

## **El Niño return threatens summer crops**

*By Wandile Sihlobo, [Business Day](#), 13 September 2018*

After showing solid recovery from drought in the previous and current marketing seasons with above-average maize and soya bean production, the debate on climate-related challenges could resurface as the opening of the summer crop-planting window approaches in the next two to three weeks.

On Tuesday, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology indicated that there is a 50% chance of El Niño developing over the 2018-2019 summer season. This corroborated the message shared in August by the International Research Institute for Climate and Society at Columbia University, which indicated a more than 60% chance of El Niño developing.

The local weather agency has also expressed concerns about the weather outlook, forecasting dryness between October and December, a period that coincides with summer crop planting. It is still unclear whether SA farmers will reduce the intentions to plant because of this forecast. However, we will have a better indication when the National Crop Estimate Committee releases its estimates on October 25.

There are two variables that influence the favourability of conditions for dryland crop production in SA at the moment.

First is the "interseasonal variation" in rainfall. The country now receives average annual rainfall that is comparatively lower than historical trends. SA received a rainfall average of 526mm per year over the past 60 years. However, we have recently witnessed a progressive decline in annual average rainfall, with the post-2010 average being 7% lower than the previous three decades (1970-2010).

The second variable is the "intraseasonal variation" in which the geographic and temporal distribution of rainfall seems to have shifted over time. Anecdotal evidence suggests we now experience a delay in the onset of summer rainfall. For example, the peak rainfall period in SA commenced around early October in the eastern regions and from November in the western regions, which corresponded with the optimal plating periods.

However, recent rainfall patterns have seen three-to six-week delays, which has shifted optimal planting dates for summer crops forward. As a result of these two rainfall variables, the SA farming sector has had to continuously adapt to this shift in order to ensure that planting coincides with peak rainfall patterns in order for crops to receive sufficient moisture for seed germination and crop development. This already makes it difficult enough for farmers to plan their planting schedules properly, without El Niño. As such, the occurrence of El Niño only exacerbates these cropping challenges that farmers have to contend with on an annual basis.

Let me emphasise that the El Niño forecast has some level of uncertainty, although showing a higher probability of occurrence. Therefore, the pendulum could still swing towards a favourable outcome. Be that as it may, it is better to be prepared than to get caught by surprise.

So, as we approach the 2018-2019 production season, farmers will not only be grappling with uncertainty regarding land reform policy; climate will be central to the planning processes. One can only hope that lessons from the 2015-2016 droughts will help farmers to cope in an event of another drier season. On a positive note, the country is well supplied in terms of grains and oilseeds, at least until the first half of 2019, thanks to above-average production and large stocks from the previous year in all grains. The aforementioned weather developments will influence a crop that will be in the market from the second quarter of 2019.