

# CROP REPORT

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## The 2024 Grain Season - Dry dusty start to the 2024 Western Australian growing season

Most growers have either turned a wheel in the last week or will do so during the week leading up to ANZAC Day. Apart from some canola and oats in the Hyden area sown into moisture and isolated pockets of canola further north, it is all dry sowing. With no rain on the horizon, it looks like at least a couple more weeks of dry sowing is ahead. This is not unusual for Western Australia and is not necessarily a precursor to a poor year. Although the extremely dry soil profiles are a concern and have put a dampener on the start to the 2024 growing season.

The dry hot summer is lingering, and the reprieve in March with storms across areas of the eastern grain belt raised hopes for a change in weather patterns. However, with current climate outlooks forecasting more of the same for the time being, these hopes have evaporated. Whilst things can change quickly at this time of the year, growers are taking a cautious approach with cropping plans.

Dry sowing of canola, lupins and vetch is underway in many regions of the state, with growers planning to swap to dry sowing cereals when they reach around 50 per cent or less of their planned canola hectares sown. This is a subtle change from recent dry sowing strategies, where a larger percentage of the planned canola crop would be sown dry before switching to cereals. With virtually no sub-soil moisture across the grain belt, except for the central eastern fringes, growers are holding back on committing larger areas of canola due to the risk associated with a late break to the season.

The cereal area was expected to increase from 2023 due to a reduction in sheep numbers and percentage of ewes mated. The anticipated pasture-to-crop swap of around 10 per cent is likely to be less now as growers are still holding stock that was earmarked to be turned off. The swap from pasture to crop will be offset largely by a decrease in total crop area if the dry conditions continue into May.

There is expected to be an increase in both lupin and oat area from 2023, due to the run down in stocks and current higher prices on offer. The reduced area of plantings in 2023 and increased domestic demand for these grains as of livestock feed has pushed prices up to decile eight to nine levels for both crops. It remains to be seen if these higher prices hold through to harvest.

The wheat and barley areas could change significantly across the regions as the break to the season lingers and it is too early to be firm on crop area split of the two. There could also be a wide swing in variance with crop area as growers in the northern and eastern regions of the state may opt for fallow over crop as the break to the season pushes back.

Whilst long-term weather forecasts are not particularly reliable this time of the year, there is nothing positive on the horizon and this is playing on growers' minds with most taking a cautious approach to the season ahead.

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

### 2024 Season GIWA April Western Australia Crop Area Estimates (hectares)

Port zone	Wheat	Barley	Canola	Oats	Lupins	Pulses	State total
Kwinana	2,900,000	560,000	650,000	130,000	150,000	10,000	4,400,000
Albany	500,000	550,000	450,000	120,000	30,000	8,000	1,658,000
Esperance	560,000	250,000	320,000	10,000	20,000	20,000	1,180,000
Geraldton	1,000,000	100,000	150,000	5,000	100,000	2,000	1,357,000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>4,960,000</b>	<b>1,460,000</b>	<b>1,570,000</b>	<b>265,000</b>	<b>300,000</b>	<b>40,000</b>	<b>8,595,000</b>

#### Geraldton Zone

Some isolated storms hit the western strips from Mingenew down to Coorow with falls of up to 40mm enabling growers to sow canola into moisture. But for the remainder of the zone, it is “as dry as most have ever seen it.”

Last year was a very poor year for the region and the dry summer has resulted in growers pulling back on planned areas of crop. The appetite for risk is just not there. Canola area is likely to be down in 2023, although lupin area may nudge up slightly from the record low plantings in 2023 due to the lower cost of production and stockpiles now depleted.

There has been a conscious plan to hold off on canola plantings until a rain is in sight, as historically, dry sown crops that receive rain sooner after sowing generally have better establishment than those where seed has been sitting in the hot soil for weeks. As a result, it’s mostly wheat that is going in dry at present, and barley for those that grow barley.

The coastal areas will stick more closely to their set programs and switch to the quicker maturing varieties as the start to the season becomes later.

Most growers stick to a target date where the crop type or area will be cut and have reasonable flexibility with seed on hand to switch crop species to match the season, so the crop area mix is up in the air to some extent at this early stage of the season.

The region has seen wild swings in the last five years with the best seasons on record in 2021 and 2022, and the worst years on record in 2019 and 2023. Growers are understandably nervous as to what this season may hold.

#### Kwinana Zone

##### Kwinana North Midlands

Many growers are commenting that it is “as dry as they have seen it” and feel it is shaping up to be similar to the 2006 and 2007 seasons, which were very poor production years for the region.

Growers had paired back seeding plans for 2023 following the very dry 2022 and have again reduced planned areas of canola, particularly with the continued dry weather.

