

10 January 2024

The lie of the land for 2023/24

- I typically drive from Pretoria to the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape each December, which allows me to assess SA's agricultural conditions after the first few months of the summer season.
- Whether one enjoys the trip largely depends on weather conditions and the subsequent effect on crops and vegetation. In drought seasons, like 2015, traversing dry grains and oilseed fields and dry grazing veld can be depressing. Conversely, it can be an uplifting drive in rainy seasons, with green and lush fields visible from the highway.
- This year's drive qualifies for the latter. The vegetation was welcoming and green all along the way, having benefited from the early summer favourable rainfall. In areas planted early in the season, the maize fields looked healthy from a distance. Other crops were also in good condition.
- One would not expect such favourable conditions amid an El Niño season. But the typical dryness of an El Niño may only start to intensify from March 2024. That is mainly the case for the central and eastern regions of SA, which could receive above-normal rainfall in the month before that, according to the SA Weather Service. Meanwhile, the country's western regions could experience below-normal rain throughout the season. The soil moisture levels in the west are already low and thus concerning for farmers.
- Still, not all areas have fully completed their intentions to plant. Some fields in the Free State and Eastern Cape have yet to complete grains and oilseed plantings, so are behind the typical planting calendar.
- Ordinarily, the regions to the east of the N1 highway plant maize and soybeans between mid-October and mid-November. The regions to the west plant maize and sunflowers, among other crops, between mid-November and mid-December. We have passed this period with some areas on both sides of the highway yet to be fully planted.
- The delays in summer grains and oilseed plantings are neither unique nor worrisome and were caused by excessive moisture in some regions. Also, the heat has disrupted activity for several weeks. The 2021/22 and the 2022/23 seasons, which delivered large yields, were among such seasons that planted behind typical schedules.
- In a few exchanges with farmers some expressed their appreciation for the recent rains, though it had been excessive in some instances. The issue they worry about more these days is extreme heat, which the country's northern regions are already experiencing. Higher temperatures, when not followed by rain, can damage agriculture.

- Still, this is not a significant issue for now as there are hopes the country could still have a decent season (bearing in mind the risks of harsh production conditions in the North West).
- At the start of the season SA farmers intended to plant a total area of 4.5-million hectares for the 2023/24 summer grains and oilseed crops. That's 2% higher year on year. Moreover, the view from farm inputs organisations suggests they experienced reasonably encouraging sales, further supporting the optimistic view on crop planting.
- Regarding the livestock industry, green pastures are welcome, especially as feed prices remain high relative to pre-Covid-19 levels. The challenge for these farmers is the biosecurity weaknesses that should be resolved to curb the spread of animal diseases in the country and minimise outbreaks.
- I still believe we are in for another good agricultural season, especially if January and February offer favourable rainfall. The SA Weather Service captured the optimism about the country's central and eastern regions in the December 19 2023 Seasonal Climate Watch, stating that "multi-model rainfall forecast indicates mostly below-normal rainfall over most of the country during January-February-March, February-March-April and March-April-May with the exception of the central and eastern coastal areas indicating a higher likelihood of above-normal rainfall".
- That worries me about the western regions of the country but provides hope for the central and eastern regions.

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