

CASE STUDY FIVE

Seasonal forecasts helping to reduce risk

AUTHOR

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Heeding the signals coming from seasonal forecast information has saved Yorke Peninsula grower Tony Andrews from large areas of potentially failed crop in 2018.

A dry start plus a drier outlook for the season before he began sowing prompted Tony to reduce the area he committed to field peas in his 800-hectare program. He reduced his pea plantings from 243ha to 174ha and filled the gap with barley. This was despite knowing he was planting barley in a paddock with a high weed burden that would require more management and spray applications over summer. The decision has proved a wise one.

“It has been a very disappointing year for peas and in the end I was harvesting for seed and cost recovery,” he said. “Barley has been the opposite and we’ve had average yields and good quality with some malting grade coming through.” “If I had put the other paddock into peas, I would have had a cleaner paddock now for next year but at the same time I would have had to reap another near failure.” “I’ve definitely made more money out of the changes I made this year by listening to the forecast information.”

In-season rainfall has been less than half the historical average for 2017 and 2018 at the Nalyappa property and risk reduction has been a priority to ensure the farm remains profitable. Over time Tony and his wife Michele have grown in confidence in adjusting their plans based on forecast outlooks as they have experienced seasons and conditions consistent with the forecasts.

Tony says he now plans to be flexible where possible knowing it could prevent disappointing seasons. He says a dry forecast would usually prompt him to “lean” towards hardy varieties and maximise his barley plantings, while a wet forecast could allow him to favour field peas and chase potential higher returns.

“I’m always planning my cropping program for an average to above average season, but when I see dry forecasts come through I usually alter my plans,” he said.

“This year they were dead right and the fact that I’ve had success with following forecasts helps me trust it as a source of advice in the future.”

Property:

Tea Tree Glen

Owners:

Tony and Michele Andrews

Location:

Nalyappa, South Australia

Farm Size:

800 hectares

Average Annual Rainfall:

400 mm

Soil Types:

red clay to sandy loam

Typical Crops Grown:

wheat, barley, canola, lentils, oaten hay and field pea hay

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Tony and Michele have been monitoring seasonal forecasts for around four years and have welcomed the expansion of GRDC investment with Agriculture Victoria to extend the subscription-based forecast service The Break to South Australia.

“Even with some good experience with my decisions around seasonal forecasts, I’m always mindful of what is actually happening in the short term and the decades of cropping experience in my family. I think more and more people are using seasonal forecasting as a part of their cropping operation. While some may take it more seriously than others, we know farming can be a gamble and anything that reduces our risk is definitely worth my time,” says Tony.

Decisions around spraying and fertiliser application also involve seasonal forecasting consultation for Tony, who says spring is a key time for cost management if a drier period is more likely based on forecasts. He monitors evidence of disease or pest damage and is usually inclined to spray less often or not at all if problems are within threshold levels in a dry period.

“If the forecast indicates favourable spring conditions and you see the peas podding up nicely, they’re worth the extra fungicide and insecticide,” Tony says. “I’ve always held the view with peas and chickpeas especially that you don’t waste too much money on fertiliser with them, but you definitely focus on fungicide and insecticide as that will do more good in spring. In a wet year you will often observe more bugs in your crops but in a dry year there is usually much less pest activity. This means in a dry year you can monitor activity and potentially spray less often and save on repeat applications.”

