



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND  
FORESTRY

**Reference: Future development of the Australian honey bee industry**

WEDNESDAY, 13 JUNE 2007

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY**  
**Wednesday, 13 June 2007**

**Members:** Mr Schultz (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mrs Mirabella, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

**Members in attendance:** Mr Adams, Mr Forrest, Mrs Mirabella, Mr Gavan O'Connor and Mr Schultz

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Honey bee industry in terms of:

1. Its current and future prospects.
2. Its role in agriculture and forestry.
3. Biosecurity issues.
4. Trade issues.
5. The impact of land management and bushfires.
6. The research and development needs of the industry.
7. Existing industry and Government work that has been undertaken for the honey bee industry.

**WITNESSES**

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**Committee met at 5.11 pm**

**ANDERSON, Ms Victoria, General Manager, Industry Leadership and Development Branch, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**BIDDLE, Dr Bob, Acting Chief Veterinary Officer, Product Integrity Animal and Plant Health Division, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**LIEHNE, Mr Peter, National Manager, Animal and Plant Quarantine, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**McCUTCHEON, Mr Steve, Executive Manager, Product Integrity Animal and Plant Health Division, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**MARTIN, Dr Robyn, General Manager, Animal Biosecurity, Biosecurity Australia, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**NICHOLSON, Mr Tony, Senior Policy Adviser, Forest Industries Branch, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**RYAN, Mr Michael, Acting General Manager, Horticulture and Wine Branch, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**CHAIR (Mr Schultz)**—Welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into the future development of the Australian honey bee industry. It is the first public hearing of this important inquiry.

Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Consequently, it warrants the same respect as proceedings of the House. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. The committee has received a submission from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Are there any corrections or amendments you would like to make to your submission?

**Mr Ryan**—I have some updates, which are incorporated in our opening statement, which I am happy to provide.

**CHAIR**—Flowing on from that, I invite you to make a brief statement or some introductory remarks in relation to your submission.

**Mr Ryan**—The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's role is to develop and implement policies which ensure that Australia's agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food industries remain competitive, profitable and sustainable. The honey bee industry is one of the many industries that DAFF works with to achieve these goals. The honey bee industry is working in partnership with the Australian government to improve the industry's understanding of the issues and opportunities that will impact on its future profitability, competitiveness and sustainability. Under the Industry Partnership Program, the Taking Stock and Setting Directions

project was undertaken in 2005. This culminated in a report by the Centre for International Economics titled *Future directions for the Australian honey bee industry*.

The project also supported a honey bee linkages workshop that was held on 23-24 April 2007. A key outcome of that workshop was a commitment to forming a strong alliance between the honey bee industry and industries which have a stake in pollination. Based on the findings of the setting directions exercise, the honey bee industry is currently being supported to undertake an action partnership project. This project is assisting the industry to initiate and implement a national environmental management code of conduct and to improve the training of beekeepers on environmental issues. The department plays a crucial role in prevention and management of incursion of pests and diseases through quarantine and risk management. Areas of the department involved in biosecurity issues include Biosecurity Australia, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, and the Product Integrity and Animal and Plant Health Division, including the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer.

The work DAFF undertakes in quarantine and risk management helps to maintain Australia's reputation for producing high-quality honey and bee related products. Of particular importance to the honey bee industry is the National Sentinel Hive program, which was established in 2000, to enhance early detection of the incursion of varroa mites, tropilaelaps mites, tracheal mites and the Asian honey bee. Early detection of these pests provides the best opportunity to successfully contain and eradicate bee parasites or exotic bee species, at least cost. This program operates by locating sentinel hives in the vicinity of identified high-risk seaports. I am pleased to advise the committee that the National Sentinel Hive program has recently been included in the surveillance program of Animal Health Australia. Funding under this arrangement will total \$247,132 in 2007-08.

The department also provides services to assist exports and imports of honey and bee related products. AQIS is responsible for testing honey and other bee products for human consumption imported into and exported out of Australia. Testing of exports is at the request of the exporter or as required by our trading partners. The honey bee industry is concerned that some honey bee related products, particularly royal jelly and propolis, are being imported into Australia from China and then re-exported to Asia and Europe with a 'Made in Australia' label. The industry is concerned that possible contamination of these imported products may tarnish the reputation of the Australian honey bee industry when they are re-exported under a 'Made in Australia' label. However, as a result of contaminated product being detected by the European Union, any royal jelly not of Australian origin that is re-exported must now be tested for the presence of banned substances before it is issued with export documentation. A product of Australian origin is not subject to these same restrictions.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has responsibility for enforcing the Trade Practices Act 1974, including any requirements related to country of origin claims. Food Standards Australia New Zealand is the authority with responsibility for developing and reviewing food standards. Enforcement of the food standards code is the responsibility of state and territory agencies. The department has a role in providing input to the development of food policy for domestic food standards, including food labelling issues through the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council. The department is also represented on a number of working groups of the Food Regulation Standing Committee.

