

# Dry Seasonal Conditions in Rural Victoria



Report: 77

May 8, 2008



Grain growers in the north have commenced dry sowing. (April 2008).  
Source: A. Wallace

## Environmental Indicators

### Weather

#### Rainfall

April 2008 was dry and relatively cool across Victoria, in spite of the current *La Niña* event. Less than half the usual rain fell at most places, except along the West Coast, and also along the exposed Central and South Gippsland coasts (Figure 1).

Many areas have had three months of below average rain from February to April. The Bureau has been quoted as saying that we have had 20 years in a row of below average autumn rain (Weekly Times, April 7)

#### Temperature

Overnight temperatures were about a degree below normal in most districts - a little more than a degree below in the north of the state. Day time temperatures were about half a degree below normal in most districts. An exceptional cold outbreak at the end of the month resulted in significant snowfalls on the Alps and led to several inland centres experiencing their coldest April night on record.

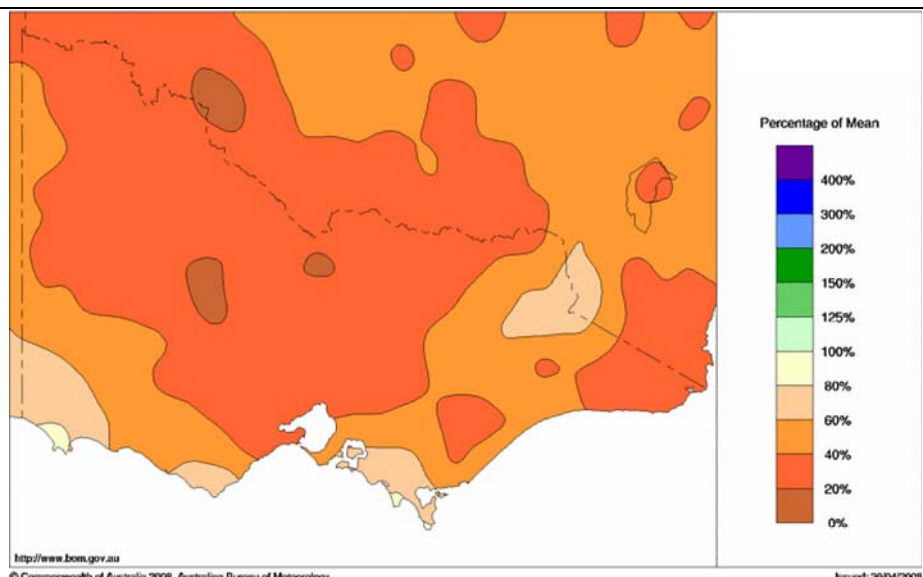
## Wind

Early in the month, there was a sustained period of strong to gale force winds, which caused widespread damage and raised dust over many areas of the state. The weather late in the month was characterised by light winds, clear skies and overnight fogs, with hazy conditions associated with controlled burns during the day.

**Figure 1.**  
**Victorian rainfall percentages**  
**1 month (April 2008)**

Percentage of monthly mean  
(1961 – 1990 base period)

National Climate Centre  
Bureau of Meteorology



## Seasonal outlook

The Bureau of Meteorology's Seasonal Outlook for May to July is for average rainfall and temperatures in Victoria. Pacific climate patterns are now generally neutral. The SOI has continued to retreat from the strong positive values seen earlier in the year and is now in the neutral range. The decline in *La Niña* has seen below average rainfall return to large parts of eastern and northern Australia during March and April.

The Southern Oscillation Index for April was +5.

## Water storages

### Federal government water plan

The federal government has unveiled its water investment program of \$12.9 billion over ten years (April 29). This will include accelerating investment in the Murray Darling Basin, with \$400 million brought forward between 2007-08 and 2009-10. This money will be used to purchase water (\$3.1 billion) and invest in key infrastructure projects across the Murray Darling Basin (\$5.8 billion).

### Goulburn-Murray Water (G-MW)

G-MW has offered Campaspe irrigators the opportunity to buy a share of 415 ML of water from the Murray and Goulburn systems for use this season or carryover to 2008-09 (April 23). This opportunity has come about as water traded out of the Campaspe area was able to be supplied from other systems. Normally, Campaspe irrigators are not able to purchase from downstream systems.

