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Global Market Analysis
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Commodity Intelligence Report

AUSTRALIA: 2020/21 SORGHUM PRODUCTION REBOUNDS

Australia sorghum production for 2020/21 is estimated at 1.35 million metric tons (mmt), up 1.05 mmt or 350 percent from last year. Area is estimated at 0.51 million hectares (mha), up 0.36 mha or 240 percent from last year. Yield is forecast at 2.65 tons per hectare (t/ha), up 0.65 t/ha or 33 percent from last year. The significant rebound in production is due to much improved precipitation compared to last season.

Sorghum is sown from September through February. Harvest of the early-planted crop began in February. The later planted crop will be harvested by June this year. Final summer crop yield is typically more influenced by rainfall and temperatures during crop growth than by the soil moisture at sowing, although this remains an important factor.

Mixed conditions this season with periods of below normal precipitation during Australia's summer and early autumn period in much of the sorghum belt of eastern Australia reduced overall yield potential. However, New South Wales (NSW) fared marginally better than Queensland (QLD).

A major shift in the precipitation pattern occurred during March. Excessive March rainfall in QLD and NSW boosted soil moisture profiles to well-above-average levels. These rains were especially beneficial to the later planted crop. The area, yield, and production of grain sorghum have fluctuated widely over the years (see Figure 1). This is a result of variations in rainfall amounts, irrigation availability, and prices of cotton and sorghum. Sorghum and cotton are Australia's two major summer crops and compete for the same land. When cotton prices are high, sorghum area decreases.

Sorghum is a summer crop that is planted in areas throughout Australia, but production is concentrated mainly along the QLD and NSW border. One of the main advantages of sorghum is that it is produced in key livestock producing and feedlot regions. Sorghum is primarily a livestock feed grain and competes with feed wheat and barley. QLD produces about two-thirds of Australia's sorghum, with NSW accounting for the remainder (see Figure 2).

In the summer crop regions of eastern Australia mixed growing conditions have affected vegetation health and yield. An April 2021, satellite-derived Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) anomaly shows the situation in sorghum areas with average to below-average vegetation health throughout the QLD and NSW sorghum belt (see Figure 3).

Historically, Australia is the ninth largest producer of sorghum in the world, but the second largest exporter. Improved conditions this will year increase export availability. Australia field crops include wheat, canola, oats, triticale, rye, sorghum, barley, rice, and several pulses. Australian grain production occurs in both the summer and winter seasons. Major winter crops include wheat, barley, and rapeseed. Summer crops include sorghum, cotton, rice, and sunflowers.

Most cropping regions of Australia are only able to produce one crop per year, but areas of Darling Downs (southern QLD) and the Liverpool Plains (northern NSW) can produce a summer and winter crop each year. This is due to their favorable soils and climate. In addition, the use of no-till and minimum-till fallow farming in QLD has expanded the planting window for sorghum. Planting of the 2021/22 Australia sorghum crop will begin in October 2021.

