

# Section

# 3

## District Reports

Reviews of the 2019–20  
season

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## National overview

Just when we thought things couldn't get much tougher than the drought conditions of 2018, the rainfall taps were even more firmly turned off for the national grainbelt during the 2019 winter crop growing season.

The tonnages delivered told the tale. Winter crop production in 2019–20 is estimated to have decreased by about 5 per cent on the previous year to just under 29 million tonnes (mt). This is the smallest winter crop since the devastating drought of 2006–07 when 17.6 mt was harvested across the nation.

The national wheat crop in 2019 fell by around 12 per cent on 2018 to 15.2 mt. But barley production increased 7 per cent to 8.9 mt while the canola tonnage also increased by 7 per cent to 2.3 mt.

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Amongst other crops, chickpea production in 2019 was similar to 2018 at 281,000 tonnes and oats production increased slightly to 900,000 tonnes.

Across the national grainbelt, wheat yield averaged 1.5 tonnes per hectare in 2019–20 while barley and canola were relatively strong

yield performers at 2.2 and 1.3 tonnes respectively. This average varied markedly on a state and regional basis. For example, many parts of Victoria enjoyed an excellent season with average wheat, barley and canola yields coming in at 2.5, 3.0 and 1.7 tonnes per hectare respectively – well above the national averages.

### The 2019–20 summer crop prospects

Despite some widespread and very welcome rainfall across northern NSW and Queensland in early 2020, summer crop production prospects remain well below average. This follows unfavourable seasonal conditions in late 2019 that further depleted soil moisture levels to well below average in most summer cropping regions and record lows in some others. These low levels of soil moisture constrained planting of summer crops in most regions.

Other than in Central Queensland, substantial rainfall from late January through to mid-February generally arrived too late for additional planting of summer crops. The area planted in 2019–20 is estimated to have decreased by two-thirds on the previous year to 357,000 hectares. Consequently, total summer crop production in 2019–20 is forecast to fall proportionately to around 878,000 tonnes – the lowest production figure in more than 25 years.

The area planted to grain sorghum is estimated at 143,000 hectares with production at around 292,000 tonnes.

Because of low supplies of irrigation water and insufficient levels of soil moisture to plant dryland cotton, the area planted to cotton in 2019 is forecast to have fallen by more than 80 per cent on 2018 to 61,000 hectares – the lowest since 1978–79 when it was 50,000 hectares.

Cotton production this year is forecast to decline to around 135,000 tonnes of lint and 191,000 tonnes of seed.

Rice production is forecast at a record

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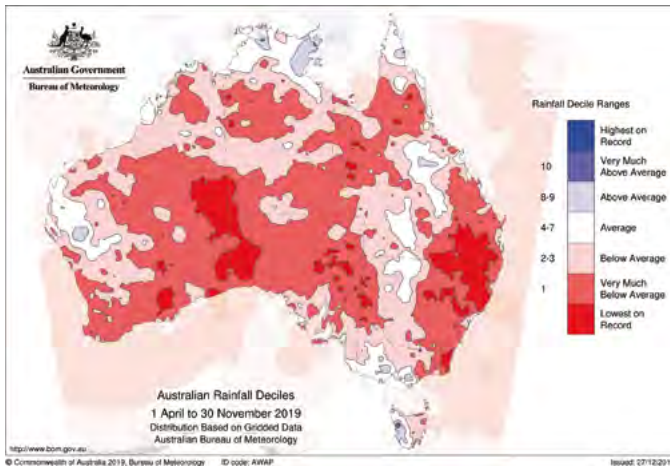
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low of around 54,000 tonnes because of low water allocations and high water prices.

**Things are looking up... to the rain clouds**

In the latest (mid-April 2020) Bureau of Meteorology climate outlook, the 2020 winter crop is forecast to have a very promising start. On top of excellent rain already tipped out of gauges across much of southeast Australia in early autumn, the BOM rainfall outlook for the three months May to July are likely to be wetter than average for much of Australia (mostly a 60 to 75 per cent chance). Similarly, June to August is also likely to be wetter than average for most of Australia (mostly 60 to 75 per cent chance).