### Southern Rural Water (SRW)

The irrigation allocation for the Macalister is 200% with the season closing on May 15. Bacchus Marsh and Werribee are on 8% with the season closing on June 30 and no allocation increase expected.

Storage	Change in last month	Capacity 02/05/08	Storage	Change in last month	Capacity 02/05/08
Goulburn Basin	-3%	14%	Thomson/ LaTrobe Basin	-3%	33%
Broken Basin	-1%	6%	Werribee Basin	-1%	9%
Campaspe Basin	-1%	7%	Glenelg/ Wimmera Basin	0%	3%
Loddon Basin	-1%	20%	Maribyrnong	-1%	3%
Upper Murray Basin	-1%	15%	Barwon Storage	-2%	35%
Ovens Basin	-17%	67%			

Source: [http://www.fishvictoria.com/pnews/water\\_levels.php](http://www.fishvictoria.com/pnews/water_levels.php)

## Social Indicators

### DPI Drought Hotline

The DPI / DSE Customer Service Centre received 125 drought related contacts for April 2008 compared to 150 last month. Enquiries were from the South West (41), North West (31), North East (21), Port Phillip (19), Gippsland (6), interstate (3) and unknown (4). The major queries are listed overleaf.

FAQ's used to answer customer enquiries	Total
On-Farm Productivity Improvement Grants	33
Drought Apprenticeship Retention Bonus II	12
DVD: The Hard Yard	10
Exceptional Circumstances	9
Stock containment areas	7
Water tank rebate for GWMWater customers	6
Drought feeding of cattle and sheep	5
State financial assistance	5
Other queries made up the remainder of the calls	

### Drought financial assistance

Rural Finance Corporation reports that 9,916 applications for the **Exceptional Circumstances Interest Rate Subsidy** have been approved with a 79% approval rate. The total value of the subsidies approved is \$286 million with an average of \$28,752.

The federal government will conduct a comprehensive national review of drought policy through three separate investigations, to help prepare farmers and local communities for climate change.

#### Victorian Government drought support

For the ten months to April, a total of \$12.6 million in **Municipal Rate Subsidies** was paid to EC relief payment recipients across 52 Shire and Rural City Councils. Councils have been paid \$439,000 to administer the delivery of this additional drought assistance on behalf of the state government.

Over the same period, a total of \$5.3 million in **Water Tank Rebates** was paid to GWMWater customers who did not receive their winter dam fill.

To date a total of \$816,750 in **Drought Apprenticeship Retention Bonuses** (DARB II) have been paid to Victorian businesses to support 1089 apprentices in the 2007-08 financial year.

To date the Rural Finance Corporation have paid out \$2.7 million in **On-Farm Productivity Improvement Grants** to 983 applicants on behalf of the state government.

The state government has announced the \$205 million Future Farming strategy to help farming communities to face challenges including prolonged drought, water scarcity and climate change (April 23).

### Community report

The state government has provided \$50,000 to the Victorian Farmers Federation to launch the VFF's *Looking Out for Your Neighbours: A Community Workshop* (April 22). The program aims to generate ideas for keeping communities in touch by providing them with information on looking out for signs of stress, while providing a reminder of the importance of staying connected with neighbours, friends and community.

Developed through a partnership between the VFF, the Bouverie Centre, community health and family services, and the Department of Human Services, the workshops are designed to give farm families the ability to cope with the challenges of drought.

## Economic Indicators

### Commodity prices and movements

Recent grain harvest estimates for the northern hemisphere have seen a decline in prices and with good estimates for Australia prices are expected to continue to ease over the coming months. However, there is a world wide shortage of grain and this combined with the demand for biofuel has seen wheat hitting record highs this year. There are concerns about food supplies and the increased cost of food staples with a number of 'food riots' being reported and some countries introducing limits or bans on grain exports. Strong demand over the

coming year will mean prices are unlikely to fall back to some of the very low levels we have seen over the last few years.

The AWB Ltd pool price for APW has been dropping consistently and is now at \$418/t in Pool Number 1, \$399/t in Pool Number 2 and \$350/t for Pool Number 3.