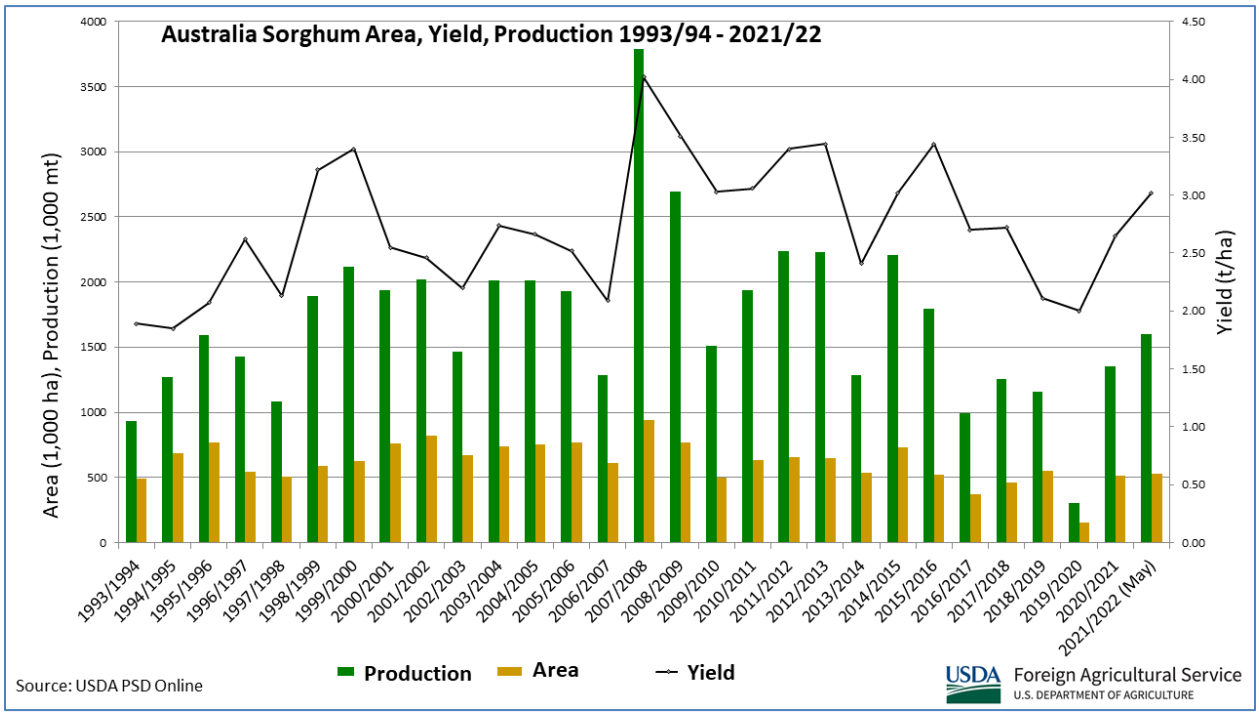

Figure 1. Australia Sorghum Area, Yield and Production time series chart. Source USDA PSD.

