

SATURDAY

# THE BIG DRY



**BENDIGO FARMER DOUG CURNOW KNOWS THAT IF THE RAINS DON'T FALL SOON — VERY SOON — IT WILL BE ANOTHER YEAR OF HARD YAKKA**

It was Grand Final day last year — just as reigning premier Hawthorn demolished West Coast at the MCG — that searing unseasonal heat unleashed a similar path of destruction across Victoria's wheatbelt.

Hundreds of thousands of hectares of healthy crops were laid to waste in the spring scorcher that lasted just a few short days.

Canola flowers curled up and fell to the ground and with it any hope farmers had for the season ahead.

"It was a massive kick in the guts for us," farmer Doug Curnow said.

## AARON LANGMAID

"The plants just weren't ready for it. It cost us \$250,000. "Bang. Just like that."

As the players paraded their silverware in the city, Mr Curnow was just another country mind burdened by cruel weather.

Like any blockbuster clash at that time of the year, he said the season could have gone either way. A break of rain — say 25ml across three days — could have set the industry up for the season.

"It would have been a good year," he said. "Instead, we copped

that early heat, it ruined us and there wasn't a thing we could do about it."

Like his late father before him, the 46-year-old said he'd grown used to a little hardship.

But nothing quite like this. It's the kind of relentless weather that has held farmers to ransom since the new millennium — first drought, then floods, and now another big dry.

Even those of little faith pray for rain and climate sceptics can't help but re-evaluate.

"You have to wonder," Mr Curnow said. "I haven't always had

an opinion on it. But now I'd almost be ready to get on board."

All 40 of his dams across more than 810ha south of Bendigo are bone dry. And six long months after the 2015 crop failure, the outlook isn't much better.

This week marked the beginning of a solid fortnight of sowing for farmers who look to the sky each morning, hopeful a big wet might finally dampen the dusty horizon.

Successful yields of wheat, oats, barley and canola will depend on it — but it's been months since Victorian farmland has benefited from a decent drop of rain.

Without water, farmers will be forced to hand feed stock and cart water across stagnant paddocks.

"If it doesn't rain until mid-May, the ground gets cold and everything just slows down," Mr Curnow said.

"But it's April and we have to get on with it. The main trick now is just to make sure every (drop) of rain counts."

But Mr Curnow said the troubles he faced paled in comparison to larger operators drowned by debt and swamped by the kind of thoughts that wake them long before roosters had the chance.

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Ground zero in Victoria's latest drought crisis is about two hours north of Mr Curnow. Find Birchip on the map, and within a 100km radius you'll find the hardest-hit regions in the state.

Donald, Wedderburn, Charlton, Horsham, Nhill, Edenhope and Ararat have now all made the dubious dry list. The Mallee is among the worst-hit regions, with rainfall at Mildura in March 99 per cent below average.

Warrnambool farmers have received just half of the monthly average in the past four weeks while Echuca and Wangaratta have not fared much better.

Not even the rain forecast to move across country regions this weekend is likely to offer any real reprieve.

The Bureau of Meteorology outlook for the three months from May to July suggests an 80 per cent chance that almost all of Victoria will exceed average minimum temperatures.

**W**INTER will be warmer. The odds of above-average temperatures range from 60 per cent in a line south from Swan Hill to Nhill up to 80 per cent or greater south of a line bisecting Albury, Wangaratta, Seymour, Ballarat and Hamilton.

Long-range forecasts to June point to wetter-than-average conditions in the northwest but there it's still a 50-50 chance of decent rain in all other parts of the state.

Climatologist Jonathan Pollock said farmers who had sowed winter crops through the dry autumn might have to wait a little longer for rain.

"For most of Victoria, the odds of a wetter or drier May are pretty neutral, and there's only a patch in the northwest where the odds are just above 60 per cent," he said.

"The above-average rainfall is tipped not for May but more June and July, so perhaps for part of the state is that you've maybe got a wetter outlook for winter."

A La Nina watch issued by forecasters this month might offer some hope, with the phenomenon typically increasing the chances of above average winter-spring rainfall over much of Australia.

"We're seeing the really strong El Nino is in decay and is probably in its final throes over the next few weeks, but there are already some indications that in the later part of the year, we might be in for a La Nina," he said.

But if the rain does fall, it needs to be consistent.

Grain Growers CEO Alicia Garden said farms urgently needed subsoil moisture to give crops a kick start.

"One day of rain is not going to translate and we don't want it all at once," she said.

"We need consistent falls across a few days to really have an impact."

She said the dry conditions were being experienced right along the eastern seaboard.

"In recent weeks, I have travelled from Dalby in Queensland to NSW and across the cropping belt in Victoria into South Australia and the story is repeated

across the entire east coast.

"Given it's the third year in a row of restricted rainfall, most farmers were hoping recent forecasts were accurate but it hasn't brought much to bear."

But growers are slowly becoming accustomed to a shift in the traditional weather patterns.

State Agriculture Minister Jaala Pulford said while Anzac Day was a marker for many farmers, in recent years the autumn weather break had been arriving much later and farmers were now better prepared for it.

"There is no doubt that what has occurred in the last 10 years, is a significant change in the pattern of rainfall," Ms Pulford said.

"Farmers are incredibly attuned to the environment in which they work. They are skilled and resilient."

But she said in areas such as the Wimmera, where income had been slashed to 10 per cent of profits generated two years ago, the situation had been taking a toll.

"That's a huge hit for these communities," she said.

One farmer in southern Gippsland told the minister it was the worst weather conditions he had experienced since 1966. The situation has prompted a number of state and federal packages aimed at propping up farmers.