Livestock markets are showing variability depending on locations. Prices and demand remain good in the south, but there have been increased numbers in markets in the north and less interest in unfinished stock. The price for good quality lambs has improved, but the number of poorer quality lambs being turned off has increased as producers cannot wait for rain. The Eastern Young Cattle Indicator was 315c/kg this week.

The Australian Citrus Growers Inc have forecasted the lowest crop of summer Valencia oranges for 35 years due to ongoing drought and low water allocations leading to continued tree removals and/or no irrigation strategies applied.

Commodity prices	This Week	Last Week	Last Month	Last Year
Wheat APW pool <sup>1</sup>	398.03	372.61	372.61	213.50
Malting barley <sup>1</sup>	405	405	405	n/a
Yearling steers (C3 180-220 kg) <sup>2</sup>	325	329	320	351
Old pasture hay (Bairnsdale \$/t) <sup>2</sup>	130	130	130	190
Temporary water (Greater Goulburn \$/ML) <sup>3</sup>	377.50	335.50	300.50	500.00

Grains are Portland cash price (except for APW pool)

Stock prices are ¢/kg cwt

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Weekly Times

<sup>2</sup> Stock and Land

<sup>3</sup> www.watermove.com.au

## Regional Reports

### Mallee

Growers are still waiting for enough rain to call a break. This year more farmers are sowing by the date rather than waiting for rainfall events. Many grape growers have suffered yield and quality reductions from attempting to save water and not meeting plant requirements at critical growth stages.

### Wimmera

**Seasonal conditions:** Everyone is anticipating an autumn break and many have started dry sowing since Anzac Day as a risk strategy. However, the light falls of rain we have had make this risky as the soil is neither dry nor wet enough. There is plenty of hay being moved around with increased interest from dairy farmers.

### North Central

April has been typical of mid-autumn with mild dry weather. Many farmers are starting to dry sow crops as early sown crops. Most sheep are being fed a grain diet in paddocks or stock containment areas. Dry paddock feed is very low and of poor quality, which is typical of this time of the year. Both grain and hay supplies are good.

### Northern Irrigation

Sowing is under way, with most crops dry sown. Some pastures that were watered up in early March had reduced germination rates due to the hot spell at this time and now have reduced plant density and growth rates. Dairy farmers are now looking at the option of buying water for carryover as a risk management tool.

### North East

Small areas have had useful rain, but all areas need good rains to start the season. Sowing has begun cautiously. Paddock feed is in very short with most livestock reliant on some degree of supplementary feeding and some animals on full rations. Many areas have very little ground cover and will be at risk of soil erosion with heavy rain.

### East Gippsland

April was a very dry month. While paddocks are not bare, there has been little or no growth. Most farmers have adequate fodder from last spring's flush. Some erosion from the 2007 floods has been revealed on riverbanks on private land now that spraying of blackberries and other weeds has been completed.

## West and South Gippsland

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April remained dry and warm. Some rain at the start of the month got pastures going but moisture quickly ran out and growth did not continue. Most dairy farmers still have reasonable reserves of silage and hay, though much has been fed out through April. There are still issues with water that is normally collected by runoff into dams.

## Port Phillip

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Thought April was dry, the Yarra Valley has had some useful rainfall events in the first week of May. The average rainfall for the year-to-date is less than 50% of the long term average for this region. The severe storm, early in April, caused damage to mainly to apple orchards and the nursery and cut-flower industries.

## South West

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Rain in late March and early April triggered an autumn break, but the eastern areas need more rain urgently. Potato growing areas are still quite dry, particularly around Ballarat and Colac. Pastures north west of Warrnambool and north of Hamilton and Ballarat are in need of rain to allow feed production before winter.

# DPI response

## Drought related activities held this month

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### Mallee

- 7 - 8 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Ouyen. 14 attended.
- 15 - 16 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Mildura. 25 attended.
- Apr - Mallee Beef Profit Partnership Group at Tempy. 10 attended.
- Apr - Soil test results & making sound P & N decisions at Nullawil. 9 attended.
- 6 - 7 May - Swan Hill - Murray Downs Field Days - Seasonal climate risk.

