the far eastern regions, did not receive enough rainfall to plant on except for isolated cases. However, the chaos caused by the rain over harvest in the region has resulted in good levels of stored soil moisture, which means that once the break occurs, seeding decisions will be easier.

In sharp contrast, the very long growing season and dry summer for most of the state has left soil moisture reserves low, particularly in the northern regions. Growers in these areas have already decided to take a risk averse approach to the year. Some of the hesitancy is around the seasonal outlook with a drier than average year predicted and whilst there is no certainty of this, the probability of a low rainfall season is greater than it has been in recent years. While the predictive accuracy in autumn for these climate events is low, it is unusual for the climate models to align together so strongly in their prediction that below normal rainfall is more likely from April to June over most of Australia.

The general swing from barley to wheat in the last few years will likely continue unless barley prices continue to strengthen. Large areas of canola plantings are again in the mix, although a late break could see the area dropping off. Lupin and pulse area are certainly going to be down now that the price of nitrogen has fallen from previous highs. The large carry-over stocks are also weighing on growers' minds. Whilst there is a desire to reduce sheep numbers by growers long-term across the state, the manufacturing and export brake on older stock may see pasture area remain about the same for the time being.

There may be a slight increase in area intended for hay, as there are signs of strengthening market signals. Oats in general are suffering some "recency bias" due to lack of frost in recent years, putting the benefits of oats as a frost mitigation strategy behind the potential profit margin of alternative crops. This may impact on oat area intended for milling.

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Geraldton Zone

Most of the recent rain fell in the eastern low rainfall corridor from Binu/Yuna down to Mullewa and Latham. Any areas that had more than 60 to 80mm of rain on the medium soils, have sown canola into moisture. The warm conditions and very dry subsoil has tended to hold back plantings on the lighter country due to the risk of the topsoil drying out before the canola had time to germinate. In this warm northern environment, canola nearly always ends up more even if rain falls on top after sowing, rather than having to walk the fine line when chasing moisture between sowing deep enough to get a germination, but not too deep to prevent emergence.

Most growers will take to the opportunity to give their country a knockdown and start sowing dry after Easter. At this stage, it is likely up to two thirds of the intended canola area will go in dry, leaving the remainder as a “wait and see” option.

Lupins are likely to be dropped out of the rotation in a big way due to the mountain of carry-over grain still in store, particularly now that the price of nitrogen has come back a little.

Rain on the lighter country has fired up tractors deep ripping and undertaking other soil amelioration operations.

Wheat will again be the dominate crop, with the recent trend of later sown paddocks increasingly going to a short season barley such as Buff for feed.

Kwinana Zone

Kwinana North Midlands

The region has had some patches of between 50 to 80mm of rain mostly in the south-western parts from around Bindi Bindi down to Toodyay and further to the east near Latham, and strips around Dalwallinu. The remainder, particularly along the west coast, remains quite dry.

The soil profile is very dry, drained by the huge crops in 2022, and growers are mindful of that and are taking a cautious approach to the upcoming cropping season. Those that were not able to sow a paddock or two of canola following the rainfall over the last two weeks, will start sowing dry after Easter.

At this stage, intended canola area will be equal to 2022, and the later the general break occurs, canola will progressively be dropped in favour of fallow in the east and cereal in the west. Lupin area will be down from 2022 in the zone, as it will be across the state due to low prices and large stocks. Barley area is likely to be up on 2022, replacing country dropped out of lupin, oat and canola if it is a late break. The region has traditionally been a big barley growing region, however the introduction of Imidazolinone (Imi) tolerant wheat varieties and some very high yielding quick wheats such as Vixen, and the lack of price spread for malt barley, has seen a big slide in barley area in recent years. The strengthening barley prices may see a change to that this year.

Canola leaf diseases have been increasing in the region due to the increase in area, good seasons and tight rotations with a high percentage of canola. Growers are confident they can keep blackleg and *sclerotinia* under control by changing up varieties and fungicide applications, although at lower prices for canola, the cost of a two-spray disease strategy and the risk of lower grain yields from lack of subsoil moisture and a late break, would likely see the area of canola area drop back a little.

Kwinana North East

The bulk of the very good falls of rain were in the eastern areas of the Kwinana North zone. There were some very heavy falls of rain in the triangle north-east of a line from Narrogin out to Moorine Rock north to Bonnie Rock, west to Koorda and south-west to Dowerin. Most growers in the area received at least 50mm from the two main rainfall events at the end of March. Some growers received well over 100mm from several rainfall events and are taking the opportunity to get canola sown into moisture. The epicentre where most of the rain fell was around Merredin, and up to half of intended canola plantings are now in the ground.