The department also assists with market access issues. Our submission detailed a market access issue of concern to the honey bee industry, which the department has been attempting to resolve with the Thai government. In an update to this issue, the Thai Food and Drug Administration has advised that its review of microbiological standards is almost complete and that it intends to align its standards with relevant international standards. This will restore confidence to Australian exporters looking to export honey to Thailand.

While recognising that land management is primarily a state government issue, access to public forests is a key issue for the honey bee industry. The change in tenure of many state forests to nature reserve and national parks in recent years affects access that the honey bee industry has to these areas. The future direction of land and fire management is also of importance to the industry, as maintaining access and managing forest fuel loads to minimise the impact of large bush fires will benefit the industry. Large areas of severely burnt forest may not flower for some time, which may significantly impact on the resources available to the honey bee industry in those areas.

The continuing drought conditions may have adverse implications for the honey bee industry, and this is particularly relevant given the uncertainty over water availability for irrigation purposes in the Murray-Darling Basin in the upcoming irrigation year. We are currently supporting the bee keeping industry with drought assistance under the exceptional circumstances arrangements.

The department also plays a role in collecting the levies which are directed towards research and development for the industry, as well as the National Residue Survey and the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement. The Australian government matches the statutory levy for research and development paid by the honey bee industry up to a maximum of 0.5 per cent of the gross value of production on a dollar for dollar basis on eligible expenditure. In 2005-06, the Australian government's contribution totalled \$189,672.

In summary, the department plays an important role in supporting the honey bee industry through quarantine services and export certification, biosecurity risk management, market access assistance, levy collection services and industry development grants. We will continue to work with the Australian honey bee industry to support its efforts to remain a competitive, profitable and sustainable industry. Thank you for the opportunity to attend this hearing. We will be happy to receive any questions the committee has.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for those opening remarks, Mr Ryan. I will just give you some brief background as to why we undertook this inquiry. We previously did an inquiry with regard to skills shortages in rural and regional Australia and during the evidence taking we picked up significant problems associated with the honey bee industry. The problems were not only around the lack of training facilities for people in the industry, and more particularly on the technical side of the honey bee industry, but, more specifically, around some concerns raised with us which prompted us to seriously consider undertaking this inquiry. We are aware that, whilst the honey bee industry does not play a huge role in the economy of this country, it does produce \$60 million worth of honey bee products and plays a significant role in the exporting of honey bees to places like California, which has had a huge problem with the varroa mite, and we are helping them out with the pollination of their almond crops. We are concerned about anything happening to the honey bee industry by an incursion of a pest from outside, keeping in

mind that Australia is an isolated island and is free of the varroa mite—I understand it is the only country in the world that is free of the varroa mite—and the fact that, indirectly, the honey bee industry, through the pollination process from feral honey bees and hived honey bees, contributes to about \$2 billion of the Australian economy through the agriculture and horticultural sector. We thought that this was a very, very serious issue that is confronting us offshore.

We wanted to do something constructive in terms of getting a report out and making recommendations to the government to hold off as long as we could or come up with some strategies that would help the honey bee industry. That is not only from the point of view of the incursion of foreign pests from outside but, more importantly, to help the honey bee industry to be given the prominence it needs to be given. Not too many people understand just what a significant contribution this small industry makes to the economy of this country. Thank you for your time.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—I will just pick up on some of the opening remarks and ask about the growth of the industry. Has anybody in the department done any planning on where it sees the industry growing, or is it just one of these nooks and crannies that grows naturally? That might be a bit of a left-field question.

**Ms Anderson**—The most comprehensive study was the taking stock report that was done in 2005. The purpose of those reports is to provide some funding for the industry to be able to assess its position, its future, where its key threats and risks are and where some key opportunities are and then potentially build on that in the future with some further funding to address some of those strategies. That report is probably the most comprehensive attempt of government support to do that sort of thing. Some quite specific recommendations came out of it as well.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—On the question of China and the country of origin requirements, has anybody been prosecuted to this point? Has anybody been fingered bringing the stuff in from China and then re-exporting it?