### Wimmera

- 3 Apr - Seasonal climate risk and financial planning at Brim TOPCROP. 15 attended.
- 3 Apr - Farming with pipes at Warracknabeal.
- 7 Apr - Horsham drought committee meeting.
- 9 Apr - Hindmarsh drought committee meeting. 30 attended.
- 10 Apr - Planning for the year, inputs and risk at Winiam / Nhill South TOPCROP. 20 attended.
- 11 Apr - Planning for the year, inputs and risk at Lubeck TOPCROP. 18 attended.
- 11 Apr - Planning for the year, inputs and risk at Woorak TOPCROP. 20 attended.
- 15 Apr - Farming with pipes at Clear Lake. 35 attended.
- 16 Apr - Farming with pipes at Laharum. 23 attended.
- 16 Apr - Farming with pipes at Wonwondah. 8 attended.
- 17 Apr - Farming with pipes at Natimuk. 10 attended.
- 18 Apr - Economic Development Officers Association Conference - seasonal climate risk. 70 attended.
- 22 Apr - Farming with pipes at Netherby Broughton TOPCROP. 15 attended.
- 23 Apr - Climate change and landuse at Gymbowen TOPCROP. 15 attended.
- 23 Apr - Planning for the year, inputs and risk at Wallup TOPCROP. 20 attended.
- 24 Apr - Wimmera DHS drought committee meeting.
- 24 Apr - 21st Century Farming at Ararat - seasonal climate risk. 120 attended.

### North Central

- 9 Apr - Precision cropping at Natte Yallock Landcare. 40 attended.
- 15 Apr - 'Coping with today - planning for tomorrow' Landholder Information at Yarrowalla. 40 attended
- 16 Apr - Planning for the year at Mt Korong TOPCROP. 15 attended
- 17 Apr - 'Front foot farming' workshop, Natte Yallock. 12 attended
- 21 Apr - Maryborough Bestwool / Bestlamb. 18 attended
- 1 May - Rural Futures Forum at Natte Yallock. 25 attended.
- 1 x Radio interview on drought.
- 2 x Farm visits re drought agricultural related issues.

### Northern Irrigation

- 2 - 3 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Echuca. 11 attended.
- 24 Apr - DPI Feeding Pastures for Profit workshop for dairy farmers. 30 attended.
- 29 - 30 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Swan Hill. 20 attended.

- 2 May - Two field days for horticulturists held at Shepparton and Toolamba and focussed on reduced irrigation post harvest. Both sessions were well attended, especially by consultants. The sessions were video taped and will be put up on the web.

#### **North East**

- 9 - 10 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Benalla. 19 attended.
- 9 - 10 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Rochester. 22 attended.

#### **Gippsland**

- 16 Apr - Drought business breakfast for bankers and accountants at Ellinbank. 40 attended.
- 17 Apr - Rural Futures Forum in the Leongatha district. 70 attended.
- 28 Apr - DPI service provider update at Ellinbank. 20 attended.
- 29 Apr - Grains to Milk service provider workshop at DPI Maffra.

#### **Port Phillip**

- 8 Apr - WaterWise Berries Field Day. 30 attended.
- 14 - 24 Apr - 'Drought through the eyes of a child' exhibition at One Spring St.

#### **South West**

- 10 Apr - Rural Futures Forum at Shelford/Meredith.
- 17 - 18 Apr - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Colac. 22 attended.

### **Success stories**

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At the end of a recent Sustainable Farm Families course held in Swan Hill, an older farmer commented that, 'He only came to the course *under sufferance* and had arrived *very grumpy* at the start of day 1'. But, he wanted to say how great he had found the two days. He had been to a few men's health nights in the past, 'but they only go for a couple of hours and you don't get anywhere near the same type or amount of information'.

'The speakers were all easy to relate to and *told it like it is*. The amount of interaction amongst the farmers was great as they don't usually talk about these kinds of things (health and mental wellbeing) and they're very important, particularly at the moment.' He said he will definitely be telling other farmers that they should get themselves to a program.

### **Local workshops planned**

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#### **Mallee**

- 20 - 21 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Mildura.
- 1 - 2 Jul - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Donald.

#### **Wimmera**

- 13 May - Farming with pipes at Riverside.
- 14 May - Farming with pipes at Quantong.

#### **North Central**

- 17 - 18 Jun - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Heathcote.