This is music to the ever hopeful ears of Australian grain farmers.



**As the 2019 Growing Season Rainfall Decile chart depicts through a sea of red and pink hues, the few grain producing regions that did not have below average or record low rainfall, were in Victoria and South Australia's South East.**

**Western Australia**

Across the WA grainbelt it was “one extreme to the other” in 2019, irrespective of your location (see Tables 1 and 2). In the north of the state grain yields were more than 50 per cent below for all crops (except

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oats), and in some cases up to 75 per cent below 2018. Moving south in the state the combination of severe frost followed by very hot windy conditions resulted in unprecedented loss of production for some growers. This was most evident in the south coast where some growers had their “best ever” result due to the lack of waterlogging, others had their “worst ever result” due to the lack of rain and frost.

In traditionally higher rainfall regions of the south west, grain yields were spectacular and grain quality excellent, with some regions returning the highest grain yields ever.

During the 2019 harvest, grain quality was “all over the place”, with



**A well established 2019 wheat crop on the Eradu sand of WA's northern cropping region. (PHOTO: Peter Norris)**

**TABLE 1: 2019 WA crop production estimates (tonnes) – GIWA**

Port zone	Wheat	Barley	Canola	Oats	Lupins	Pulses	State total
Kwinana	2,650,000	1,450,000	365,000	180,000	160,000	8000	<b>4,813,000</b>
Albany	985,000	1,600,000	370,000	190,000	65,000	5000	<b>3,215,000</b>
Esperance	850,000	700,000	285,000	10,000	15,000	15,000	<b>1,875,000</b>
Geraldton	1,060,000	105,000	97,000	15,000	110,000	4000	<b>1,391,000</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5,545,000</b>	<b>3,855,000</b>	<b>1,117,000</b>	<b>395,000</b>	<b>350,000</b>	<b>32,000</b>	<b>11,294,000</b>
Compared to 2018 harvest	-45.40%	-25%	-23%	-31.30%	-38.60%	-3%	<b>-37%</b>

Note: The grain totals reported are for whole farm production. This includes on-farm seed and feed requirements as well as grain traded outside of the CBH delivery system.

**TABLE 2: 2019 WA crop yield estimates (t/ha) – GIWA**

Port zone	Wheat	Barley	Canola	Oats	Lupins	Field pea
Kwinana	1.01	1.88	0.91	1.05	1.33	1.33
Albany	1.89	2.35	1.76	1.18	1.65	0.63
Esperance	1.70	1.84	1.72	1.00	1.50	0.42
Geraldton	1.10	0.88	0.44	1.00	0.61	1.00
<b>Averages</b>	<b>1.43</b>	<b>1.74</b>	<b>1.21</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>1.28</b>	<b>0.85</b>

some growers delivering into more segregations than ever before due to the range in protein and screenings. Having the ability to deliver into the number of segregations required (due to the wide range in grain quality) was a credit to the grain handling system in the state. Reflecting market signals, the lack of price spread for protein reinforced the message to mostly “grow for yield”.

For most, the 2019 cropping year in Western Australia was one to forget. As is often the case when faced with a difficult situation, learning from what did and did not work in the 2019 season can have more impact.

A standout from last year was the very good weed control achieved by loading up with pre-emergent herbicides when faced with the second year in a row without a knockdown. Weed control was helped by the season in 2019, although strategies to keep herbicide rates up, use diverse modes of action, and be spot on with post-emergent application timings have also contributed to low weed loads for the 2020 season.

Climate prediction models are becoming more sophisticated each year. Predictions in early 2019 were that it was going to be a low decile year and warmer than normal in the spring, which turned out to be correct. Growers are taking more consideration of climate models and whilst many may not have necessarily changed plans based on early seasonal predictions, it certainly was in the reckoning, particularly as the season break became later. This year there has been a fundamental shift away from the weather patterns that were affecting our climate in 2019 from a negative situation to a more neutral outlook.

