

Media Article



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MEDIA ARTICLE

MANAGING GROUNDCOVER IN THE RANGELANDS & CROPPING AREAS Spring-Summer 2008!

The seasonal climate outlook for the winter period (June to August 2008) from the Bureau of Meteorology shows a strong trend towards the continuation of neutral conditions for south-eastern Australia. This is as a result of higher than average temperatures in the Indian Ocean and cooler than average waters in the central to western equatorial Pacific Ocean in association with the decay of La Niña.

What does this mean for the coming spring/summer season?

The chance of wetter-than-average conditions for this period of time are about the same as drier-than-average conditions, which means that the current rainfall that has been experienced over the past months may well continue into spring/summer. Computer models indicate a continuation of neutral conditions for the next two seasons with no computer models predicting a return to La Niña conditions anytime soon. The chance of an El Niño developing remains small but cannot be ruled out.

The 30 day value of the Southern Oscillation Index was close to 0 on 18 June, in keeping with the predicted computer models of a neutral spring/summer. If this value was negative as it was on 2 June, then a negative value means less chance of rain occurring, with a positive value meaning a greater chance of rain occurring. The stronger the value, positive or negative, the more likelihood of that event occurring.

With groundcover already at critical levels (40% and below in some areas) in rangeland and cropping areas due to the lack of effective rainfall over the past ten years and with the present seasonal climate outlook taken into consideration, there is a real risk that there will be an increase in the likelihood of soil erosion and resultant dust events occurring this spring/summer.

Maintaining what little groundcover exists will be a real challenge for land managers this spring/summer if adequate rainfall is not received.

Confining stock to drought containment areas will ensure that (1) stock won't lose condition as they do not have to travel as far in search of food and water, (2) native vegetation is not grazed upon heavily to the point where it may not recover when good rainfall events return and (3) both cropping and rangeland areas have adequate groundcover (40 or 50%) to protect them from wind and water erosion.

There are two groundcover targets - 40% for rangelands and 50% for cropping lands. The differences are due to the additional protection rangeland sites receive from biological crusts, shrubs and trees.

Land managers need to aim for 40 or 50% groundcover at all times, especially during December – April when feed supply is diminishing and when cropping paddocks are being prepared for the following cropping season. This is the period when wind erosion and dust events are at their greatest risk of occurring due to reduced groundcover levels.

The resulting dust from wind erosion can contain about ten times more nitrogen and twice as much phosphorus as the soil it has eroded from. This results in crucial soil and fertility being lost from the paddock. The most effective way of controlling erosion is by maintaining adequate groundcover and soil aggregation.

Rangeland paddocks that have a minimum groundcover level of 40% not only display significantly reduced wind erosion effects but are also 'rain ready', that is, vegetation responds faster to rainfall due to increased infiltration.

Regular monitoring of groundcover in rangeland and cropping areas by land managers over the next two seasons will ensure that wind erosion and dust events are reduced and that soil productivity is maintained.

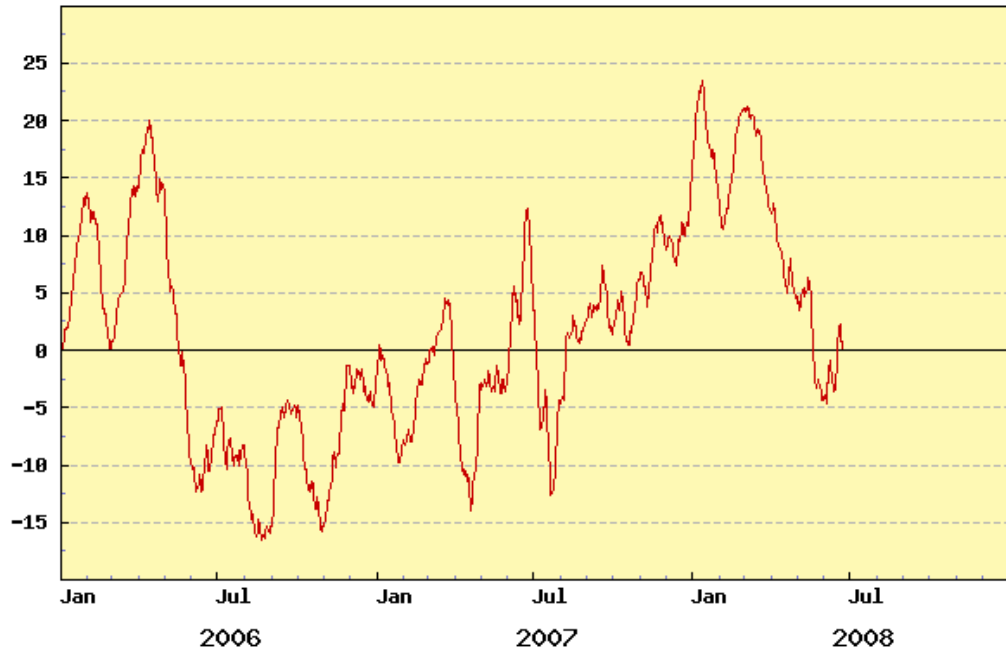
Simple monitoring techniques are available to land managers and can be accessed as Farmtalks 26 and 29 (under News/Media) on the Mallee Sustainable Farming website <http://www.msfp.org.au/>

More information on this project can be obtained from Kat Biesaga, LMD CMA Soil & Cropping Officer on 03 5021 9460.

Diagram 1 – SOI June 2008

Diagram 2 – June-August 2008 Predicted Rainfall

30-day moving SOI
(shown against end date)



Chance of exceeding the median Rainfall June to August 2008
Product of the National Climate Centre

