USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Global Agricultural Information Network

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution **Date:** November 14,2019

Report Number: SF2019-0035

Report Name: South African farmers are praying for rain

Country: South Africa - Republic of

Post: Pretoria

Report Category: Agricultural Situation, Grain and Feed, Agricultural Situation, Grain and Feed

Prepared By: Dirk Esterhuizen

Approved By: Kyle Bonsu

Report Highlights:

South Africa's summer rainfall (September to April) has been limited and scattered so far this season. As a result, soil moisture for planting is currently insufficient in most parts of South Africa's summer crop areas. While this is not an ideal situation and rainfall is critical in the next couple of weeks, there is still enough time for the planting of summer crops, South Africa has enough food and feed grain stocks for the current marketing year, but a poor harvest this season due to a possible drought, will have a major impact on food inflation and the affordability of food later in 2020. Farmers have voiced their concerns and want the government to implement a drought support system.

Late Summer Rainfall

Covering 1.2-million square kilometers of land, South Africa is one-eighth the size of the United States and has 14 million hectares of arable land available (13% of total land area) of which about 1.5 million hectares or 10% is under irrigation. Most of the arable land falls within the summer rainfall climatic zones of South Africa, with rainfall that usually starts in September and continues until April. However, this year it is not the case as farmers are still waiting for the start of the summer rainfall season which is preventing farmers from planting. In fact, most parts of the summer rainfall area last received decent rains more than seven month ago. Figure 1 below from the South Africa Weather Services illustrates the seasons' cumulative rainfall from July to October. Except for the coastal areas of Kwazulu-Natal, and parts of the coastal areas of Eastern and Western Cape, limited and scattered summer rainfall has been recorded in the rest of South Africa. If this season is compared with last year's summer rainfall (see Figure 2), it is clear that rainfall is very late this year, especially in the eastern parts of South Africa.

Figure 1: Cumulative rainfall from July 2019 to October 2019 in South Africa

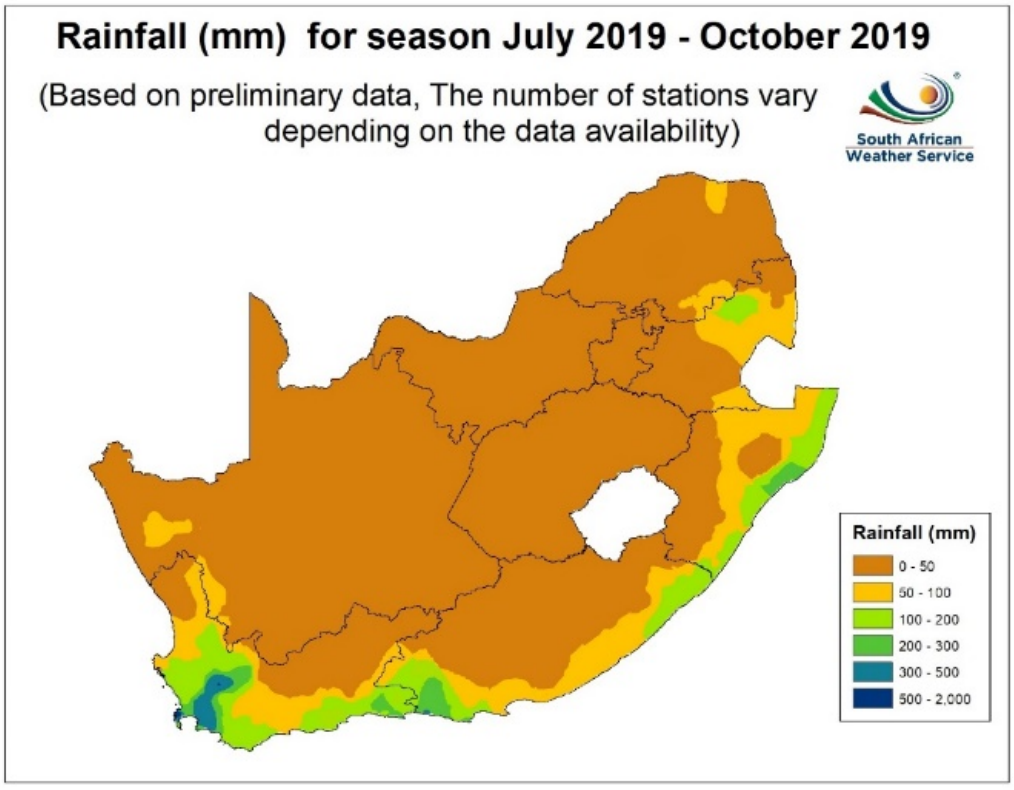
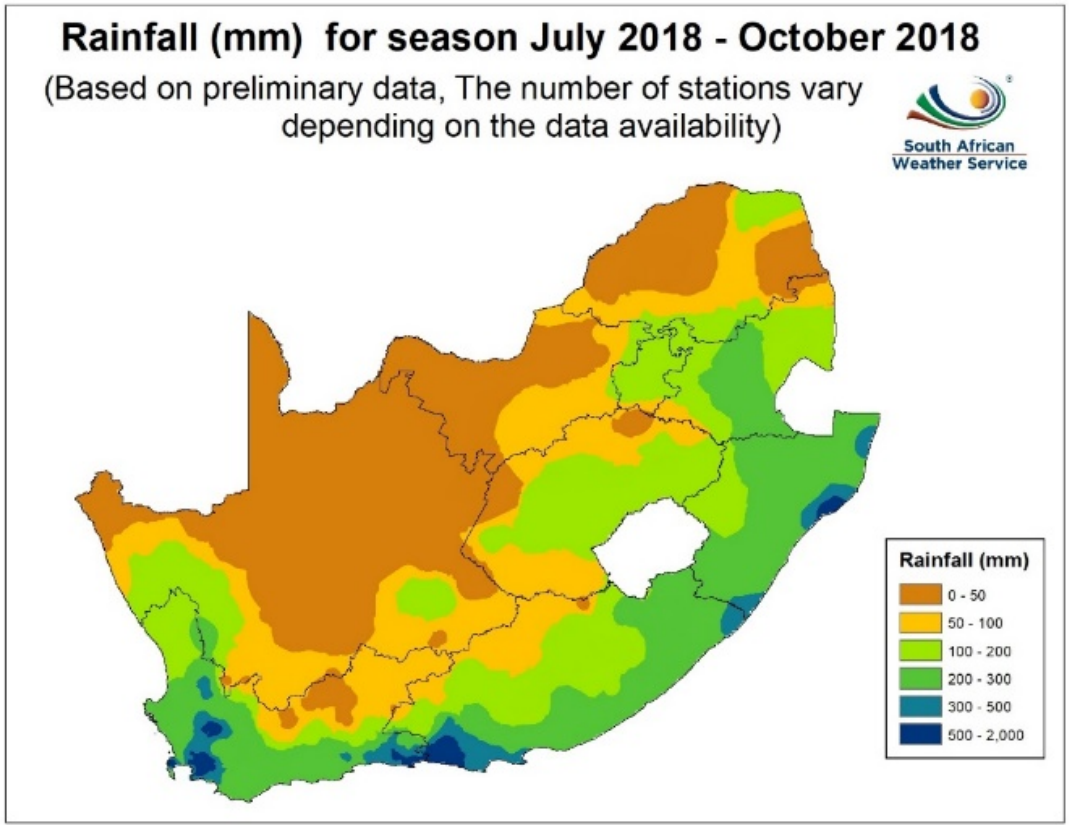