For growers not planting canola, the rain will allow for a decent knockdown as many winter weeds have come up, and it will give them confidence going into 2023 with subsoil moisture in the ground. Having 50mm plus of effective subsoil moisture at the start of the season will nearly ensure average grain yields for most if the break is in May and there is average rainfall over winter.

Kwinana South

There were some very heavy falls of rain in the triangle north-east of a line from Narrogin to Quairading, Corrigin and south Tammin, north to Wyalkatchem and west to Northam. Some isolated falls of well over 100mm were recorded with most in the 50 to 60mm range. Any country with these sorts of totals has canola already sown. Growers with the heavier falls have waited for a germination and are sowing canola into moisture now. Around half of intended canola plantings will go into moisture in this area of the state and with good reserves of subsoil moisture in the ground, the rest will be planted dry.

Canola price is weighing on some growers minds however when doing the sums on \$700/t and the yield bracket for early sown canola, most growers' concerns are put aside. This is especially since price at this time of the season is generally not a reflection of price at the end of the year.

Availability of seed of the canola varieties best suited to these early rains has been a cause of frustration for some growers seeking to maximise the opportunity offered by the early rains. This may keep the lid on canola area in the region.

Those that have decided to wait are content with getting a decent knockdown on weeds that have germinated. It has been cool enough to get most of the winter weeds up, and being able to get a non-selective herbicide on the country is a valuable alternative to solely relying on pre-emergent herbicides to do the bulk of the work.

Crop area mix is unlikely to change too much now from 2022. Barley is likely to be consistent, with the regular barley land types holding but a preference for wheat and/or canola over anything else.

Oat area is likely to be down due to a "recency bias" due to lack of frost in recent years, putting the benefits of oats as a frost mitigation strategy behind the potential profit margin of alternative crops.

Planned lupin and fallow paddocks are looking like being swung into canola where rainfall has been greater than 60mm.

Albany Zone

Albany West

The majority of the West Albany zone missed out on the recent rainfall of the last two weeks except for the very north-east portions around Williams and Arthur River, where some canola is going in on moisture.

There were some heavier falls in around Frankland and Kendenup although these were pretty isolated. There is also some winter wheat being sown in areas that received enough rain to get a germination. The remainder of the region had light falls of 20mm or less.

There is canola and pasture being sown dry where there is no chance of a split germination, although most are waiting until after Easter to get started in earnest. Pasture is the only legume in favour due to large carry-over stocks of lupins and beans. Many growers have been caught with sheep, and rather than quitting them for a loss, most will carry them for another year and may need an extra pasture paddock or two to run them on.

Canola is still very profitable at current prices on the potential yields that can be achieved in an average year in the higher rainfall regions of the zone. The wheat/barley split will probably not change too much from 2022 unless barley kicks up a bit in price between now and the start of June.

Albany South

There has been a patchy start to 2023 in the region, with marginally adequate moisture allowing for small areas of canola being sown. A lot of pasture is going in although the uncertainty around the live sheep game has lowered growers outlook for sheep and most are planning for at least the same area of crop as 2022.

Soil moisture models are showing good reserves, therefore growers are not going to rush into seeding programs just yet.

Albany East (Lakes Region)

Most growers in the region received between 25 and 75mm of rain from the last couple of rainfall events. The variability of falls increased from north to south, with very few areas south of Pingrup receiving enough rain to sow into. Some canola and Illibo wheat is being planted, although most are waiting on a germination of weeds before deciding on whether to start sowing and most are planning to get a knockdown in and hold off until Easter to get going.

Similar to 2022, growers are sticking to their 'Plan A' canola areas at this stage. This will of course depend on the timing of further rainfall in April and early May. Pasture area may creep up a little in order to carry more sheep. Oats are likely to remain equal to 2022 and the wheat/barley split is also likely to be similar too. 2022 saw the swap back to wheat from barley which had been the dominant cereal for the last 5 to 7 years.

The lack of a green bridge means pest and disease pressure will be at the lower end of the scale, which should help keep the cost of growing a crop down.

The last two years have been exceptional for the region and many growers are taking a cautious approach to their cropping programs including time of sowing as there hasn't been a decent frost for a while to take the edge off potential yields.