### Outlook for 2020

The main shift in grower’s cropping plans for 2020 for all areas except the western and south western regions is one of returning to conservative



**This 2019 crop of Jurien lupins had established well for James and Susie Lewis of ‘Lennoch Park’, in the Gibson district on WA’s South Coast. (PHOTO: Quenten Knight)**

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programs and making risk adverse decisions around spending and crop type mix.

There were good falls of rain throughout February and March across much of the grain growing regions of the state, except for the northern and western areas. This has resulted in useful levels of sub-soil moisture for the 2020 cropping programs – moisture which was absent this time last year.

The rain also resulted in decent winter weed germinations in the central and southern regions which will take the pressure off pre-emergent herbicides when the bulk of the crop is sown.

The strong grain prices for all crops is giving growers options with potential crop rotations – the timing of the opening rains will have a big part to play in how the mix of crops plays out.

Wheat will be the dominant crop in 2020. Even though the increase in barley area will continue this year in the southern areas of the state, the wheat area is likely to be up in the north and eastern regions of WA.

Area sown to canola could see a swing of up to 200,000 hectares in the central regions of the state if good rains fall by early May. The lupin area is unlikely to change from 2019 to any great extent, and the oaten hay and oat areas may increase slightly.

Growers in the southern regions, where surface water runoff into dams has been low for the last couple of years, are still looking for rain to fill dams. This has resulted in high rates of sheep turnoff in those regions.

Despite a Covid-19 induced rush for skilled people and product during April, the supply of inputs to agriculture – including labour – does not look to be limiting production. Fertiliser and chemical supplies are catching up with demand and growers are moving from just-in-time purchasing patterns to a hold-stock-on-farm strategy.

Most growers and contractors (with some handy kids having returned from boarding school because of Covid-19) are now hunkered down on farm, concentrating on machinery and program preparation for seeding and looking forward to some early rainfall to kick off the season.

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

## South Australia

### The season in review

The estimated total 2019 winter crop production for South Australia was 6.2 million tonnes from 3.85 million hectares (see chart). Harvest was delayed for some growers by cool conditions in November and hot windy/high fire danger conditions in late December, 2019.

By early January 2020 most areas had completed harvest with only a few farmers on Southern Yorke Peninsula and the Lower South East still harvesting.

Yields of cereal, oilseed and pulse crops were highly variable across the state, depending on rainfall received. But most areas produced below average yields.

The areas worst affected by lack of rainfall were the north and

north-eastern section of the Lower and Upper North, the eastern Mid North, Northern Murray Mallee, and the Far West Coast and Eastern Eyre Peninsula. Some farmers in these areas were unable to harvest enough grain for seed requirements.

Generally above average yields were delivered in the Lower South East and western part of the Upper North districts. While yields in Lower Eyre Peninsula were generally average to slightly above average. This was despite severe grain losses of over 2.0 tonnes per hectare in some crops from strong winds on November 20.

High water use efficiencies were reported in many barley crops across the state. Barley handled the hot dry finish to the season better than wheat.

Canola yields on Western and Lower Eyre Peninsula, Kangaroo Island and the South East were average to above average. In all other districts, canola yields were below average to well below average. Grain oil content was average to above average across the state.

Wheat grain quality was generally average to above average due to low screenings, above average grain protein and high test-weights. A high percentage of deliveries made milling grades.

Barley quality was better than expected with a higher than normal proportion of malting barley varieties classified as malt and most feed varieties classified in the highest feed quality segregation.

Bean and lentil crop yields were average to above average on Lower Eyre Peninsula and the South East, and below average to well below average in all other districts.

Chickpea crops generally performed poorly due to dry spring conditions and lack of stored soil moisture at seeding time. So most chickpea yields across the state were well below average.

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**Pests and other issues**

Some field pea crops were severely damaged by frost but even the non-frosted crops still yielded below to very much below average.

Pests and disease levels were generally low across the regions and crop types, resulting in minimal losses to pests.

With very little late spring and early summer rain, the summer weed numbers were generally low coming into the New Year.

