

Initial impressions on the impact of the early summer rains on SA agriculture

The start of South Africa's 2022/23 summer season has brought heavy rains across most regions with varied agricultural implications. For the horticultural industry, specifically fruit, we have been keenly watching whether the heavy rains would damage the orchards. Fortunately, there hasn't been any significant damage thus far to our knowledge. This is with the exception of damage in banana and macadamia fields in some areas of Mpumalanga following heavy winds and rains. Positively, the rains have improved the dam levels, which will be helpful for irrigation.

In the livestock industry, however, there is an increased risk of diseases with heavy rains that tend to be followed by significantly warm temperatures. Tick and insect populations are likely to flourish during the summer season. Hence, there is a relatively higher possibility of tick and insect-borne diseases such as redwater, heartwater, anaplasmosis, RVF, blue tongue, horse sickness, etc. This means the livestock farmers will have to remain alert during this period and apply vaccines where possible.

Within the field crops, the sugarcane-growing regions of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga have also broadly benefited from increased moisture, supporting the growing conditions. This is notwithstanding the business challenges that the Tongaat Hulett financial difficulties brought to the industry.

The 2022/23 summer grains and oilseeds planting season started in October in the country's eastern regions. The heavy rains have delayed planting in some areas. For example, Mpumalanga, which would typically be nearing the completion stages of soybeans planting, is estimated to have grown only roughly 40% of its soybean fields thus far, according to surveys by Grain SA. The province's optimal planting window for soybeans ends this week, so the additional hectares will be planted outside the window. Still, this should not be a major problem or something we haven't seen before. In the 2021/22 season, the excessive rains meant that most of the summer crops were planted a month behind the optimal window. However, that season still achieved record yields in soybeans and decent harvests in maize and other crops. Typically, the fear is that crops planted outside the planting window would be at risk of frost later in the season. But in the recent past, we haven't seen such occurrences of frost, which gives us hope for yet another good soybean production year.

In KwaZulu-Natal, roughly 80% of the intended area for soybeans planting is complete, and maize is 50% complete. The delays here are also caused by the heavy rains of the past few weeks. The Eastern Cape has also made good progress but has not yet been completed planting. In the eastern Free State, about 40% of soybeans and maize have thus far been planted. The fields are exceptionally wet in this region. We will have to get some days of drier weather conditions for planting activity to resume.

For the western regions of the country, the optimal planting window for grains and oilseeds is roughly between mid-November to mid-December. There is still sufficient time for planting in these areas, especially if we get more days of sunshine, as the recent rains have improved soil moisture. The western Free State is currently very wet and will need to dry up

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