

## 1997 - The Year that Was

*"The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time"*

What an exhausting year. If your farm achieved a reasonable season you must be dumbfounded. The Australian climate centre predicted an "El Nino" year and it turned out to be dry. Most areas had a growing season of decile 1-2 rainfall. Despite the dire prediction of drought, rain in August/September salvaged crops. Victoria produced only just below average production. Most farmers would say that the El Nino scare was a trifle overdone.

Despite the generally low rainfall for 1997, farmers managed to use water very efficiently and many had a satisfactory year. Rainfall deciles for the growing season from April to October ranged from decile 1 in the North to decile 4 in the South, most getting decile 1 to 2. (Decile 1 means the driest year in 10, decile 9 the wettest year in 10). The little rain that fell during the growing season came at very opportune times.

What did happen in 1997?

With an excellent 1996 harvest tucked under farmers belts they were ready to give 1997 every chance. CASE IH machinery sales soared, PIVOT was doing brisk business and the gypsum carters were having to wait long hours to get loaded. A feeling of optimism prevailed. The two main concerns in the Autumn period were mice and the fact that little rain had fallen in Victoria since October 1996 resulting in little or no soil moisture. "Don't worry, she'll rain" was the optimistic approach.

As February went into March and approached April, farmers started to worry that virtually no preparation of paddocks had been done for the 1997 crop. Those who cultivate soils began working paddocks dry, many paddocks becoming quite cloddy. The fallow paddocks prepared before October 1996 were the only paddocks that had sub soil moisture, a few isolated thunderstorms in January did help some farmers.

Livestock were being handfed.

The first signs of an EL Nino event were being echoed by the weather bureau. Many parts of Victoria had their driest 8 month period on record till May. As we know the break in May was varied and indecisive, some had enough rain to sow full steam ahead, others sowed some, stopped and tossed up whether to sow dry or half dry. Farmers were changing their sowing plans, canola and pulse crops being the main crops affected. The West and Central Mallee seemed to be the be the driest areas for missing the vital rains. A rain on the 15<sup>th</sup> June allowed more farmers to sow the bulk of their crop, with some areas of the Mallee missing again. For many mice, were wreaking havoc and crops were baited from air and ground with Zinc Phosphine. Those farmers whose seeders were not working precisely were paying a heavy penalty.

July was a month that confirmed the El Nino fears. Many thought 1982 was being revisited. Warracknabeal had twenty-four frosts for the month. Livestock was being sold in droves, budgets were being adjusted and many were deciding that crops were not worth spraying. Crops grown on long fallow were the only crops looking all right. Some canola crops were being cultivated because they looked so terrible.

Rebel weather forecaster Ian Holton was retaining his optimism, "Don't worry rain will come in early August". The day after the disastrous August 3<sup>rd</sup> Ouyen sheep sale where lamb prices dropped \$15 per head, the cycle changed. For the next two months most farmers had in excess of 100 mm of rain, crops seemed to come back from the dead, particularly cereal crops. A feeling of relief and partial optimism at long last returned. Farmers became frantic to spray the crops for unwanted weeds.

Could this be a good year after all? For most, not quite.

The predicted Holton rain on the 7<sup>th</sup> October went further North than expected. We all had to wait till the 30<sup>th</sup> October for this critical event. The Wimmera getting by far a greater share than the Mallee. In the meantime eleven days in October had maximum temperatures greater than 25 degrees Celsius. There were frosts on the

17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> October which caused damage to many pulse crops. A hot period between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November had seven days above 30 degrees Celsius. This was the last straw for lentil and field pea crops.

At long last harvest. Cereals grown on fallow proved to be good to very good, showing the benefit of good stored moisture. Cereals grown after pulse crops which had very little stored moisture resulted in below average yields. Some farmers achieved up to two tones per hectare which was truly remarkable in water use efficiency terms. Most yields were 0.8 to 1.4 tones per hectare. Many wheat and barley crops had problems with screenings, both Ouyen and Silverstar seemed to be the wheat crops affected. Frame wheat proved to be an excellent quality wheat and generally out-yielded Ouyen by as much as 20%.

Canola yielded better than anybody expected in a dry season.

The big disappointments were the pulse crops. Even though it was a difficult season most farmers only received half their expected low yields from lentils, chick peas and field peas.