During summer there were numerous fires started by dry lightning – and in some cases machinery – that burnt more than 270,000 hectares across the state. Approximately 2000 hectares of unharvested crop was

**SOUTH AUSTRALIA 2019–20 WINTER CROP PRODUCTION (tonnes) AND AREA (hectares) AGAINST THE 5 YEAR AVERAGE**

Crop		5-year average	State total 2019–20
Wheat	ha	2,139,600	2,153,700
	tonnes	4,545,300	3,303,500
Durum	ha	50,700	45,600
	tonnes	125,900	88,350
Barley	ha	795,200	950,100
	tonnes	2,008,300	1,914,800
Oats	ha	78,200	73,300
	tonnes	150,600	122,050
Rye	ha	7800	5700
	tonnes	7900	4250
Triticale	ha	23,900	32,300
	tonnes	40,700	42,050
Peas	ha	90,800	63,600
	tonnes	112,300	66,150
Lupins	ha	68,400	55,100
	tonnes	76,900	61,050
Beans	ha	68,000	92,800
	tonnes	103,800	129,950
Chickpeas	ha	24,800	22,200
	tonnes	26,300	17,000
Lentils	ha	146,800	142,500
	tonnes	231,600	178,650
Vetch	ha	29,200	34,000
	tonnes	16,200	10,750
Canola	ha	227,000	182,400
	tonnes	304,100	285,600
Hay (not in total)	ha	265,200	320,600
	tonnes	1,072,900	1,258,900
<b>STATE TOTALS</b>	<b>ha</b>	<b>3,750,200</b>	<b>3,853,300</b>
	<b>tonnes</b>	<b>7,749,900</b>	<b>6,224,200</b>

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lost, most of which was in the Yorketown fire on the southern Yorke Peninsula.

Livestock have grazed crop stubbles across a wide area of the state with a risk that over grazing can lead to erosion, particularly on lighter sandier soils.

In districts where there was sufficient crop growth, farmers baled straw to supply bedding for intensive livestock industries and supplementary feed for livestock.

From Crop and Pasture Report SA by PIRSA, January 2020.

## Victoria

Victoria was one of the very few bright spots for Australian grain production in 2019. Winter crop production in the state is forecast to have almost doubled on the previous year to around 7.4 mt – which is 16 per cent above the 10-year average.

Production in most cropping regions – outside of the northern Mallee and the north eastern parts of the state’s cropping district – were boosted by timely and sufficient rainfall. Production and yields in the southern Mallee, Wimmera and the Western districts were well above average.

The planted area is estimated to have increased by about 7 per cent on 2018 because fewer crops intended for grains and oilseeds production were cut for hay compared to last year.

Wheat production is estimated to have increased by a whopping 85 per cent in 2019–20 to 3.6 mt, which reflects a significant increase in the average yield to around 2.5 tonnes per hectare. This wheat yield was 18 per cent above the 10-year average.



Right on cue, many areas in Victoria’s Mallee received good rainfall in early July 2019 which kicked canola and cereal crops along very nicely. (PHOTO: BCG)



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Barley production more than doubled in 2019–20 to 2.5 mt while average yield also at least doubled the previous year. This yield improvement was driven by very favourable seasonal conditions in the Wimmera and the Western districts.

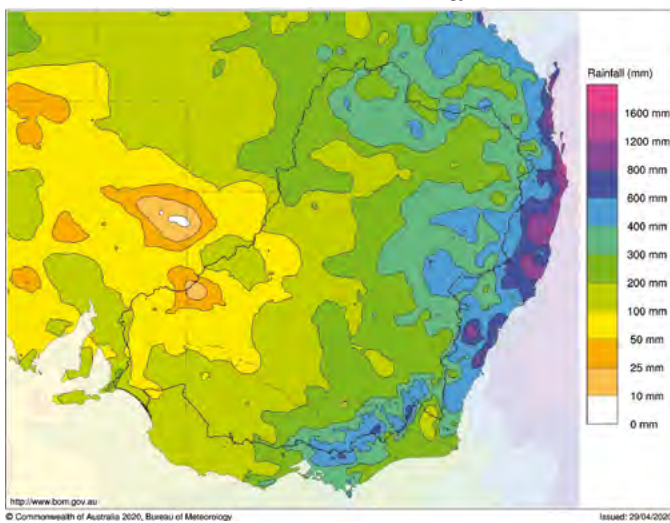
Canola production in Victoria also more than doubled on 2018 to around 650,000 tonnes. Average yields increased by around 70 per cent.

