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MEDIA RELEASE

Bureau of Meteorology: The 1914-15 Drought

The drought of 1914-15 became seared in the memory of Australians, primarily due to the disastrous failure of the wheat crop that year.

The first signs of drought became evident in 1913, when rainfall in western Australia, central areas of Tasmania, and settled areas of South Australia, was well below average in the normally wet April-July period. Timely rain in early spring then saved the wheat crop and gave good pastoral prospects. But there was to be no such respite the following year, a strong El Niño year. 1914 started off very hot, and southern Victoria suffered from widespread bushfires in February and March. Good rains fell over most of eastern Australia in March and April, but thereafter extremely hot conditions set in over most of the southern half of the country.

Except in coastal NSW, drought became widespread and severe from July to October. Across large areas of the southern states the period may through October 1914 remains the driest such period on record. As conditions worsened, stock were transported as fast as the railways could carry them to more favoured locations, where – naturally – prices for agistment rose substantially. From the Deniliquin district alone over half a million sheep, and thousands of horses and cattle, were moved out. Rivers throughout southeastern Australia fell to extremely low levels. The Murray River at Echuca fell to its lowest level ever recorded to that time, to just 2 percent of its normal flow by December. Downstream of Swan Hill the Murray was reduced to a series of stagnant pools.

By the end of October the national wheat crop was a total failure. In southwestern Australia – often spared when drought afflicts the eastern states – less than half the normal rainfall fell during the critical May-October period, leading to complete crop failure in some districts, and easily the lowest Western Australian wheat yield of the century.

Rain in the eastern states in November and December did replenish farm dams and generate some grass growth, but dry weather returned early in 1915 to most eastern areas. It was not until the autumn of 1915 that the drought began to break: in South Australia, Tasmania, and most of Victoria in April, and in NSW in May. Even then, the May rain was too late for strong pasture growth because of cold weather. The drought lasted until July in southern Queensland, and to the end of the year in northern and central Queensland, where Charleville had to import water by train.