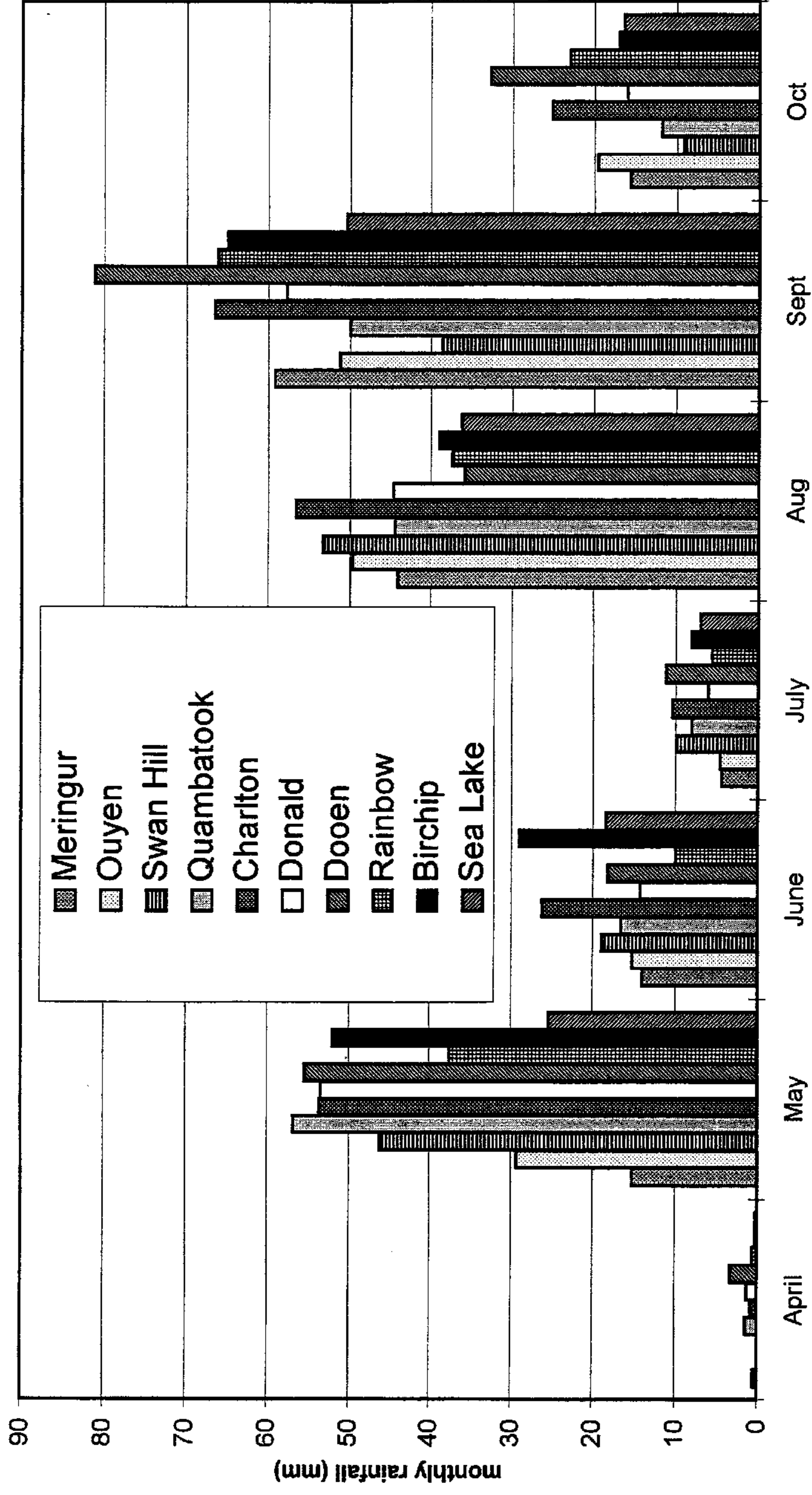
Protein levels were predictably high for cereals considering the hot dry finish. Canola oil levels also suffered because of this hot dry finish.

Prices for all crops were similar to last year except pulse crops which were at record levels. Wool prices at long last rose in 1997, rising over 100 cents per kilo clean for 21 micron wool. Cattle prices remained in the doldrums, however lamb prices were very sound considering the quality of lambs produced.

Overall, 1997 year was tough, we were probably let out of jail twice during the year. As usual there were many lessons and opportunities. Some great discoveries about growing cereals after medic pastures had resulted. The great debates about fallowing and continuous cropping, conventional cultivation and direct drilling, low and high input farming, and finally about the economic value of pulse crops will continue well after you have lost this book.

**What is important is never give up hope, never stop learning, listening or talking.**

## Monthly Growing Season Rainfall for the 1997 Season





**1997 GSR Totals at selected towns in the North-West**

