

# Drought in south-west Queensland: a farmers perspective

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Brief introduction: I am from South West Queensland, 650kms west of Brisbane in a mixed farming area that supports wool growing, beef, wheat and irrigation as the major enterprises. The average rainfall in our area is 467mm and west of us down to 300mm. It is a summer rainfall area, however the main feature is its variation; average rainfall is something we very rarely receive and is some mythical figure in between wet and dry years. Our rainfall has ranged from a low of 120mm in 1903 to a high of 995mm in 1950 and a ten-year moving average ranges from 360mm to 570mm. Managing in this environment does present its challenges, as managing in a decade with an average of 360mm is quite different from managing in a ten year period with an average of 570mm. Knowing in advance if these periods were coming would be a great help. Although I do have a vested interest in the weather I certainly do not claim to have a great knowledge on the subject, so please bear with me, I will be brief.

## 1. Impacts of the Drought

The drought started in our area in 2001 and destocking began. Some producers only received 30% of their average rainfall in this year. Most of this rainfall was received in small falls and as a result there was very little runoff for dams etc. The year 2002 continued to be dry and destocking and/or feeding began in earnest. Again rainfall for 2002 was well below the average with the only decent fall being in February. This continued right through to February/March 2003 when slight relief was received. Optimism set in, but was quickly dashed when no follow up was received in much of Queensland, and today these areas are still in the midst of a full-blown drought. Currently (*August 2003*) 63% of Queensland is still drought declared.

The effects of this drought have been quite devastating, ranging from large losses of livestock, to very large feed bills, not to mention a

number of years of below average production and in the case of wheat and cotton farmers, nil production. It has also had a significant effect on people's morale and on the local towns and businesses. To some extent we have been helped by good prices for our stock sales and interest rates have been historically low, on the other hand agistment has been very difficult to find because the drought has been so widespread and stockfeed became very expensive by the end of 2002. The other feature of this drought has been that virtually no runoff has been received since Oct/Nov 2000, and as a result, a lot of producers experienced water shortages for stock and domestic. We have had years of less rainfall but never had years of less water. The drought is not over in many parts of Queensland and we need a wet summer before we can declare it finally busted. The effects of the drought are still being felt and will so for a number of years after it has broken.

## 2. How was climate information used in planning

I have talked to a number of producers in our area and the general theme is that they regard the long-term forecasts as too unreliable to be used as a major tool in their decision-making. Basically decisions are made on what feed is on the ground at the time. In our area generally if we have not had rain by March then we begin planning for a dry year and this takes number of paths depending on each individuals attitude to risk. Some held on and spent a huge amount on feeding; some sold and will spend large amounts on restocking when the drought finally breaks. I will be corrected here but it wasn't until 2002 that the Bureau of Meteorology started talking about the possibility of a drought; a lot of producers in this area had already been in drought for 12 months. We also experienced a number of occasions during the worst period when significant rain (50mm) was forecast yet nothing fell; this was very

disappointing. Some, mainly irrigators, use the SILO 7 day forecasts to plan their work programs and find them useful.

In summary currently climate forecast information forms a minor part in the decision-making process and until it can be proved to be more accurate I cannot see this changing. Medium to long term forecasting is of most value to farmers and also climatic trends. In the past we have had long periods of essentially dry years; 1927 to 1948 and periods of wetter years 1949 to 1978 (except for 1965/67). From 1979 to now we seem to be in another dry period. In the last 24 years at Dirranbandi we have had 17 below average and 7 above average years. Does the Bureau of Meteorology have research on these trends and if so where are we heading?

### 3. Communication

I do believe that better communication would help, e.g., recently the press announced that the El Niño was over yet large areas of Queensland still remain in drought. For a lot of people El Niño means “drought” therefore the end of El Niño means the end of “drought”. I understand this is not the case and not what the Bureau of Meteorology means by this announcement. Why not say the El Niño is starting to break down and if we have a period of sustained positive monthly SOI values then we could begin to see the break down of the drought? Having said that down on

the ground at this time of year after experiencing an extremely dry and hot summer the drought will not be over until we have a long wet summer irrespective of what happens between now (*August 2003*) and say October.

More education on how to interpret climate forecast would be helpful.

Internet access in our area is relatively slow and therefore not used as widely as it could be and people need more education on how to access and interpret the available data. Most farmers do not want to be bombarded by technical data but would like a short, concise forecast written in layman’s terms. Maybe a one or two page forecast with links to more detailed information for those who desire more.

In summary, credit where credit is due and the Bureau of Meteorology did forecast the dry period from Autumn 2002 to Autumn 2003. In general many rural producers remain fairly cynical of the Bureau of Meteorology’s ability to accurately forecast long-term climate trends. However with a little education producers could make better use of the large amount of data that is currently available. If forecasts could get to a stage of being 75% accurate then I feel they would become an important part of the decision making process.

Thank you.