

Dry forecast prompts need to develop an irrigation plan

With an El Niño weather pattern in place over winter and the forecast for an increased likelihood of lower rainfall for the coming summer, cane farmers with irrigation supplies are being reminded of the opportunities that can come with planning ahead with their irrigation scheduling.

A number of cane growing regions experienced dry conditions over the 2014/2015 summer, and according to the Queensland Government's Long Paddock website, most of Queensland has "an increased probability of below median July to September rainfall, with a similar outlook for the coming summer (November to March 2015/2016)".

"The high probability of the current El Niño event developing further over winter and spring, and with it the threat of another dry summer for some regions, poses a risk of current drought conditions becoming more protracted. This risk should be factored into decision making and allocation of resources. In this context, the long-lead outlook for summer rainfall should be taken into consideration," the Long Paddock website stated.

With the seasonal forecast being reassessed each month from August until November, growers and millers are urged to check the website for updates (www.longpaddock.qld.gov.au).

The NSW Department of Primary Industries has forecast more neutral conditions and updates are available via <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/emergency/seasonal-conditions/>.

Water in storage is varied across the industry, although at the time of writing there had been a cut in allocations in the Burdekin, where SunWater has announced that irrigators face a 63 percent allocation as of July 1, 2015 (although with 160,000 megalitres carried over from the previous water year).

Sugar Research Australia has prepared a number of fact sheets on irrigation scheduling, crop water use and soil moisture holding capacity, available via its website at http://www.sugarrsearch.com.au/page/Growing_cane/Irrigation/. This site also includes a range of other materials including Cane Clip videos, research papers, and links.

Burdekin Productivity Services has also recently distributed an information sheet to growers on options for managing limited irrigation water.

These tips include prioritising irrigation requirements, not over-irrigating young plant and ratoons, managing irrigation volumes and frequency, alternating row irrigation, minimising losses, recycling water, and using a mix of groundwater and surface water.

The situation in one farming system and region may not work the same in other areas due to differences in soil type, the environment, water availability, and other factors, with growers urged to seek their own specific advice.

However, despite the dry seasonal forecast, the Bureau of Meteorology has reminded growers and millers that an El Niño does not necessarily mean drought conditions everywhere and for everyone.

"While El Niño increases the risk of drought, it does not guarantee it; of the 26 El Niño events since 1900, 17 have resulted in widespread drought," the BOM's Neil Plummer said earlier this year.

Mr Plummer noted that while the El Niño is forecast to strengthen during winter, the strength of an El Niño does not necessarily correspond with its impact on Australian rainfall.

Australia experienced widespread drought during a weak El Niño in 2006–07, while stronger events such as the El Niño event in 1997–98 had only a modest impact on Australian rainfall.