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Dry seeding is underway in the region and some in the very western parts were lucky to have a win in the storm lotto last week. This will get those dry sown paddocks up, which could do more harm than good, as there is no sub-soil moisture to keep them going if it stays dry through May. The rain was very isolated and most have zero soil moisture to work with.

Interestingly, barley is going in dry before canola for some, which is a turnaround from previous years and a pointer to the perceived risk of being exposed to too much canola area as the season start becomes later. With the increased seeding capacity now, growers can readily swap and put reasonable areas of canola in if it looks like raining.

The low levels of residual moisture that were carried over from 2022 to assist the crop yields in 2023 are not there this year, and that has facilitated a risk adverse approach to crop type and area for growers in the region. In previous years, growers would have been going flat out with dry seeding by ANZAC Day, although that is not going to be the case this year.

The swing back into lupins will be small even though the price has kicked up, as there tends to be those that grow lupins and those that don't nowadays, rather than most growers having some lupins in the rotation. The same can be said for oats for hay, as those that got out of hay are unlikely to jump back in even with the current high prices.

### **Kwinana South**

There has been little or no rain over the region since September and soil profiles are completely dry. It's early days for the more secure rainfall portions of the region and growers have been in no hurry to get started dry sowing. The soil profile is completely dry from 2023 and there has been no summer rain to germinate weeds or provide a moisture profile. Soil temperatures are very warm and dry sown canola in these conditions is a risk most are not taking just yet. A small percentage of set programs are being sown dry with most swapping to cereal, leaving a larger percentage of canola out for the time being.

Crop area and enterprise mix are currently largely unchanged from 2023, although if the dry continues canola area will drop, particularly in the eastern portions of the zone.

### **Kwinana North East**

The Kwinana North East zone jagged the majority of the rain from summer storms in March and many areas have at least 50mm of moisture stored in the top 30-40cm. There is no moisture deeper, but crops will get through a dry spell on the available moisture if they germinate on a low rainfall event.

Consequently, most growers are dry sowing the odd canola and lupin paddock with most moving onto cereals a bit sooner than normal. More than 50 percent of the planned canola area is being held back to see what happens with the rain. Most growers are keeping 3-4 paddocks up their sleeves as these can go in within a few days if it does rain within their planting window.

Timing of emergence in 2023 resulted in big swings in final grain yield due to the sharp cut out at the end of the season, and with a late break, warm winter and forecast weather patterns pointing to a similar finish as 2023 already, growers that have sub-soil moisture reserves are planning to keep dry sowing up to 60-70 percent of their cereal areas and then opt for fallow if the rain holds off until June.

## Albany Zone

### Albany West

Growers in the region are dry sowing or will start shortly. Seeding programs are going ahead as planned at this stage, even though there is no sub-soil moisture and no rain in sight. The increase in predicted crop area will be less than previously thought, as reasonable numbers of sheep are still on farms.

The wheat barley split in area from 2023 will be similar in 2024 unless the break to the season pushes back to June, where growers will opt out of the last few planned wheat paddocks in favour of barley.

Canola area could also swing a little, as most growers will leave a few paddocks unsown and decide if they go in based on the timing of the break.

### Albany South

Growers are well into dry seeding earlier than normal due to the “fear of missing out”. The tight finish last year also had an impact on the normally reliable rainfall areas in the south of the state, with the later emerging crops yielding well below the early emerged crops.

The planned area of winter wheat will now swing over to spring types or barley unless a rain comes out of nowhere soon.

The recent light rainfall events have caused more harm than good, as dry sown canola that has germinated may not make it through without a few drops of rain in the next few weeks, as the deep soil profile is very dry.

Sheep are costing a fortune to feed and whilst all growers across the state have been impacted by not being able to offload stock from farms, the growers in the high rainfall regions are less accustomed to such a dry summer and the duration of hand feeding that is going to be necessary this year. As the break gets later, hand feeding will be needed well into winter unless there is a decent fall of rain soon.

### Albany East (Lakes Region)

The western portions of the zone are as “dry as a chip”, but it picks up further east, to being very good around Hyden and down to Madden and Lake King with some areas having received more than 100mm for the year to date. Areas around Lake Grace have been patchier, with some having sowing opportunities and others remaining dry.

Seeding has been going for a little while, starting with pasture and moving onto oats and canola. Most are now dry sowing as where there was moisture, it is now too deep to chase.

No one is changing seeding plans just yet. There was a pulling back on canola area in forward plans leading into 2024 and this will continue as the break to the season becomes later.