Figure 2: Cumulative rainfall from July 2018 to October 2018 in South Africa



The Impact on Corn Plantings

Corn is the most important field crop in South Africa, as it is used for both human and animal consumption. In fact, corn in the form of a porridge, is the staple food for the majority of South Africans. South Africa is also a major supplier of corn to its neighbouring countries annually. The optimal planting dates for corn in South Africa runs from the middle of October to the middle of November for the central to eastern regions (see also Figure 3). For the western regions the optimal planting window is between middle November to end of December. A soil moisture map (Figure 4) clearly illustrates that soil moisture for planting is currently insufficient in most parts of Southern Africa. While this is not an ideal situation, there is still enough time for plantings, but it will have to rain in the next couple of weeks.

In a survey released by the South African Crop Estimates Committee last month, commercial farmers indicated that they could increase corn plantings for the 2019/20 season by 10 percent to 2.5 million hectares. Favorable local corn prices are the main driver for this trend. This means that if normal climatic conditions return, South Africa should be able to export surplus corn of about 1.1 million tons in the next marketing year on increase area.

Figure 3: South Africa's optimal corn planting dates

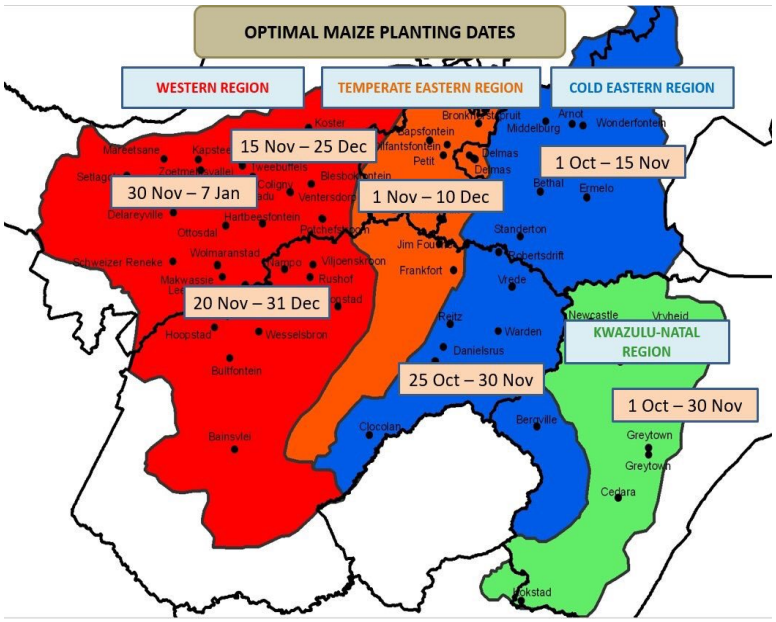
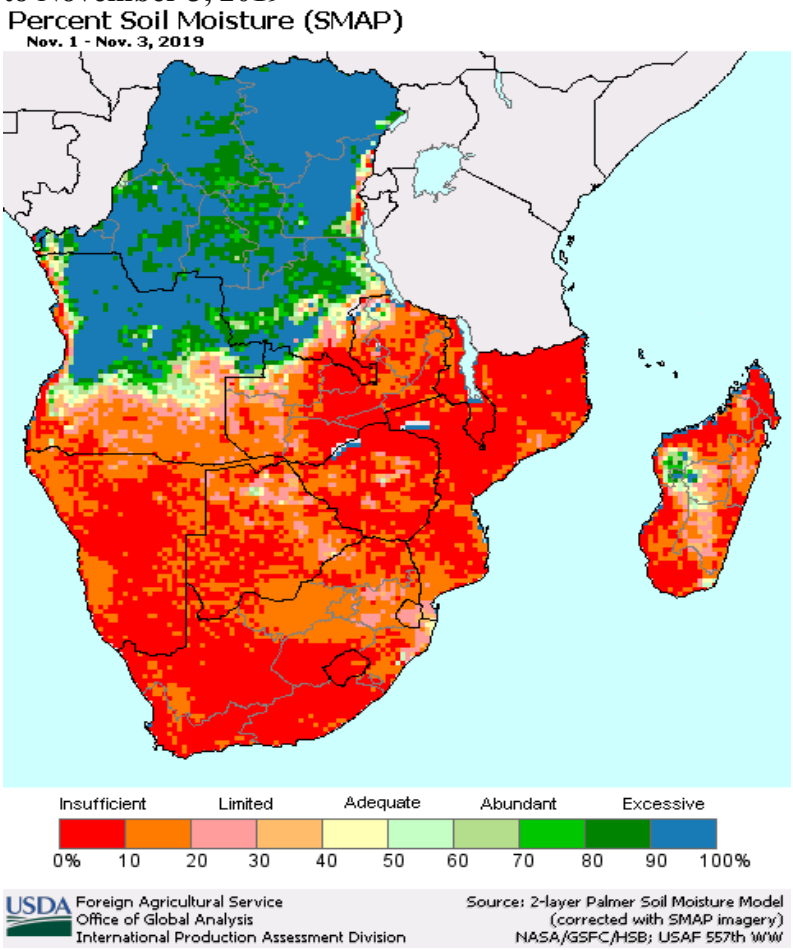


Figure 4: Soil moisture map for Southern Africa for November 1 to November 3, 2019



Reactions of Farmers

Meanwhile, at a media briefing held on November 12, 2019, AgriSA, the largest farmer organization in South Africa, reiterated that while the climate crisis has not yet necessitated the declaration of a national disaster, the South African government has to recognize that the country is not ready to handle a drought disaster. AgriSA added that South Africa needs to become more resilient to the climate crisis and to mitigate its effects. AgriSA has called upon the government for the immediate implementation of measures that may alleviate the effects of the drought including a National Drought Management Commission, private-public partnerships, multi-peril agricultural insurance and an early warning system. Currently, South Africa has no government supported crop insurance system in place and crop disaster assistance is limited.

GrainSA, representing grain farmers, explained at the same media briefing, that normally the planting of corn would be finished by mid-November in the eastern side of the country. This year, however, only a few farmers has been able to plant because the rain is more than a month late. The grain sector also asked the South African government for an insurance system that will assist farmers to at least receive their inputs cost back in the case of a drought. In that way farmers can continue planting the next year and maintain the food security status of the country.

The Impact on Food Security

The key question is what does all this means for food security in 2020 and the performance of South Africa's broader agriculture sector at large? The answer is that it is too early to ascertain the impact yet. South Africa has enough grain supplies for the 2019/20 marketing year which ends in April 2020. From April 2020 onwards, much will depend on what happens to the crop that is yet to be planted. South Africa is a water-constrained country even at the best of times and the next couple of weeks will be critical. The South African Weather Service forecast a greater chance for rain in the eastern parts of the country in the coming weeks. As encouraging as this is, it comes with some level of uncertainty and hence it will be important to monitor the weather conditions over the coming weeks in order to predict the impact on food security. Figure 4 reflects the regional scope of the current drought conditions in Southern Africa. All eyes continue to be on South Africa, as many neighboring countries rely on the agricultural sectors exports of staple foods and proteins. A shortage of surplus and available supplies could have a widespread impact on the availability of foods, including meats, fruits, tree nuts and vegetables.

Attachments:

No Attachments.