

Climate information and drought response in Victoria

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Drought is now considered part of the environment in which farms are managed, thus farm businesses are expected to have strategies to cope with the impact of drought on-farm. However, severe drought conditions have wider economic, environmental and social impacts to which the Victorian State Government responds with a range of policies. Further, a national Exceptional Circumstances program exists to provide welfare support to large numbers of farmers affected by extremely severe drought situations, deemed to be beyond on-farm provisions made through good management practices.

The widespread low rainfall events across Victoria in 2002 and first half of 2003 followed a six-year period of below-average rainfall for much of Victoria. This prolonged period of low rainfall impacted severely on the catchment area for Lake Eildon, resulting in stringent reductions in water allocation for irrigators, well below 100 per cent of water right. Dryland farm production was also severely reduced in the Mallee, Wimmera and North East of Victoria, although the social response to the drought conditions was quite different to the irrigation areas.

In 2002/03, drought declarations were made for areas of Victoria for the first time since 1994. The Victorian Government used a criterion of an

eight-percentile rainfall event to declare municipalities as drought-affected. Bureau of Meteorology charts were used to identify new shires affected by drought. By June 2003, over eighty per cent of the State had been drought declared using this criterion.

The on-going State Government response to drought is based around scenario planning. Three scenarios were developed in late 2002 for potential climatic outcomes for 2003. Bureau of Meteorology data is used in conjunction with field assessments to analyse climatic conditions affecting farmers in Victoria.

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has communicated information about climatic impact and outlook through a number of forums, ranging from policy advice to Government, media releases and management discussions with farmer groups. Bureau climate data proved particularly useful for presenting summarised information to Government and the media. At a farmer level Bureau data was part of a number of different sources of climate information used to assess conditions and plan management responses. Generally, DPI field officers report that farmers are willing to look at climate information but their preparedness to change major decisions isn't necessarily influenced by this information.