<b>Major winter crop estimates, Victoria, 2019–20</b>			
	Area ('000 ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production ('000 t)
Wheat	1450	2.48	3600
Barley	820	3.05	2500
Canola	385	1.69	650

Based on ABARES Australian Crop Report, February, 2020.

## New South Wales

Murray–Darling Basin rainfall totals (mm) for January 1 to April 29 2020  
Australian Bureau of Meteorology



**There has been excellent January through April rainfall in many parts of the Murray-Darling Basin.**

Winter crop production for 2019–20 in NSW is estimated to have increased by 16 per cent on the previous year to around 3.3 mt. Despite the increase this is about 70 per cent below the 10-year average. Area planted to winter crops was more than 44 per cent down on the average reflecting very unfavourable seasonal conditions and a significant area intended for grain and oilseed production being cut for hay.

Wheat production went up by 16 per cent to around 2.1 mt but this is about 70 per cent below the 10-year average.

Barley production increased on 2018 by about 10 per cent to just below 700,000 tonnes. And although the average yield is estimated to have increased on the previous year, it was still about 40 per cent below the 10-year average.

Canola production in NSW was around 225,000 tonnes in 2019–20 – which is 75 per cent below the 10-year average – while the average

<b>Major winter crop estimates, NSW, 2019–20</b>			
	Area ('000 ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production ('000 t)
Wheat	1900	1.10	2090
Barley	580	1.20	696
Canola	250	0.90	225

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yield was only 0.9 tonnes per hectare. A lot of canola crops were cut for hay in early spring as the risk of crops failing before harvest rose.

### Summer crop prospects

The early seasonal conditions for summer crop production in 2019–20 were extremely unfavourable. Prolonged drought conditions resulted in record low soil moisture levels during the planting window, which limited the area planted to summer crops.

December 2019 rainfall was below average across NSW, and at record lows in many summer cropping areas. And record high temperatures occurred in almost all of the state during December, with repeated bursts of days with above average temperatures. This followed an unfavourable spring during which temperatures were very much above average and rainfall very much below average.

Although rainfall in January and early February boosted soil moisture and improve yield prospects for earlier planted crops, it was generally too late to encourage any significant late planting of summer crops.

Area planted to summer crops in NSW is estimated to have decreased by more than 75 per cent in 2019–20 to a record low 101,000 hectares. Very low supplies of irrigation water and record low soil moisture in many regions prevented widespread planting of summer crops.

Total summer crop production is forecast to fall by 66 per cent to a record low 343,000 tonnes in 2019–20.

Area planted to grain sorghum in 2019–20 is estimated to be a record low of 12,000 hectares. Soil moisture levels were extremely low at the start of summer and significant widespread rainfall was needed for planting to occur. But December and early January rainfall was well below average and temperatures were at record highs.

Grain sorghum production expected to be around 30,000 tonnes, almost 90 per cent lower than in 2018–19.

Area planted to cotton is estimated to have decreased by more than 80 per cent to 43,000 hectares due to low supplies of irrigation water and insufficient levels of soil moisture to plant dryland cotton.

Rice production is estimated at only 46,000 tonnes because of high water prices and low availability of irrigation water.