**Mr Ryan**—AQIS might be able to answer in relation to the testing of exported products.

**Mr Liehne**—The testing of exported products is around the quarantine requirements of the country that they are exported to. I think that question should be directed to the ACCC. They are responsible for the management of the Trade Practices Act, which looks at country of origin requirements.

**Mr FORREST**—We test it going out, but we do not test it coming in. Is that what you just said?

**Mr Liehne**—We would look at product coming in from the view of quarantine. The products coming in need to be for commercial purposes. They would be tested on the way in. Any certification we do for product on the way out would be dictated by the country to which it is being exported. They may require certification for quarantine purposes. We would do the testing and provide that certification if that was requested.

**Mr FORREST**—But you can give us the confidence that it is tested as it comes in?

**Mr Liehne**—They have to meet their import conditions. Let me get this document out. As I left my glasses in the car, I will struggle a little bit. I apologise for that.

**CHAIR**—It could be worse. You could have only one eye like me!

**Mr Liehne**—I am afraid I cannot; it is beyond me.

**Dr Martin**—The product that comes in is tested under the Imported Food Control Act for things like residues and antibiotics.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—I have a general question relating to the product. We have had cases, for example in the wine industry, where the existence of bushfires has contaminated the taste or flavour of the product. Has that occurred in this industry at all? Does anybody know?

**Mr Ryan**—No, I do not think we could answer that.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—That is fine. I just thought somebody might know. On the larger question of this industry, it is obviously a critical one for horticulture and other industries. Do you think there is an understanding in the community, in industry and in government of its importance? It is a general question, but obviously from our deliberations in other areas we consider it to be an important issue. The reason this inquiry is being undertaken is to build on some of the initiatives going back to 2005 and before to profile this industry. What is your assessment of that as you move about the bureaucracy and the industry?

**Mr Ryan**—Clearly, the taking stock and setting directions report identified a view within the honey industry that they needed to improve their communications both with the broader community and with governments. I think the fact that they do receive considerable attention from the government in terms of the support we have provided through the taking stock and setting directions process and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation—which provides, manages and targets investments in relation to research and development for the industry—is a reflection of the fact that they do have the attention of government in relation to their importance, but they clearly see the need to improve that communication. I presume that that centres to some degree on resource access and the need to put their case to state governments to retain access to forest areas.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—Could somebody just explain the elements of the action partnerships program that you mentioned, please?

**Ms Anderson**—The current action partnership is for a honey bee environmental code of conduct. The way it works is that you do a taking stock project—that is the one that has been mentioned already—and then, from that, strategies are identified for the industry to follow up and potentially get support from the government to do an action partnership. The purpose of an action partnership is for short-term projects that have been identified as fundamental to the performance of the industry in the future. We received a proposal that was approved in August last year for an action partnership grant for the honey bee environmental code of conduct. It is

still underway at the moment. I will just read out the project aims—that is probably the easiest way to do it. They are to:

- improve access to public lands and important honey supplies through improving the public perception of environmental practices;
- secure honey supply for future industry expansion, increase sustainability within the industry, and increase resilience to adverse weather and market conditions;
- improve training of beekeepers on environmental issues and activities; and
- initiate and implement an environmental management strategy which is expected to lead to greater profitability through further access to 'clean and green' markets.

This is a first step. It is not the only step necessarily, but it is one of the key ones.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—It is a pretty big action agenda, isn't it?

**Ms Anderson**—It is reasonably big, yes.

**CHAIR**—Can I just come in on one of the points you raised here about access to public land. That is a very serious issue for a number of reasons. Has any research been done on the likely impact of current land management policies on the honey bee industry, particularly restricted access to national parks?

**Ms Anderson**—I think that was assessed in the taking stock project itself and has been identified as probably one of the key threats to the industry in that process.

**CHAIR**—But has any action been taken on that?

**Ms Anderson**—No, not specifically. One of the purposes of this environmental code of conduct project is to provide assurances of the environmental sustainability of the industry and, therefore, to help access to public land so beekeepers can demonstrate their environmental credentials and I guess reduce some of the concerns that the keepers of those public lands may have about having beekeepers on that public land. That is one part of it. It is probably not the whole solution, but it is certainly part of the solution there.

**CHAIR**—How much cooperation has that approach had from the state and territory governments?

**Ms Anderson**—I am not aware of any specific collaboration with the states in that project. There could well be, so I would have to check that.

