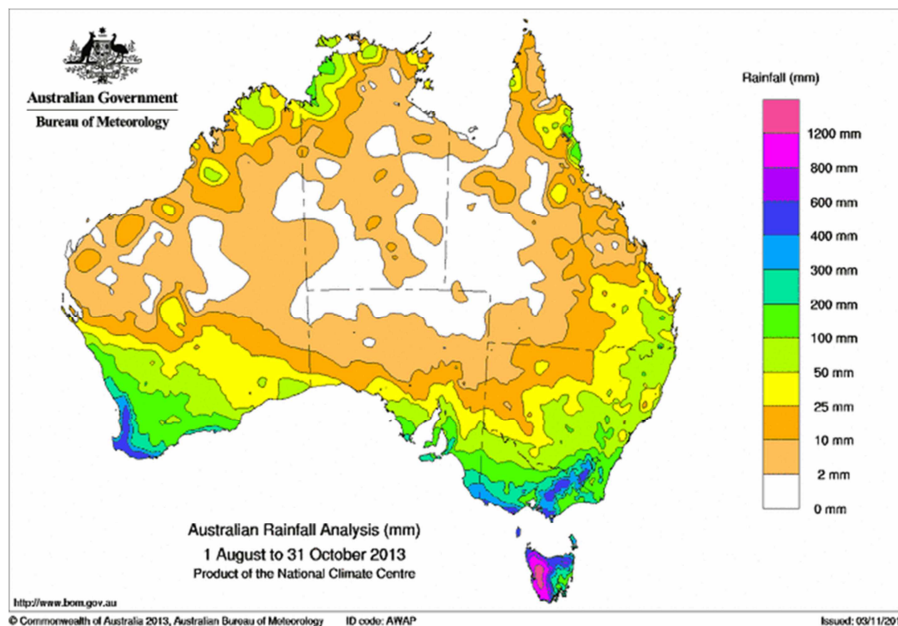


Emerging 2014 harvest gets frosty reception in October 2013

A drier winter in many parts of Australia brought the attendant fears of susceptibility to frost. This fear manifested itself in October. Frosts were reported in parts of Australia, to varying degrees of intensity, around 14/15 October and more particularly on 18 October 2013.

The reports reflected both of the broad types of frost by cause. These are either cooling by radiant heat loss from soil depleted of moisture that retains heat, or low-lying areas into which cold air flows and accumulates from surrounding higher ground.

Reports of losses from frost have been reported in Great Southern and Frankland River of WA, Clare (moderate incidence), the northern parts of the Barossa and Eden Valley, parts of the Adelaide Hills, the drier more northerly regions of Victoria – Sunraysia, Robinvale, Echuca, Rutherglen and other parts of NE Victoria. Finally, with the Bureau of Meteorology showing low rainfall in August to October over most of NSW’s winegrowing regions (see illustration), it is not surprising that many parts of NSW were affected but particularly the Riverina and elevated parts of the state - like Canberra and Tumbarumba.



Other regions escaped damage by virtue of the employment of protection systems, the moderating influence of closer proximity to the sea or higher relative rainfall in August to October. Examples included Margaret River and Mt Barker in WA, South East South Australia, Southern Victoria and Tasmania.

With younger tissue more susceptible to frost damage, earlier maturing varieties like Chardonnay most frequently escaped damage, while later varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon have been most often mentioned as being affected, followed by Shiraz and Gordo.

Significant crop loss has been reported in a telephone and email survey of selected growers in the key regions reporting damage across Australia. For example, up to 60% and occasionally even 100% loss in some patches of the Riverina resulted in 20% loss overall, 80% loss was reported in Canberra, comprehensive damage in the Rutherglen, 70% to 80% of vineyards affected in other northern parts of Victoria along the River Murray, anywhere between 10% to 80% loss on a vineyard-by-vineyard basis in the Murray Valley but an overall likely 5% loss, and some growers not expected to harvest a crop on the floor of the Barossa Valley.

While significantly damaging to individual growers affected, the reports of percentage losses are likely to be mitigated in an overall sense by the patchiness of the damage. Typically, frost damage is patchy across affected districts - depending on the location of the blocks, the topography of individual blocks, the stage of the crop's development and so on.

The final impact of the October frosts on the size of the 2014 harvest is extremely difficult to gauge not the least because the foundation fruitfulness of the 2014 crop is not yet fully understood. In addition, a number of compensators for frost-induced losses are possible including secondary growth, larger berries from fewer bunches or subsequent vineyard management practices to optimize the crop.

On the other hand, a number of factors may lead to enduring losses. In cooler regions, secondary crops may not ripen in time or the vines may experience vegetative recovery but not fruit recovery. Moreover, the knowledge that secondary fruit will be of lower appeal and value in an oversupplied market or the general uncertainty about the economics of harvesting affected blocks, some growers take the opportunity to cut vines right back to restructure them for improved crops in coming vintages or for thinning secondary growth. Hence, greater reductions in production may result.

While the October frosts are likely to impact the fruitfulness of the 2014 harvest - at this early stage of the season, it is yet to be seen if there may be bigger influences on the final harvest size.

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