Federal funding in the past year has been aimed at growers and graziers in need of concessional loans and a range of household assistance programs with the simple aim of ensuring families can stay above the bread line.

Funds are also accessible to help in pest and weed control and, more recently, farmers can receive rebates for advice on insurance to protect their productivity and profitability.

A \$27 million safety net set in place by the State Government in November is aimed at wider communities affected by the downturn.

**F**OR every struggling grower, there was a main street corner store, a hotel or a supplier also battling the bottom line.

"While the intensity and duration of the millennium drought was challenging for farmers, we haven't had much time to bounce back financially or emotionally and that has taken a real toll on farming communities," Ms Pulford said.

She said farmers were generally accepting of the current situation but were hopeful of building a support framework for the future.

"We have a \$12 billion industry, which accounts for 40 per cent of Victoria's exports, and we can be very proud and confident in its future," Ms Pulford said.

"We have some of the best dairy farmers in the world and our grain growers have continued to attract global interest for solid yields despite the lack of rain."

Results like that might offer some optimism, but it's difficult for any growers already grappling with a situation out of their hands.

Chairman of beyondblue, former premier Jeff Kennett said when the chips were down, farmers struggled

# PRAYING FOR AN AUTUMN SOAKING

**Farmer Doug Curnow waits for rain, while Damon (9), Aaron (15) and Hayden (15) make the most of the dry Lake Wallace in Edenhope, Western District.**  
Pictures: JASON EDWARDS and JAKE NOWAKOWSKI

more than any other business operator.

"The climate is beyond their control and they are subject to the whims of life in a way nobody in business could possibly understand," Mr Kennett said.

"Where there has been successive seasons of flood or drought, there is the passing of unproductive harvests where costs are not reduced, farmers can no longer meet their obligations and the pressure mounts.

"For a third or fourth generation farmer — this is their life. If this season doesn't deliver the moisture they need it will push many into a position where they will be totally unviable and that has ramifications on their mental health."

Loddon Shire mayor Neil Beattie said Australian farmers might be built tough, but there was a limit to how much they could take.

"Farmers have always been able to tough it out but times have changed ... there is a lot more cost pressure and everybody has run out of reserves," Cr Beattie said.

Whether it was cash, or hay or grain, stock was as low as farmer confidence, he said.

"It's hard work if you have





to feed stock and harder still if you have to cart water each day," he said.

"It's soul destroying."

However, he said farmers were becoming far more conscious of the science behind their situation.

"All of us have come to realise that the climate is changing," Cr Beattie said.

Yesterday, a vast cold front that crossed Victoria, Tasmania and NSW at least offered some respite.

"A good season is critical to our whole shire," Cr Beattie said. "It is raining today. It won't be enough."

"But it's a start."

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REYNOLD POERNOMO



POH LING YEOW



SAMIRA EL KHAFIR



PHILIP VAKOS

# MASTERCHEF STARS: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

**R**EYNOLD Poernomo had his head down and was concentrating on getting out a batch of intricate desserts when a person calling his name sent an involuntary shiver down his spine.

"I was really busy and all of a sudden I hear Matt Preston say, 'Reynold'," he recalls of the déjà vu moment. "But it was actually a good surprise to see him."

Season seven's dessert king Poernomo has joined the growing list of *MasterChef Australia* alumni to open their own restaurant in the wake of the show.

KOI Dessert Bar in Sydney's Chippendale has quickly formed fans both for the desserts on offer and for the novelty of watching Poernomo himself creating them in the front-of-house kitchen.

Having opened their doors on January 1 this year, Poernomo says that while business may be booming, he's conscious of not relying on the *MasterChef* afterglow to sustain the momentum.

"I'm not a trained chef, I'm still a cook, an amateur cook," he says.

"People come in and expect that kind of top end (*MasterChef*) experience and it's daunting to have that expectation because I don't want to let anyone down."

It's a sentiment echoed by all former contestants who've gone on to open their own eateries.

Anonymity is something that another Adelaide-based former contestant forfeited long ago.

Season one runner-up Poh Ling Yeow has gone on to become a Logie-nominated TV host and a best-selling cookbook author in the wake of *MasterChef*.

Having hosted two series of *Poh's Kitchen* on ABC and now gearing up for a second season of *Poh & Co* on SBS, Yeow made the most of her reality show fame.

But it wasn't until this

## TIFFANY DUNK

year that she finally realised her dream of opening her own bricks and mortar business.

Having sold homemade pastries and cakes at a weekly farmer's market for two years, when a permanent space became available at the Adelaide Central Markets late last year Yeow decided to take the leap into running her own cafe.

"It's a really tough business if you want to chef it and open a place — it's seriously like popping out quads overnight. It's this insatiable beast that eats up your life ... But I love having a place that people can come and eat my food."

That sensation is familiar to season five contestant Samira El Khafir. When the Islamic Museum of Australia opened in Melbourne, they invited her to take over the kitchen and outdoor area to run her own eatery, Modern Middle Eastern by Samira El Khafir.

Despite having now been open for two-and-a-half years she says there are still times she finds herself overwhelmed.

"There no life when you have your own business," she says. "It's been full on."

Season two's Philip Vakos is co-owner of, and chef at, popular restaurant Bahari The Hellenic Plate in Melbourne's Richmond and he warns the incoming batch of season eight contestants that it's not as easy as it looks on TV.

After opening a year-and-a-half ago, they're consistently booked out six nights a week, making his time on *MasterChef* seems like a breeze in comparison.

"Get ready for long hours because it's brutally long days," he says. "It's not a TV show and you've got to love it to stay in the game. Because if you're just doing it to be a celebrity chef? Then it's not going to work out for you."

*MasterChef Australia* season eight launches at 7.30pm tomorrow on Ten