Esperance Zone

Most of the Esperance port zone had falls of between 5 to 30mm. Except for some areas east around Beaumont, there has not been enough moisture to sow into. Some small areas of canola have gone in on moisture, as have some paddocks of vetch for stockfeed.

The region has good reserves of moisture from the rain leading up to and during harvest, and growers are in no rush to risk a split germination if the moisture is not adequate to get a nice germination.

The canola area may drop off a little as the increase in plantings over the last two years has pushed the rotation with canola to be “tight”, increasing disease pressure. The switch to Hybrid TT and Roundup Ready canola will continue if seed supplies hold up. Barley area will probably continue to slide, replaced by wheat. Pulses and lupins will have a similar fate as there is simply not a case for grain legumes at current bagged nitrogen prices. Pasture area will also continue to drop due to the complexities of running sheep and difficulties in unloading them in the current environment.



Department of
Primary Industries and
Regional Development

Season Outlook, April 2023

Ian Foster, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

Climate summary

After a dry January and February, thunderstorms in late March have brought welcome rain for much of the agricultural area. This has continued into early April, with eastern areas receiving good falls, though the south west and south coast have received less rain to date.

Estimated root-zone soil water storage is well above average for northern, central and eastern parts of the agricultural area, but it remains patchy in southern areas.

There is strong agreement among climate models that below normal rain is more likely from April to June over most of Australia (Figure 1) and the impact appears to be stronger from May onwards. Predicted atmospheric pressure patterns show higher pressure south of WA (Figure 2), which could drive lower rainfall over southern WA.

Climate models are also predicting development of an El Niño event in the Pacific Ocean, and a positive Indian Ocean Dipole event in the Indian Ocean from June or July onwards. The combined impact from these events is to suppress rainfall over much of Australia in winter and spring.

Historically, predictive accuracy in autumn for these climate events is low. That said, sub-surface temperatures and heat levels in the Pacific Ocean have primed the ocean basin for a possible El Niño event, so the models may well be correct.

Additional information is available from:

[DPIRD: Weather stations](#)

[DPIRD: Soil Water Tool](#)

[DPIRD soil moisture probes](#)

[BoM: Decile rainfall for January to March 2023](#)

[BoM: Rainfall outlook for the next week](#)

[BoM: Seasonal Rainfall Outlook](#)

[BoM: Australian Water Outlook](#)

