

# 2003 – the year that was

*“28% of all statistics are false!”*

*“Droughts of the kind experienced in 2002 happen about every twenty years.”*

Few of us are really surprised or even alarmed by this statement. What really worries us is the thought that such a drought could happen two years in succession, as was the case in 1943 and 1944 and almost occurred again in 1945 until the rain came in late June.

History tells us that major exoduses of farmers and community residents have occurred either after periods of successive drought or prolonged periods of depressed prices.

It was therefore understandable that there was a certain amount of tension and uncertainty in the air as 2003 began. We wanted and needed a reasonable year to recover from the drought.

Can we remember what the landscape looked like during those first few months of last year? Fortunately we all have the capacity to put behind us the unpleasant memories of our past. Those who kept sheep will have more reason than most to want to forget the year, as the wind erosion proved heartbreaking. The lack of vegetation and cover exposing bare, dry, fine soil resulted in soil erosion from even the slightest breeze. Every second day seemed to produce another strong wind. Those paddocks which had been fallowed and particularly those to which pre-emergent herbicide had been applied proved susceptible to the gale force winds of June 6 and 7. No one can remember such an event at that time of year. Some of the worst erosion resulted in those paddocks that had failed to produce any crop in 2002 and were ready to be re-sown in 2003. Many paddocks had to be deep ripped to stop the effects of the wind.

Most severe landscape and degradation problems occur in those unpredictable one-in-twenty-year events and this makes prevention difficult. Somehow we need to make provisions to cope with the occasional severe drought, water logging, flood, fire, and tornado.

The rain of February 21 was the only real rain event that occurred in the first four months. Amounts varied between 25 and 125 mm. Most areas received totals at the lower end but there were many farmers around Warracknabeal and Nhill who were lucky enough to have the perfect opening break, receiving substantial falls. Interestingly enough this rain germinated medics that somehow survived until the next rains fell in May and June. This meant that 2003 will go down as a good pasture year, and that sheep became very profitable. The pastures were so good and the medic so dominant that some sheep died of the disease ‘red gut’ caused by too much nitrate in the diet.

The opening break was not clear-cut; it came gradually and was patchy. Those who received the big February rains needed only a shower to sow. For most other farmers sowing was a stop-start affair in May because the rainfall events were so small. Parts of the eastern Mallee had no rain at all in May and had to wait until mid June before starting to sow their crops. As mentioned earlier, the incredible winds in June increased the uncertainty of the year.

Fortunately for everyone, good rains fell in the second half of June and throughout July and August. The mood changed from one of uncertainty to one of optimism and confidence, even though soil moisture levels remained low. While crops looked good, the fact remained that they were living from day to day, with very little in reserve. Some optimistic farmers added urea to their crops, betting on a wet finish, even though generally nitrate levels were high.

Because of the indeterminate start to the season, weed control before sowing was minimal. This resulted in many cases of rye and brome grass competition in cereals, which proved

difficult to control. Whether this was due to resistance or poor weed control remains to be determined. It probably confirms the knowledge that weed control will always be an important issue and that some weeds never disappear.

September and October rainfall was generally below average across the board and there were several days late in September when temperatures almost reached 30 degrees. Frosts on September 28 and 29 proved to be fatal for many canola and barley crops and in some cases even wheat crops. The western part of the Wimmera Mallee was the worst effected. Frosts later in October also caused some damage to southern crops.

The year demonstrated yet again the old adage of the importance of a wet spring. Even an average spring rainfall would have been appreciated. When did we last manage this? However, even though spring was dry, the weather was cool which meant that crops were not heat stressed. The Bureau of Meteorology has informed us that the maximum average temperature for both September and October was two degrees Celsius below average.

The fact that lentils yielded better than expected in the Mallee demonstrated the importance of the cool October. The Wimmera lentils crops were not so fortunate because they suffered from the lack of rain in late October and the hot weather of early November.

A new strain of stripe rust badly affected WA wheat varieties during their drought of 2002. Fortunately, we were told, Victorian wheat varieties were resistant to the new strain. What resulted was totally unexpected. WA had their best crop year ever, with very little sign of stripe rust and Victorian wheat varieties suddenly became susceptible, even with our dry spring. As a result many Wimmera farmers sprayed fungicide on their wheat with limited success. We also now have the situation where none of our wheat varieties has total resistance to stripe rust and some varieties will not be used again.

The big story of the year was the variation between wheat and barley crop yields. Barley yields were generally excellent, even though screenings were much higher than required to make malting grade. On the other hand, wheat yields were 20 to 40% lower than their appearance suggested, and considerably less than barley. Why? Well, there are many explanations. The most probable explanation is a combination of sowing time, lack of available water, dry finish and the sudden hot November temperatures. Barley was able to finish just in time with its shorter growing season.

Harvest was generally uninterrupted for most. Two rain events in the eastern Mallee and the northern country and one in other regions caused concern for a while but it was not justified. As mentioned earlier, making quality malting barley was a problem, but wheat quality was generally excellent with both protein and screenings giving good price bonuses. Some lentils in the Wimmera failed to make 1<sup>st</sup> grade because of size and colour. Oil levels in canola were lower than average.

Yields for canola and wheat were mostly below average, barley above average and pulses about average.

The price of all our farm products was affected by the sudden rise in the Australian/US dollar. The 30-40% rise during the last year has meant lower prices for all commodities. Fortunately AWB International and ABB have hedged our dollar value for a large portion of this year's crop which has helped maintain some prices. Feed barley at the beginning of harvest returned about \$150/t at farm gate. As the harvest progressed, the price dropped by about \$20/t. Wheat will return from \$160 to \$210/t farm gate depending on quality, malting barley \$170/t, lentils about \$400/t, field peas \$230 - \$250, and canola \$360 - \$400/t.

As is the case every year, some areas are more fortunate than others with rainfall. Areas in the eastern Mallee that have missed out in previous years finally had their day, experiencing a

decile 7 rainfall year. On the other hand an area in the central Wimmera again missed their fair share of the rain.

No doubt the best area to farm during the last few years and again this year is the western Wimmera going up into the far western Mallee. Farmers around Nhill, Rainbow, Kaniva, Warracknabeal and south of Rupanyup had a good year in rainfall and yields. There was also a little pocket of farmers north of Sea Lake who were able to sow their crops in late April, mostly by direct drill, who had a great year. Direct drill sowing in those sandy soils is now viewed with new enthusiasm.

One couldn't finish a summary of the year without talking about sheep during and after the drought. The cost of feeding sheep through 2002 was about \$1/week/sheep or about \$25-\$40/sheep for the time fed. Was it worth keeping sheep considering the cost of feeding, threat to our soils and worry involved? As it turned out, those who kept sheep were able to recoup their costs and be in a good position to capitalise on the great pasture year, but not without some anxious moments before June when the season finally broke. It should be noted that such was the demand for sheep in the spring that some ewes were selling for more than \$150/head and fat lambs at their peak were selling for \$4.60/kg or about \$130 - \$150/head. The disappointment for the graziers has been the drop in the wool price during the year. Many believe that meat has replaced wool as the driver of profit now and in the future.

For the record, we should remember that for most farmers in the Wimmera Mallee water system, only one dam per family unit was permitted to be filled this year. Running sheep under these circumstances has been a huge challenge, many preferring to wait for a rainy day instead.

Finally, unlike 1983, 2003 will not go down as the perfect year following the drought. It is more closely related to 1968 which had a similar dry spring and yields which showed the effect of limited soil moisture and a dry spring. Fortunately it will not be remembered as the year that meant a lot of people had to leave the area. We can all live another day.