The planned offloading of sheep has not happened to the extent that was planned as there is nowhere for them to go. As a consequence, the expected increase in crop area from pasture will be slight.

For growers in the southern regions, it is shaping up to be a tricky situation to get snail baits out when it rains, as the optimum timing is likely to coincide with emerging crops. Whilst the dry has been good for reducing snail numbers, they are still there and will need dealing with.

## **Esperance Zone**

The region received some falls of rain in the western parts of Salmon Gums and parts of Grass Patch and Cascades in March, but there has been nothing to speak of since. The isolated storms last weekend could result in patches of dry sown canola germinating, but there is no moisture in the profile to keep it alive for any length of time.

The western edges of the Esperance port zone have fared better to date, with many receiving reasonable rain in March and more follow-up last week. Small areas of canola have been sown into moisture where there were falls of greater than 50mm. The remainder of the areas are going in dry.

There has been little or no summer weed control needed, which is unusual for the region and points to how dry it has been over the summer. This has been good in some respects, as it has allowed growers to get a few jobs done that have been put off over the last couple of years.

Dry sowing has been underway and more will start this week and next. Growers have pushed the timing of plans back a bit due to the dry forecast, although most have not changed planned programs just yet.

Canola areas have not been cut yet, as growers in the low rainfall areas consider poor canola to be similar to poor barley, and the higher rainfall growers tend to stick to set rotations. In saying this, growers are planning to hold several planned canola paddocks back from being dry sown to see how the season pans out.

Water in general is problematic for the region particularly in the Mallee, with dams dry and some having to cart water from town.



## Season Outlook, April 2024

Ian Foster, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

### Climate summary

#### Seasonal climate April 2024

#### Rainfall

The period since October 2023 to date has been very much drier than normal for much of the cropping region and the south-west of WA. Some eastern and south-eastern parts have had summer thunderstorms (some very severe). Soil moisture storage remains very low in most areas, see Figure 1. Note this model shows water for the top 40cm of soil.

#### Forecast

The El Nino event in the Pacific Ocean has ended. Indian Ocean Dipole conditions in the tropical Indian Ocean are slightly positive, driven by very warm ocean temperatures off east Africa.

Some climate models are predicting possible development of a La Nina event in the Pacific and even a positive Indian Ocean event from winter 2024. However, predictions of these events made in autumn have lower accuracy, so they should be treated with caution at this stage.

The Bureau of Meteorology seasonal outlook for May indicates drier conditions are likely to continue into May, see Figure 2. Many of the international climate models also have a drier outlook for May. Rainfall chances improve from June.