<b>Major summer crop forecasts, NSW, 2019–20</b>			
	Area ('000 ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production ('000 t)
Grain sorghum	12	2.50	30
Cotton lint	43	2.27	98
Cottonseed	43	3.21	138
Rice	3.4	13.50	46

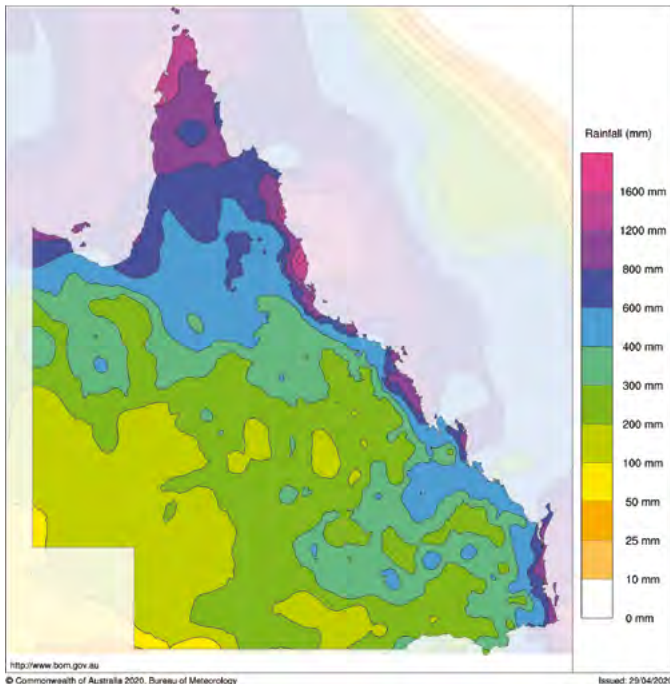
Based on ABARES Australian Crop Report, February, 2020.

## Queensland

Winter crop production in Queensland in 2019–20 is estimated to have fallen slightly on the low 2018 result to around 678,000 tonnes. This was the third consecutive fall in annual production since the record high production in 2016–17. Production in most cropping regions was constrained by well below average rainfall and above average temperatures during the season.



**Queensland rainfall totals (mm) for  
January 1 to April 29 2020**  
Australian Bureau of Meteorology



**Some handy 2019–20 summer rainfall in Queensland generally came too late to encourage widespread planting of summer crops. But the addition to soil moisture reserves has boosted 2020 winter crop prospects.**

Winter crop area is estimated to be 657,000 hectares, which is more than 40 per cent below the 10-year average. This reflects drier than average seasonal conditions at the beginning of the winter crop season. Some area planted to wheat and barley – and intended for grain production – was cut for hay in response to high fodder prices and unfavourable seasonal conditions.

Wheat production is estimated to have increased by around 5 per cent on 2018 to 420,000 tonnes – still well below the 10-year average of 1.2 mt.

Barley production is estimated to be 60,000 tonnes again well below the 10-year average of 214,000 tonnes. This was because of below average winter rainfall in southern Queensland, where most barley is grown in the state.



**A typical eastern Darling Downs (Qld) croppage paddock during the 2019 winter – stubble!** (PHOTO: Hugh Reardon-Smith)

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Production of chickpeas is estimated to have been 170,000 tonnes from a 15 per cent smaller area. This was in response to lower prices and weaker import demand from India. Yields are estimated to have increased because almost all chickpeas are grown in central Queensland where seasonal conditions improved from last season.

**Major winter crop estimates, Qld, 2019–20**

	Area ('000 ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production ('000 t)
Wheat	400	1.05	420
Barley	45	1.33	60
Chickpeas	170	1.00	170

**Summer crop prospects**

Prospects for summer crop production in Queensland remain well below average because of the long period of well below average rainfall in most cropping regions. Seasonal conditions during December were more unfavourable than expected and depleted soil moisture levels. Good rainfall in late January and early February prompted some additional planting of summer crops in Central Queensland as well as a limited area on the Darling Downs.

Planting of forage crops to avoid risks associated with carrying late planted grain crops through to harvest – or fallowing through to the upcoming winter crop – were the preferred options.

**Major summer crop forecasts, Qld, 2019–20**

	Area ('000 ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production ('000 t)
Grain sorghum	130	2.00	260
Cotton lint	17	2.14	37
Cottonseed	17	3.03	53

Based on ABARES Australian Crop Report, February, 2020.



**Record prices for stockfeed in 2019 made crops such as silage corn a very attractive option – if you had the water!** (PHOTO: Hugh Reardon-Smith)