

The Year That Was

"Optimists are always prey to disappointment, but life without hope is dismal."

When Dorothea McKellar, that well-known exponent of the virtues of our countryside, described Australia as "a land of droughts and flooding rains," she hadn't heard of 1998. Had she done so, she might have mentioned the Big Freeze, spring days as hot as those of summer, crop disease - to name but a few of the problems farmers faced in our region last year.

1998 was a trying year, one during which awareness of the incredible risks involved in farming was driven home. Almost every disappointment, every disaster was meted out, no mercy given.

Farming is a tough occupation which demands that we be a special sort of people. We need to have strong resolve and great resilience, to be mentally tough, to possess a strong streak of hope and to hang on to our optimism. We should be proud that we survived.

All right. Let's get it over with. What did happen in 1998?

After the dry 1997 season, very little moisture was available at the end of the year for the 1998 crop. Farmers were pleased to move into the New Year and think positively about the months ahead. Quite a lot of rain fell in January and February to give those who cultivate the chance to begin preparation for the coming crop. Many areas received up to 100mm of rain during January and February. As we may remember, El Nino, which was strongly evident during 1997, was predicted to break down during 1998. Ian Holton, Birchip Cropping Group Forecaster was positive and encouraging about 1998.

Alas, it was not to be.

The price of feed Barley and feed wheat was sitting on \$150 per tonne and \$160 per tonne respectively during the autumn. Though many didn't take the opportunity, this gave farmers the chance to sell stored grain.

March was dry in most areas.

April produced good rains on the 12th, 18th and 24th which offered farmers the perfect start for preparing paddocks. Some even began sowing. The Eastern Mallee received a substantial fall at the end of April which gave the area the perfect sowing rain. They had to wait, however, until July for follow-up rains.

In early April, forward sales of Canola were making \$360 per tonne delivered at Melbourne. Many farmers sold and decided to grow more canola at the expense of wheat and barley, the prices of which were flat at the time. In May, canola prices reached a high of \$410 per tonne. Farmers were further encouraged.

May was dry throughout the Mallee. Some sowing was completed in early May into stored moisture, but by mid-May, Mallee farmers were sowing both wheat and canola dry. The far northern Mallee still had not had a break at all. Some farmers had to wait till July for that to happen. Although considerably more cropping could have been completed in April or early May, many believed that there was no hurry, as only a small sowing rain was required. Some also believed that early sowing could result in crop damage, as occurred in 1996.

Meanwhile, the Wimmera received below average rain, but falls were concentrated in May, which many considered to be a near-perfect situation. Considering that a dry winter in the Wimmera is often beneficial, things looked good. The western Wimmera, in particular, showed promise.

By June, many paddocks were still dry, and concern grew, particularly for late dry-sown canola crops, which looked dismal. A small rain on July 5th allowed more crops to be planted, and the dry-sown ones to germinate. The remainder of June was dry.

Between the middle of June and the end of July, there were about thirty frosts - a traditional indicator of a tough year. Despite this, July was the wettest month of the year.

Up until the end of July, livestock had a pretty rough time. Although stubbles after harvest were very high in nutrient value, the volume was small and sheep were soon being hand fed.

August remained dry in most areas except the Wimmera, especially the western part, and the far northern Mallee.

September was, as usual, the crucial month. Farmers were amazed how some crops, especially wheat, managed to stay alive. Barley crops, because of early sowing, suffered most. Some respite was experienced on 22nd and 23rd September, when some rain fell. Hot conditions between 28th September and 1st October, however, did incalculable damage everywhere. The thermometer reached near forties on October 1. This was regarded by many as the end of the season.

However, October brought significant rain: neither sufficient nor in time to ensure good yields, but just enough to revive suffering crops. Perhaps there would be some salvageable yields. Some Wimmera crops, already looking good, were substantially boosted.

Then, on 28th October, came The Great '98 - Hundred Years Freeze, ironically, and sadly, to potentially high-yielding crops. Some areas suffered temperatures of -3°C for as long as six hours. An uncertain, but at heart pessimistic, calm descended on the affected farmers.

"So what will all this mean?" they pondered. "Surely the crops with grain in them won't be affected." It was not to be.

The slow realisation of the devastating effects of the freeze on (mostly) Wimmera farmers created an atmosphere of shock, of disbelief, of mourning. And, of course, finally, acceptance.

The crops most affected were wheat, barley, and pulses. Canola generally suffered less damage.

The farmers of the Wimmera and Southern Mallee had also to cope with the outbreak of ascochyta blight in their chick peas. Previously, we had thought that the disease was confined to South Australia and was less virulent than the overseas version.

How wrong we were. The outbreak spread quickly. Many farmers were forced to spend \$20 per hectare for spray, some as much as three times this amount, only to see the crop eventually knocked over by the Great Freeze.

It was no help when feed wheat and barley prices collapsed to \$45 and \$55 per tonne respectively. Nor can it be said that they have recovered. Wool prices also collapsed after July, to bottom in October at 150c per kilo clean. Fat lamb prices, fortunately, continued to be firm at about \$40 per head and cattle prices increased on the 1997 figures by as much as 20c per kilo.

The harvest in the Mallee was generally easy. Wheat was of an excellent quality and high protein. Yields were about half of average, so that there were no silo hold-ups. Malting barley was universally problematic, either because of high protein due to the drought, or high screenings as a result of the freeze. Much of it was down-graded to feed.

Wimmera wheat crops affected by the freeze failed to reach ASW or better. Many farmers were forced to be satisfied with GP1. Yields were generally one third of normal. All pulse crops yielded dismally, the combination of drought, disease and frost resulting in strongly negative gross margins for chick peas, lentils and field peas. Canola yields varied enormously, though some farmers were lucky enough to achieve both good yields and prices.

The majority, however, broke even or, in some cases, lost money. It was a dismal year.

A farmer from the southern Wimmera declared that he hoped 1999 would be similar to 1998, but without the Great Freeze. He is the one for whom we should feel the most compassion: it was his year, his chance to make significant profits.

For the rest of us, it was never going to be our year. Or put it this way - we have a bad year out of the way. Perhaps this will even up the odds a little.

We possibly did everything right on our farms: we just didn't get the rain. No-one can ask more of us than that, even ourselves. We should hold our heads up high. The main task now is to think about 1999. We must plan more carefully, guarding against avoidable errors. We need to be prepared for either a good or a bad year.

Our hope is that next year we can say we would not have done anything differently during 1999, and remember that it is our last chance this millennium to get it right.

District Growing Season Rainfall mm. (April to October) for 1998