**CHAIR**—Could you check that and come back to the committee on that?

**Ms Anderson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—That is a very important issue, particularly in relation to the possible incursion of pests such as the varroa mite, because the attitude of the national parks personnel to bees is going to play a very integral part in the protection of our native flora in particular.

**Mr FORREST**—I would like to come back to all those quarantine issues, but one thing I have realised is just how significant this industry is to my own constituency. It seems to me, in

terms of the challenge of raising research dollars, that the beneficiaries are those who get the pollination benefits, and they are not necessarily making an assisting contribution; they are pretty much getting it for free. Is that a reasonable observation to start? I note in your submission that the amounts of revenue collected are pretty insignificant when you look at the benefits that this industry has to the GDP.

**CHAIR**—Could you have an argument from the agricultural industry itself that a lot of the pollination that is undertaken on the crops at the moment is done by feral honey bees, not hived bees that are placed in paddocks? I am just being the devil's advocate.

**Mr FORREST**—I understand that. It is probably not so when you get to the intense horticulture. There just would not be enough bees. In fact, that is where a lot of my beekeepers place their hives. Could I have a reaction to the observation I made?

**Mr Ryan**—The *Taking stock and setting directions* project certainly identified what the industry sees as the key issues it needs to address in order to extract greater value from the pollination services industry. One of those issues is pricing, in that there are some part-time pollinators who are pricing their services at what the rest of the industry considers to be below commercial rate. That is affecting other operators. Quality, or standards, is another issue. I guess there are two sides to that. One is that growers cannot distinguish between who is a good pollinator and who is a poor-quality pollinator. Also, the industry itself needs some sort of benchmark to position itself against so that when people are offering pollination services they are offering a standard that is going to be suitable for getting good-quality pollination for a crop. The third part is education. They need to make growers aware of the need for good-quality pollination. They also need to make sure they do their part, which is that they are careful with the use of chemicals around crops which are being accessed by bees, so that it does not impact on the hives which are positioned there for pollination. They are the three key issues that the industry has identified that they need to address in order to get better value out of the pollination services market.

**Mr McCutcheon**—I would like to add one further comment in response to your question. I am aware that the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council has, certainly in the last 12 months, approached a number of the horticulture industries looking for some sort of possible funding contribution to deal with some of the biosecurity risks they face. They have done that on the basis that, whilst they have a very clear interest in terms of maintaining honey bee production, they also recognise that bees play a fairly important part in a number of horticulture industries. My understanding is that those overtures to the horticulture industries did not yield any positive responses to doing some cofunding into these things. It goes back to the issue of communication, which was raised earlier. I think the honey bee industry probably needs to do a bit more to communicate the importance of its particular industry to the general pollination area.

**Ms Anderson**—In April this year, RIRDC—the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation—hosted a workshop of the honey bee industry, pollination-reliant industries and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation to address that sort of issue and the need for better alliance and communication between those groups. That was seen as a quite successful workshop. We supported that through our industry partnerships program, but it was RIRDC's forum. Since that time we have received a request for another action grant project, which is currently being considered by the minister. That is for an alliance to be formed between

relevant parts of the industry—across the pollination service industry, I guess—and for them to put together a strategic plan as to the key elements of that project proposal, which is under consideration at the moment. So there has been some further action and an attempt to consolidate and get better communication across the relevant parties involved.

**Mr FORREST**—My second question is about access for Australian honey export. I noticed in your submission some of the tariff restrictions—particularly, I think, in Germany and the UK: 17.3 per cent. Are we doing any work to have that barrier removed? I wonder why it exists when most of the other destination countries are down at zero, especially in the USA.

**Mr ADAMS**—Korea is 170 per cent, I think.

**Mr FORREST**—What are we doing to encourage reduction of those barriers?

**Mr Ryan**—We would have to take that on notice. I am sorry, I do not have anyone from our trade area here.

**Mr FORREST**—Okay. I will give other people an opportunity to ask questions, but I would like to come back to the quarantine concerns. That seems to be where anxieties are.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—You mentioned the training of beekeepers in environmental issues. What sorts of matters does that training involve? Is there a cost to them? How extensive is it?

**Ms Anderson**—At this point, the project is for the establishment of an environmental code of conduct. I guess that is the starting point. Probably more relevant to your question, we have received a request for funding from the honey bee industry for the development of trainer workbooks.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—That code of conduct is being developed by the department?

**Ms Anderson**—No, it is being developed by the industry with funding from the department and with our support. It is a partnership, I guess. That is the aim of it.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So there is input from the department?

**Ms Anderson**—Yes.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Is there input from other government bodies in other jurisdictions perhaps?

