

Soil Moisture Conditions in South Africa

Wandile Sihlobo

This soil moisture update from World Weather Inc. is worth monitoring from time -to -time. Do not worry about drier conditions in much of the regions of South Africa. We are in the winter season. But, one should focus on the Western Cape, a winter rainfall region.

The key message of this particular update is that the recent rains have helped improve soil moisture in the Western Cape, an important development ahead of the winter crop planting period.

Farmers across the Western Cape have started to prepare the land for the 2023/24 winter crop season. The crops include wheat, barley, canola and oats.

In other provinces such as the Northern Cape, Free State, Limpopo and Eastern Cape, where wheat is produced under irrigation, the planting will gain momentum from the end of May.

The Western Cape is a winter rainfall region, and we know from the South African Weather Service updates that the province will likely receive additional showers in the coming weeks/months. This is favourable for crops.

However, how much area will be planted for each winter crop is unclear. South Africa's Crop Estimates Committee will release the farmers' intentions to plant data, and key figures for the potential area plantings, on 26 April.

I expect most crops' plantings to exceed the five-year average area. For example, the wheat five-year average area planted is 528 690 hectares, which is 7% lower than the area plantings for the 2022/23 production season.

Therefore, I doubt that the 2023/24 season will see an area below the five-year average for several reasons. First, wheat prices, although having softened somewhat in recent months, remain relatively attractive for farmers. Moreover, the demand for the crop domestically remains strong.

Also, the input prices – fertiliser and agrochemicals -- have come off from the highs we saw last year, which will help ease farmers' financial pressures. Lastly, the weather outlook is favourable.