Western Cape grain farmers ‘disappointed’

As the winter grain season drew to a close, farmers tallied the cost of low rainfall in the Swartland. Denene Erasmus reports.

For most parts of the Western Cape, the
2014 grain season has yielded average results. According to André Kirsten, the Swartland region’s Grain SA representative and Darling grain farmer, the year could be summed up as one in which “disappointment outweighed initial good expectations”.

southern Cape regions, and Caledon grain farmer Richard Krige said that farmers had achieved an average yield of about 3.5t/ha in this area. In areas that received up to 70mm of rainfall in September, yield of as much as 4t/ha had been recorded.

“The interesting thing about the 2014 wheat harvest is that it was

For the most part, farmers in the southern regions of the province experienced better yield than those in the Swartland. This was due to rainfall patterns in September, a crucial time during the wheat-ripening phase.

Farmers in the Overberg and parts of the southern Cape received between 13mm and 70mm during September, while farmers in most parts of the Swartland received little to no rain.

“Very few farmers in the Swartland managed to produce the harvests they were expecting earlier in the season, although those who planted at the end of April achieved better yield than farmers who planted at the end of May,” said Kirsten. He attributed this to the lack of rainfall later in the season.

Grain SA representative for the Overberg and
probably one of the wettest crops that grain storers have ever had to deal with,” said Krige.

According to Overberg Agri, 54% of the wheat and 47% of the barley delivered to them had been wet.

WET WHEAT
Farmers had struggled to get wheat to dry off due to cold, humid conditions during harvesting, said Krige. “Fortunately, the grain storers were very accommodating, allowing farmers to supply them with large volumes of wet wheat.

“We’re very grateful for their co-operation. I don’t know if all the producers realise the amount of pressure that grain storers now face as they struggle to dry mountains of wet wheat.”

In its latest production forecast for winter grain, the Crop Estimates Committee (CEC) indicated an average yield of 3.7t/ha for wheat. The total area planted to wheat declined by about 6%, from 505 500ha in 2013 to 476 570ha in 2014. Only the Western Cape (310 000ha) did not show a decline in the number of hectares planted.

Total winter production of wheat declined by just over 4% from 1.87 million tons to 1.79 million tons.

The expected production in the Western Cape was 914 500t, with 285 000t in the Northern Cape and 271 050t in the Free State, according to the CEC.

CANOLA
Canola production increased by almost 19% from last year to 133 000t in 2014, and the area planted increased by 31% to 95 000ha. However, the average canola yield declined by about 10% from 1.6t/ha to 1.4t/ha.

Both Krige and Kirsten said that farmers in their regions had seen a slight to dramatic decline in canola yield. “We don’t really know

why the canola performed so poorly this year in the Swartland. We speculate that it might be related to low rainfall in September,” said Kirsten.

In addition, canola plantings in the Overberg and southern parts of the Western Cape were hit by a number of diseases, including blackleg disease and beet western yellows virus, an aphid-spread disease which has started to occur in SA only during the past two years.

“We’re also starting to learn that canola doesn’t perform well when planted in a two-year rotation cycle with wheat,” said Krige. “Ideally, you need a three- or four-year gap between canola plantings.”

BARLEY
Barley yields were generally good, as was the quality, said Krige.

According to the CEC, malting barley plantings in the Western Cape increased by almost 5% to more than 85 000ha and production increased by more than 18% to around 318 000t.

Peter Williams