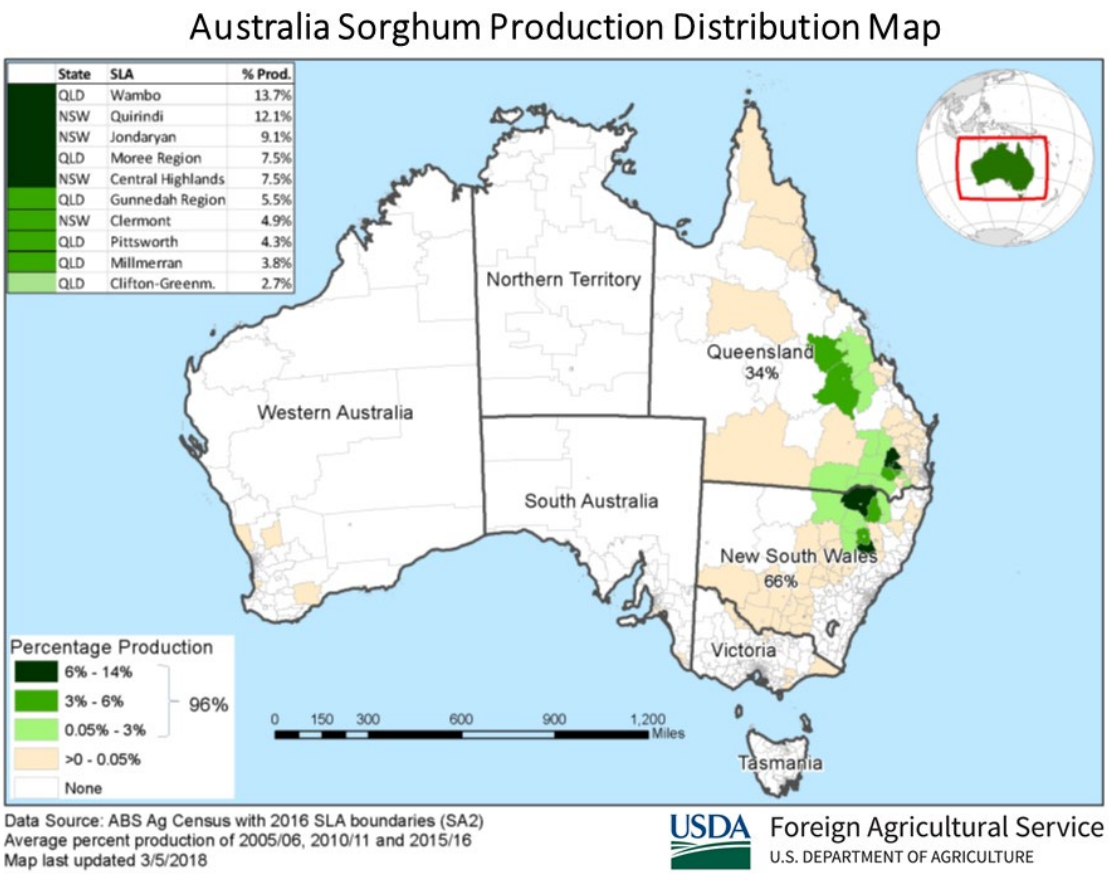

Figure 2. Map depicting production distribution of sorghum across Australia. Source is three years of Census data from Australia Bureau of Statistics.

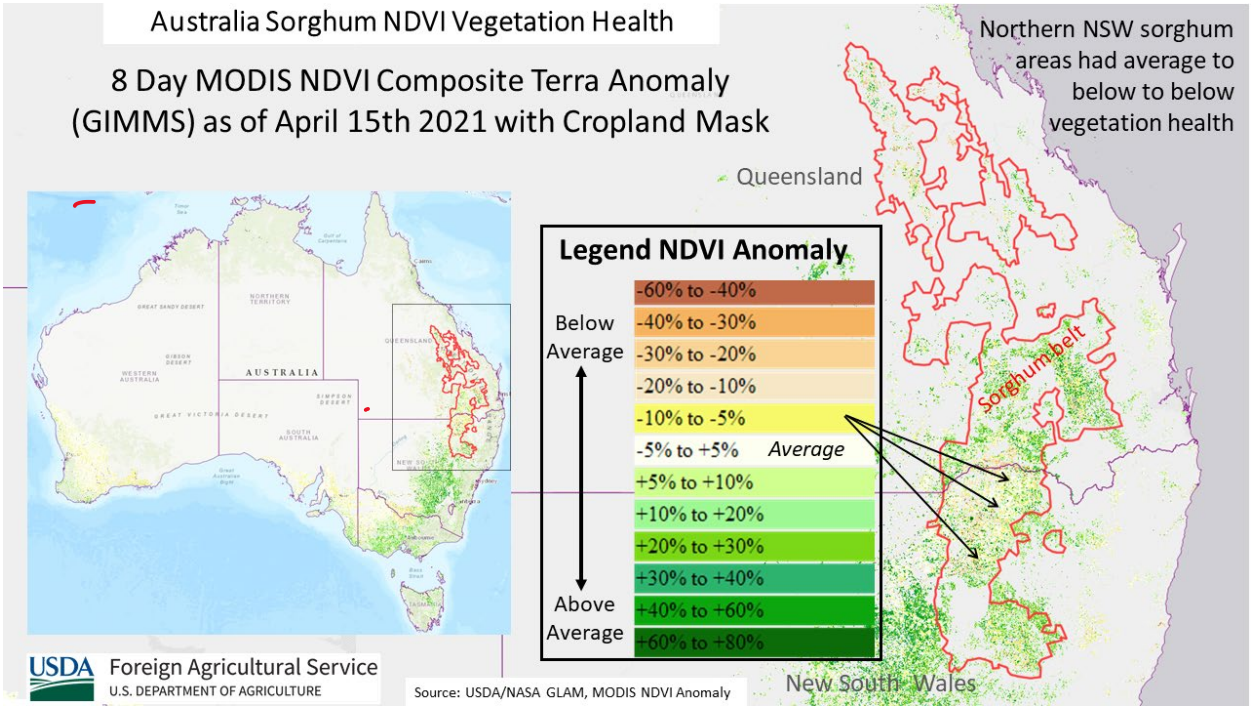

Figure 3. Vegetation health as measured by MODIS satellite showing Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) showing agricultural pixels within the sorghum belt of Australia.

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