**Ms Anderson**—I would have to take that one on notice to check.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Linked to the issue of difficulty of access to crown land, I would have thought that it would be a sensible approach to try and involve them. Do you have any information regarding why beekeepers are locked out of state parks and national parks?

**Ms Anderson**—I personally do not. I agree with you that it is a sensible thing. I will check on that and get back to you.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Does anyone in the department have any information in that regard?

**Dr Biddle**—In general, one of the issues for people charged with looking after the environment and national parks is their concern for native bees, which are highly adapted to specific types of native flora. There is a desire to maintain the native species of bees in their natural habitat. They do not necessarily view competition from honey bees in a favourable light. That is one of the issues. I am not saying it is the only issue, but it is—

**CHAIR**—It is a noble issue if it were practical, but it is not practical because bees do not stop at the trees; they keep going.

**Dr Biddle**—That is right. As you say, there are very large feral populations. I have certainly heard that issue raised as one of the planks of environmental concern.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Is that a minor issue, one of the major four issues—how would you rate it?

**Dr Biddle**—I guess that you would have to talk to environmental authorities about the extent to which they rate it as a hazard to the environment. I have certainly heard many statements in the past about concern over preservation of unique species of bee which are especially adapted to Australia's floral types.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Are there any other reasons that the department is aware of—any other environmental matters or issues?

**Dr Biddle**—It could be that vehicles track in weeds, with the beekeepers taking their hives into the national parks. There could be concerns about invasive weed species or whatever being introduced. The environmental authorities should be asked that question.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I totally appreciate that you cannot answer for the state environmental authorities—

**Dr Biddle**—State and federal.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Even the state ministers can rarely do that. Could the department double-check to see if there is any documentation or correspondence regarding specified environmental threats? That would be appreciated. Perhaps the committee can think a bit more laterally about trying to get some information out of the relevant state bodies.

**CHAIR**—That argument is interesting—and I know it is not your argument; it is the argument that comes from the people managing the national parks and particularly the state governments. They argue about the vehicles coming in and bringing noxious weeds or whatever into the parks, and the parks being absolutely chock-a-block full of noxious weeds and feral animals. I get a bit angry when I hear those sorts of excuses made to deprive people of making a living or taking some leisure time in national parks which were originally designed to create the very things that the national park personnel are trying to stop.

**Mr ADAMS**—You have an Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed—do bees fit into that process?

**Dr Biddle**—Perhaps I could start more on the animal disease response to it.

**Mr ADAMS**—We know about a bit about the mites and things.

**Dr Biddle**—Under the number of diseases specified as amenable to cost-sharing and emergency response, and there is also under active consideration the addition of two pest bee species to that list—the Asian honeybee and the giant honeybee. They could well be added in the very near future, which means there is a cost-sharing mechanism to respond to incursions.

**Mr ADAMS**—That is a part of that—that is good.

**Dr Biddle**—But as Mr McCutcheon said before, in terms of the plant health deed, there are no pest bee species listed for cost-sharing purposes under that agreement.

**Mr ADAMS**—Does that mean our honeybee is not under it?

**Mr McCutcheon**—The arrangements are that the Honeybee Industry Council is a member of both Animal Health Australia and Plant Health Australia, which are the custodians of the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement in case of AHA, and the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed. The honey industry has also signed up to the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement for dealing with either competitor bees or diseases and so on, but it is not a party to the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed. It has only signed up to one of the emergency deeds and that is the animal disease one.

**Mr ADAMS**—What has it got to do to sign up?

**Mr McCutcheon**—That is a decision for the industry to make. It would have to weigh up what it would get out of the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed that it does not get out of the animal deed?

**Mr ADAMS**—What is the principal contamination of residue in honey? What is the biggest problem?

**Mr McCutcheon**—Perhaps the major one is antibiotics, but the residue testing program that the National Residue conducts—

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you do a survey?

**Mr McCutcheon**—Yes.

**Mr ADAMS**—How is that done—over different beekeepers, or what?

**Mr McCutcheon**—It is. There are approximately 170 samples of honey that are collected—that is the collection rate for this financial year—over a range of honey producing areas.

**Mr ADAMS**—Over Australia?

**Mr McCutcheon**—Yes, it is a national—

**Mr ADAMS**—So 170 different beekeepers—

**Mr McCutcheon**—Yes, 170 samples of honey are taken during the year, and they are looking for essentially pesticides, metals, nitrofurans and chloramphenicol—they are the four key areas.

