

# The year that was 2004

*“I’m rather good at it. I have been always borrowing. If I can borrow nothing else, I borrow ideas.”* Marcus Clarke

It is relatively easy to describe a particular year on one’s own farm. To specify precisely what happened over our whole region is the challenging part. Far more difficult is to accurately describe the feelings of the farmers, not to mention those of their partners: the hopes, expectations, commitment, hard work, disappointments and the consequences of what happened.

Summarising 2004 has been my hardest task in twelve years I have been writing ‘The year that was.’

2004 was a disappointing year in nearly every way we choose to look at it. For some, it was the worst financial drought they have had, worse than 2002, because they spent money on inputs right up till harvest. The good thing about the year was that, as droughts go, there was very little wind erosion because paddocks were not bare. All paddocks had enough rain to grow crops or pastures, enough rain to persuade farmers that every thing was going to be all right, right up till the bitter end.

Unfortunately, the spring let us down again with its combination of lack of rain, hot day time temperatures and frost. Looking back, many of us believe that we should have been less optimistic. Hindsight, after all, is a wonderful thing.

So, for the record, what did happen?

It’s important to remember that during 2003 the months of June, July and August were average rainfall months and September and October were well below average. Those who made fallow before the end of August saved some water for the 2004 crop, a strategy which proved to be highly significant for crop yields.

Those who didn’t fallow early had to wait till June in 2004 before any worth while rain fell.

That was the first significant clue that 2004 was going to be tough unless something dramatic happened. For most farmers in the Wimmera Mallee, very little rain fell for the nine months to June: the Systems site at Birchip, for example, received only 100 mm for the nine months. Subsoil moisture levels for most paddocks were near wilting point. In fact some paddocks had less water than wilting point, meaning that some rain had to fall before any water would be available for plants.

Reflecting on that nine month dry period reminds us that preparation for the cropping program during the time was virtually impossible. On the positive side, there were no summer weeds, but on the negative, it was not possible to kill self-sown cereals or an early strike of brome grass before sowing commenced. Those who hadn’t fallowed early were prevented from doing so unless they could work their ground dry. As a result, many who normally cultivate chose to adopt a direct drilling approach to their entire cropping program. Trifluralin that for many is incorporated before sowing was either not put out this year or alternatively sprayed in front of the air seeder. Pre sowing of urea for most was abandoned or delayed because of both the dry start and the difficulty of application.

2004 will be remembered by many as the year they began a serious direct drilling approach to their farming system. Many new and modified air seeders were used this

year. Press wheels, deep banding capacity and narrow points aimed at water harvesting and better germination of crops are now common place on many farms. Particularly those farming the sandy soils of the Mallee are changing at a rapid rate to this system. The BCG survey this year indicated that more than 60% of the crop in 2004 was sown by direct drill systems.

Dry sowing was again common as another dry May eventuated. Many farmers began sowing on the first showers of May, hoping to receive more follow-up rain to ensure adequate germination. Fortunately everyone had average June rainfall, which meant that all crops that were sown germinated and emerged. Because of the dry start many abandoned sowing canola, particularly in the Mallee, and others totally removed some paddocks from the cropping program.

Livestock enterprises, as can be imagined, also felt the pinch of the long dry months of spring, summer and autumn. Because the 2003 year produced excellent stubbles that were unblemished by rain, sheep feed lasted longer than would have been normally expected. However by June most farmers with reasonable stocking rates had been handfeeding for at least three months, and would continue to do so for several more until feed germinated in June was sufficiently grown. Provision of feed for lambing ewes was again a problem, resulting in lower lambing percentages than normal.

Lamb prices right through the autumn were stuck on about \$3.30/kilogram carcass weight, until suddenly in late May they surged upwards until they peaked at about \$5.80/kilo at the end of July. The record price for a pen of lambs was set at market in August at \$194/head. Those who kept lambs or bought them and feed-lotted them were handsomely rewarded for their efforts during this period.

Even though it was clear that most crops were living off rainfall and not stored moisture, during July, August and the first two weeks of September they were still looking healthy and had potential for average yields. The Wimmera at this stage was in better shape than the Mallee and confidence was growing. Some were even confident enough to apply urea to their crops, hoping and even expecting better than average yields. Unfortunately, as we all know, for nearly everyone this optimism proved to be unfounded. It's interesting to note that BCG's Yield Prophet was telling us that we had little chance of average yields for wheat at the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. Its median yield prediction for Hopetoun was 0.7 t/ha, Birchip was 1.1t/ha and Laen 2.0t/ha. Maybe we should have taken more notice of its predictions.