#### **Northern Irrigation**

- 26 - 27 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Katamatite.
- 28 - 29 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Shepparton.
- 28 May - Buying feed workshop at Cohuna for dairy farmers.
- 28 May - Buying feed workshop at Kyabram for service providers.
- 29 May - Buying feed workshop at Rochester for dairy farmers.
- 29 May - DPI Feeding Pastures for Profit workshop at Cohuna for dairy farmers.
- 30 May - Buying feed workshop at Kyabram for dairy farmers.
- 3 Jun - DPI dairy cow nutrition program at Kyabram for dairy farmers.
- 5 Jun - Buying feed workshop at Katunga for dairy farmers.
- 6 Jun - Buying feed workshop at Congupna for dairy farmers.

#### **North East**

- 20 - 21 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Beechworth.
- 28 - 29 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Mansfield.
- 24 - 25 Jul - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Seymour.

#### **Gippsland**

- 15 May - Grains to Milk service provider workshop at Leongatha.

- 15 May - Take control of feed purchasing seminar at Leongatha.
- 16 May - Take control of feed purchasing seminar at Kooweerup.
- 20 - 21 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Buchan / Orbst.
- 26 - 27 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Leongatha.
- May - DPI dairy industry social events at Hill End and Ellinbank.
- 3 - 4 Jun - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Morwell.
- 8 - 9 Jul - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Yarram.
- Jun - DPI service provider update at Ellinbank.

#### Port Phillip

- 20 - 21 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Lilydale.

#### South West

- 8 May - Rural Futures Forum at Coleraine.
- 26 - 27 May - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Winchelsea.
- 11 - 12 Jun - Sustainable Farm Families workshop at Camperdown.

### Dry season related staff training activities

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- 17 Apr - Farming Climate Change workshop at Wodonga. 30 dairy industry service providers attended.
- 28 - 29 Apr - Confident Decision Making staff workshop at Bendigo. 18 staff attended.
- 14 - 15 May - Staff training in Farm Business Management.

## Media and Communication

### Media releases

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**23 Apr 08 - Drought policy for Australia's future. (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)** The Rudd Government will conduct a comprehensive national review of drought policy through three separate investigations, to help prepare farmers and local communities for climate change.

**22 Apr 2008 - \$2.4 million for farmer health centre at Hamilton. (Premier)** A \$2.4 million Brumby Government grant will help to position Victoria as a national leader on farmer health and well-being by establishing a National Centre for Farmer Health in western Victoria.

**22 Apr 2008 - Drought relief extends a neighbourly helping hand. (Minister for Mental Health)** The Brumby Government has expanded drought assistance to rural families with a \$50,000 partnership with the Victorian Farmers Federation to help battle stress and improve mental health, as part of its Sustaining Community Wellbeing package.

**23 Apr 2008 - \$205 million to secure the future of farming in Victoria.** The Premier John Brumby today launched the Victorian Government's \$205 million strategy to boost farming services, drive growth and innovation in agriculture and help the sector respond to new challenges.

**23 Apr 08 - Drought policy for Australia's future. (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)** The Rudd Government will conduct a comprehensive national review of drought policy through three separate investigations, to help prepare farmers and local communities for climate change.

**29 Apr 2008 - Rudd Government to invest \$12.9 billion in water. (Minister for Climate Change and Water)** The 2008/09 Budget will deliver on the Rudd Government's election commitments in water and establish a \$12.9 billion water investment program over ten years.

### Media headlines

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#### Weather

- **Rain hopes fading** Weekly Times 23/04 - Farmers across southeast Australia may have to wait until spring for drought-breaking rain, according to Japanese long-range forecaster Toshio Yamagata.

#### Farming and agriculture

- **Grower gamble could pay off** Weekly Times 09/04 - Grain growers are facing a big gamble this year, with massive increases in input costs and interest rates. But the gamble could pay off, with big returns to be made if there is a good season.

#### Drought financial assistance

- **Do it now: Farmers demand that feds commit to drought aid** Weekly Times 16/04 - Victorian farmers are demanding the Federal Government immediately commit to extending drought assistance beyond its current September expiry.

- **Plan to help climate-proof farmers** The Age 23/04 - The Brumby Government will plough millions of dollars into preparing farmers for the impact of climate change and developing new drought-resistant species, under a new blueprint to safeguard the future of farming in Victoria.

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