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MEDIA RELEASE

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Cashing in on a wet season

A wet season across South Australia is providing researchers with a valuable opportunity to explore how much additional yield potential can be captured in traditionally low to medium rainfall farming systems, and define what the ceiling to productivity is.

CSIRO farming systems research scientist Dr Kenton Porker (pictured below) will be presenting on this topic at the Hart Field Day on Tuesday, September 15.

He says the beginning of 2026 has been a stark contrast to the record-breaking dry conditions experienced during the first two years of the GRDC-funded Profitable Yield Frontiers trial, being conducted at Hart and five other sites across southeastern Australia.

"It's been one of the warmest May/June periods on record, and now we've had decile 7-decile 8 rainfall across South Australia," Kenton said.

"These are the years that we're really interested in. I think we've got good at managing for the low rainfall years, and relatively good at keeping our water efficiency up in those years.

"But how do we make the most of these really wet years, and get the most out of it and 'cash in' if you like?"

"Is there a chance we could actually get seven or eight tonne potential at Hart? I think there is. So that's the really exciting part."

The trial is investigating how growers can capture more of the upside in higher rainfall seasons, with management decisions made at sowing playing an important role in determining final yields.

Kenton said this year, growers have had an early sowing opportunity, good

stored soil moisture and continued rainfall.

"Emergence timing or the sowing date and variety choice is still a big factor into what drives profit, the problem is that's a decision made when there is most uncertainty of emergence timing, and spring conditions," he said.

"One of the significant things we've seen is the difference between wheat and barley. We've seen more upside from barley sown early, than what we may have expected in the past.

"So, there's this potential for high yield."

However, the potential gains come with risks.

"I think barley is shaping up as a real opportunity, but having said that, there's more downside risk to barley than what we previously thought, particularly under conditions where water is depleted prior to flowering, such as late sowing and higher N (nitrogen) applications," Kenton said.

Kenton said while more nitrogen will be required to match increased yield potential in a wet year, the foundations for a productive season can often be established well before the outcome is known.

"If you're coming from a relatively high fertility base, things that you might do in your farming system in the previous years, around even legumes, or, you've got a history of high-end fertilisation, they set you up well for these wet years," he said.

"So, it's really trying to understand, how do we best set up our crops?

"Often these decisions are made at sowing time for an unknown outcome."

Hart was one of the lowest-yielding sites in the trial in 2024, with crops yielding about one tonne per hectare, and wheat higher than barley, compared with 8-9 t/ha at Bordertown and Yarrawonga.

However, after a run of dry seasons, Kenton's message this year is optimistic: when moisture is available, there may be more yield to capture than previously thought.

"I haven't seen it this good at Hart," he said.

"We talk a lot about how do we set up our crop for the most important part of the year, which is now - from August to September, we call this the critical period - how do you have a canopy that's intercepting as much light as possible, got enough water and nitrogen under it?

"They are obviously the management things we're thinking about, but the season has us all set up and I know there's a little bit of time now until the field day, and we still think about the things that may or may not rob us of potential in years like this - disease, and dare I say it, frost or heat from here on.

"There's things to play out, but the yield potential is certainly there."

Come along to the Hart Field Day to hear more from Kenton, ask questions or have a chat with him about how the trial's early findings might correlate to your own farm.

The Hart Field Day will be held on Tuesday, September 15.

Admission is $45 (students $15), including access to all rolling sessions and guest speakers, as well as a Hart Field Day Guide with articles and information from each of the sessions.

The Hart trial site is located at 871 Hart Road, Hart, South Australia.

Tickets on sale from Monday, August 24, and early purchase is encouraged.

For tickets, or more information head to the Hart Field-Site Group website www.hartfieldsite.org.au (look for Events/Hart Field Day in the main menu).

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