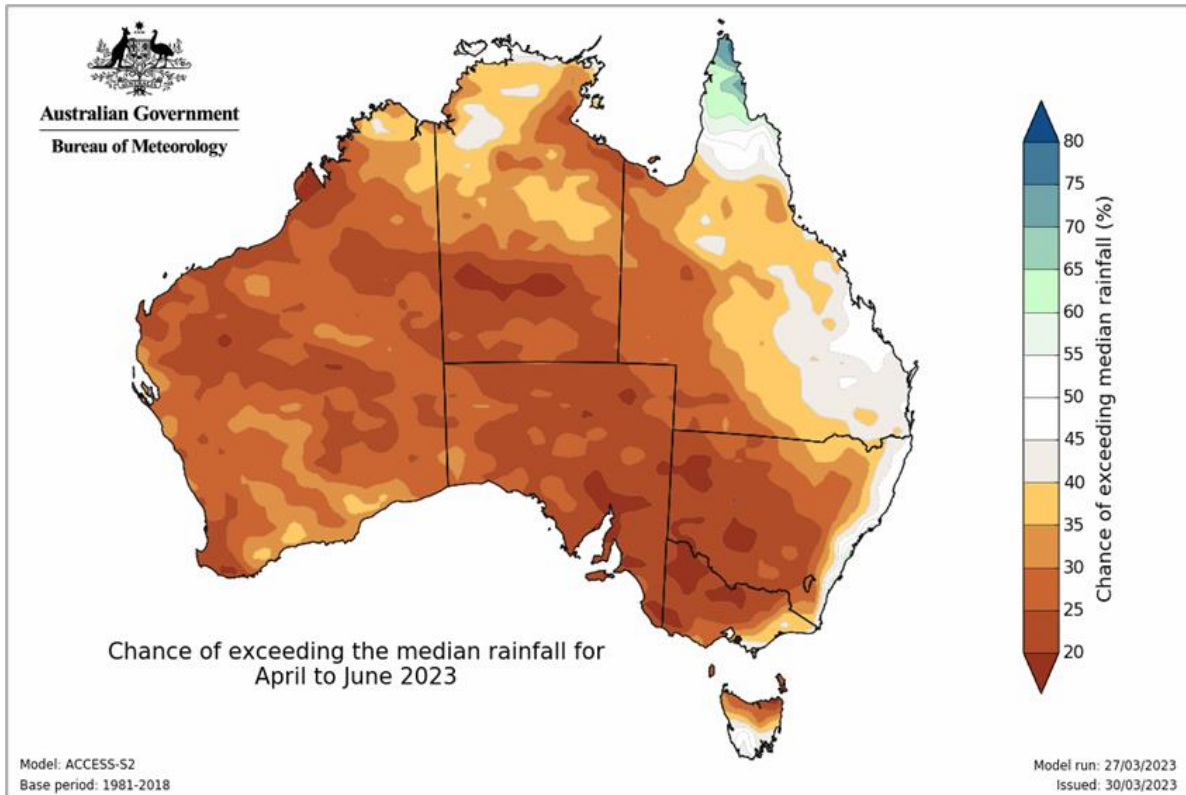


Figure 1. Chances of exceeding median rain for April to June 2023, based on model run 1 April 2023. From Bureau of Meteorology.

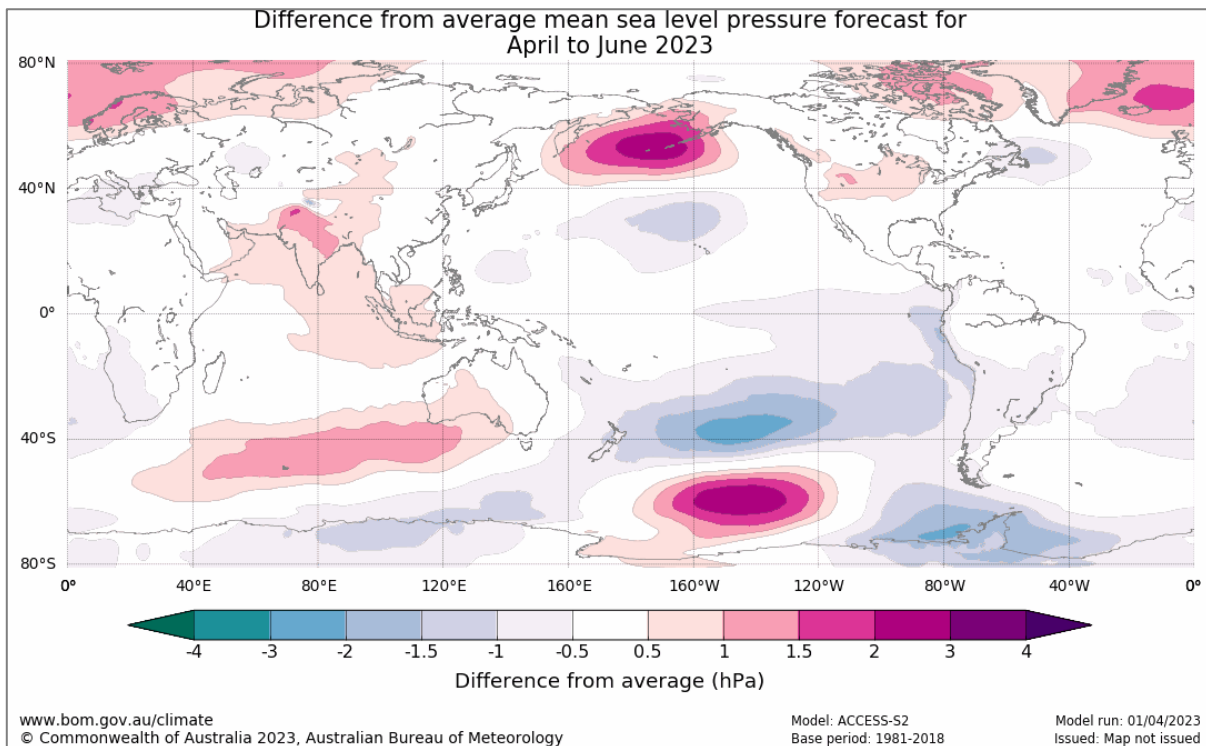


Figure 2. Predicted sea level pressure anomalies for April to June 2023, based on model run 1 April 2023. From Bureau of Meteorology.

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