Limited opportunities of killing weeds early meant that they were difficult, expensive and in some cases impossible to control, especially brome and rye grass populations. It is now generally accepted that resistance to many group A and B chemical groups is well entrenched on most farms. Herbicide resistance poses one of the great challenges facing farmers, one which must be immediately addressed.

A stripe rust outbreak again occurred this year, causing many farmers to spray fungicides on their crops from late September onwards. Certain varieties of wheat became more susceptible this year due to the emergence of a new strain. This gave farmers fewer variety alternatives in 2005, particularly those wanting to plant wheat after wheat. Fortunately the most commonly used variety Yitpi had some resistance to the disease and did not need fungicides this year. We hope it maintains that resistance this coming season.

The rot began when rain ceased to fall after the 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> September rain event. Two other rain events in September and October produced for most less than 10 mm each. On top of that a hot week in early October culminated in a record 42 degree °C on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> of October. If that were not enough, the following Saturday produced a frost that affected crops mostly across the Wimmera region. The dye had been cast: the season's potential had been severely retarded as subsequent crop yields indicated.

It was strange that, from the road, many of the crops of 2004 looked reasonable. They grew right up to the Mallee trees, and seemed to have heads on all plants. However, though there was very little evidence of tipping in the heads, when they were rubbed out very little grain was found. The pulse crops similarly produced pods but very few seeds. The reason for this is believed to be the combination of low subsoil moisture and extremely hot days. The effect was similar to that of a frost on a crop when no seed is produced. The crops that did survive were the long fallow paddocks with subsoil moisture and the sandy soil type paddocks that need less water because of lower wilting points.

Harvest was interrupted in the North by rain in the first two weeks of November. As much as 100 mm fell in some areas. Wimmera crops gained some benefit from these rains and many frost-affected pulses had another attempt at producing a crop. The farmers in the southern Wimmera certainly gained significant benefits from this rain.

The effect of the November rain and the dry season meant that grain quality was unfortunately a mixed bag. Large percentages of shrivelled and light barley were delivered to the silo this harvest, much of it failing to make malting grade or even feed one or two. Some wheat was shot and sprung, some light and shrivelled and nearly all showed high protein levels. The cash price for much of the feed barley was under \$100/t, and for wheat less than \$150/t which meant that many farmers stored grain on farm hoping for a rise in price later on in the year. The rain also meant that some farmers were unable to harvest crops because of green heads from second growth until well into January.

You can read in more detail in this manual about actual crop yields across the region. In summary, some wheat crops were not harvested, particularly in the central southern Mallee. Wheat sown on fallow yielded generally 40% below average and the rest half that again. Barley crops were all harvested but yielded similarly to the majority of wheat crops not sown on fallow. Canola generally failed completely in the Mallee and yielded less than half average in the Wimmera. Pulse crops barely produced seed in the Mallee and about one third of average in the Wimmera.

The sheep producers continued to have a reasonable season, even with the lack of spring rain. Demand in the spring for store sheep was extreme, resulting in most crossbred young ewes selling in excess of \$150/head and merino ewes making around \$100 for quality. Lambs in the spring maintained the \$3.50/kilo and 30-35 kilo live weight and store lambs were making around \$65. Unfortunately wool continued its lacklustre performance making around the 750c/kilo clean basis for 21 micron wool.

It's important to mention that rain fell, primarily in the Mallee, during the first 10 days of December. Some farms received up to 150mm during that time and most received more than 50mm. Unfortunately much of the Wimmera received less. The effect of this rain when added to the rain event of November has been the germination of many summer weeds which have had to be controlled, but also with the potential of significant amounts of moisture being stored for the 2005 crop. The result was that

the December period proved to be a strenuous period for work, as crops had to be harvested, paddocks sprayed for summer weeds and some cultivation of paddocks undertaken in readiness for next year's season.

The consequences of the 2004 year are significant. There is no doubt that the majority of farmers are worse off now financially and probably psychologically than last year. It has been only two years since the last severe drought. The last eight years have been dry for most. During this eight year period, few have had even one average or better than average October rainfall month. Only two years have been wet during May, when sowing crops is all important. Average growing season rainfalls have been well down. The result is that farmers are understandably getting a bit sick of doing it tough and generally think our region deserves a wet year. Who could disagree?

An early addition to the significant November and December rains in February or March would help morale enormously, as well as saving in sheep feeding.

After that, who knows? Imagine the vision of bogged tractors at sowing, and maybe even bloat in the spring or a multitude of other things we've almost forgotten could happen. Who knows, if we do things properly, we might even....