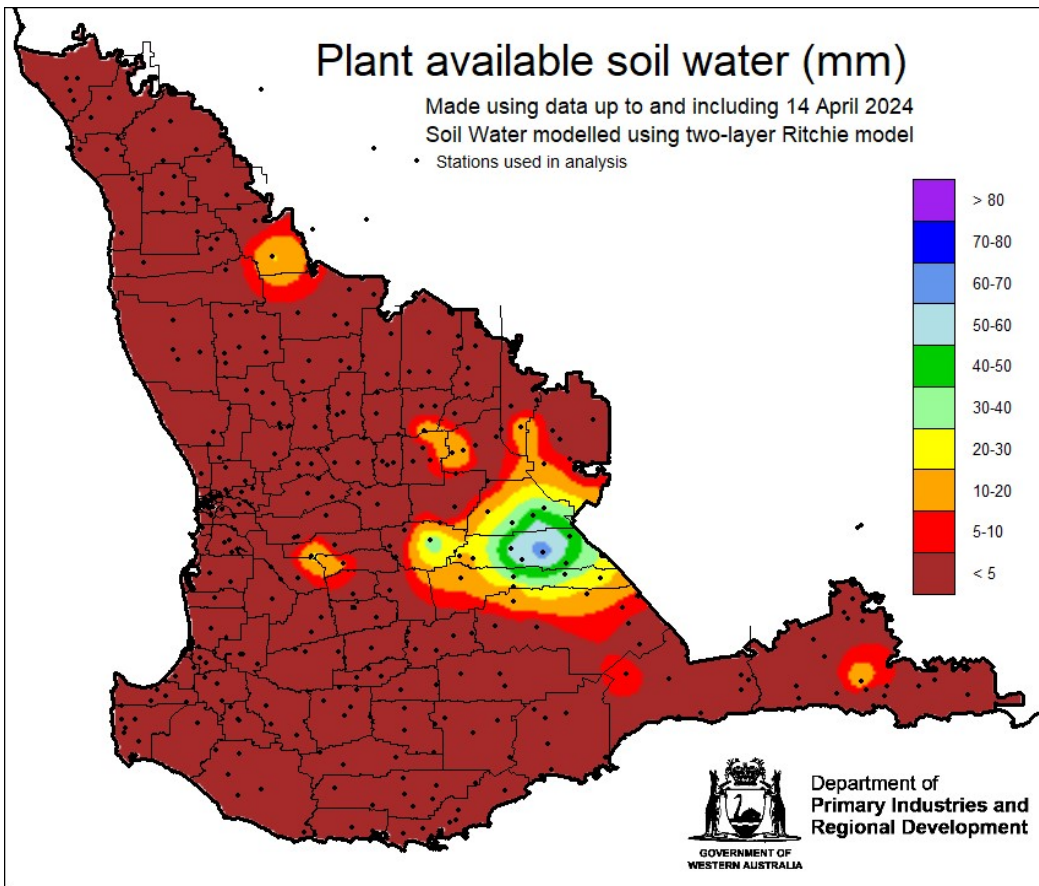


Figure 1: Estimated plant available soil water at mid- April 2024. Source: DPIRD (2024)

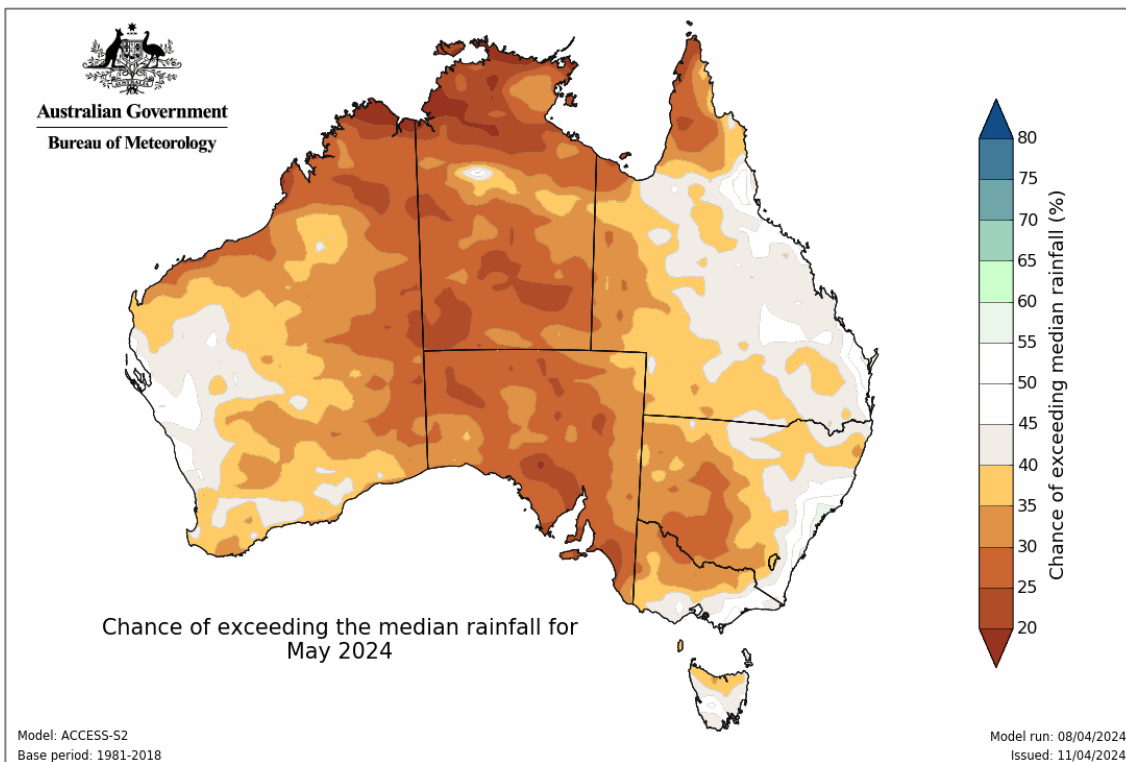


Figure 2: Rainfall outlook for May 2024 Source: Bureau of Meteorology (2024)

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## Temperature

Seasonal temperatures over summer and into autumn have been very much above normal. Soil temperatures remain very warm.

Predictions of above normal temperatures continue through autumn and into winter. Chances of unusually high maximum temperatures are about three times as likely for most of southern WA. Minimum temperatures are also expected to be much warmer than normal.

Additional information is available from:

[DPIRD: Weather stations](#)

[DPIRD: Soil Water Tool](#)

[DPIRD soil moisture probes](#)

[BoM: Decile rainfall for October 2023 to March 2024](#)

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

[BoM: Seasonal Rainfall Outlook](#)

[BoM: Australian Water Outlook](#)

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