**CHAIR**—What about imported honeybee products?

**Mr McCutcheon**—That comes in under the Imported Food Control Act, and I think Food Standards Australia New Zealand would actually set the parameters for what is tested and AQIS would actually do the testing.

**CHAIR**—I just wondered whether the testing is as rigorous for the imported stuff as it is for the—

**Mr Liehne**—They are conducted by the same laboratories so, yes, the sampling regime, depending on the advice from FSANZ, the sampling regime is determined by that, and if there are problems identified in sampling, then the sampling regime is increased to cover them. I would need to take on notice and give you advice as to what the actual sampling rate is for imported honey.

**Mr ADAMS**—Is there a standard for Australian honey? Do we have standards?

**Mr Liehne**—The food standards code dictates what residues are allowed to be in the product.

**Mr ADAMS**—But we just have one honey don't we, or different brands of honey, we do not have a standard?

**Mr Liehne**—Honey is honey. It does not differentiate between the plant species from which the honey is drawn out.

**Mr ADAMS**—Some people call it bush honey, and then you have Pacific honey—

**Mr Liehne**—There are marketing names, but the product is honey.

**Mr ADAMS**—But there is no standard set. Honey is produced in different ways—we would all understand that. There is heat and fire—the whole process. Some honey can be a lot better than other honey. Some honey seems to be much more watery and squirts out of bottles much more easily.

**CHAIR**—You are talking about additives.

**Mr Liehne**—It is a natural product. There is a great deal of variation in the natural product, depending on the time of harvest and the type of pollen or the type of nectar that is collected. It

is almost impossible to set benchmark standards of that sort that would apply to the product. It is recognised as a product. It has to fit within the normal labelling requirements and residue levels that are tested normally as part of that process. It is those sorts of safety issues that are of concern and—

**Mr ADAMS**—Thick or thin, okay.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—The comment is made that poor land management and unplanned fires pose a risk to the industry because of the loss of flora. Has the department conducted any research?

**Mr Nicholson**—Into the impact of poor land management on the bee industry?

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Yes.

**Mr Nicholson**—Not that I am aware of. However, in respect of bushfire management, we are seeking to have input into the process, which we have mentioned in the submission, for developing a national forest fire management policy.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—For COAG?

**Mr Nicholson**—Yes. Through the primary industries standing committees and the NRM standing committees which feed into the ministerial councils. They have asked for a bushfire policy. While that will not address honey as a specific issue, you are looking to improve land management for all values because, obviously, unplanned fire in forests and nature reserves, whatever tenure that land is, will impact negatively on those values.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Who is drafting the department's contribution regarding land management and fires?

**Mr Nicholson**—To this inquiry?

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—No, to the process that will finally feed into COAG.

**Mr Nicholson**—I am having some input into that through the forest industries branch. I will try to make sure that it is departmental-wide.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Is there a draft available yet?

**Mr Nicholson**—No. That process will not be finalised for some time yet. But the Primary Industries Ministerial Council have asked their standing committees to report to them. I will have to check on the dates that they have asked for that to happen.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Over the next month, perhaps?

**Mr Nicholson**—No; it is a much longer time frame. It will be either later this year or early next year. I can find out for you, if you like.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I am wondering if there is some way that we could perhaps get some of the research or information already drafted, or some contribution of more detailed significance to the committee. Chair, what are your thoughts on that? What do you think of trying to get some more of that detailed information regarding the department's analysis of the impact of bushfires?

**CHAIR**—It would be pretty helpful to us if you could give us more information on that.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Sorry, Chair—not just in the context of the honeybee industry but—

**Mr Nicholson**—More generally.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—because of the committee we are, it is quite relevant.

**CHAIR**—You have the Forestry and Forest Products Committee and the Natural Resource Management Policies and Programs Committee preparing a paper on the future development of a forest fire management policy at a national level and to provide advice on the implementation of any outstanding recommendations from the COAG inquiry on bushfire mitigation management. I presume that would cover it.

**Mr Nicholson**—That will happen, but I believe that paper development process is still very much at an embryonic stage. It is only in the early stages.

**CHAIR**—Was that triggered by the 2003 fires?

**Mr Nicholson**—No, that was as a result of discussions held at the Primary Industries Ministerial Council and National Resource Ministerial Council meetings held earlier this year, but they have asked for this paper to be developed. I think the 2006 fire season certainly raised the profile of land management in these councils.

**CHAIR**—What input, if any, has the honeybee industry had into the paper on the future development of forest fire management policy?

**Mr Nicholson**—As I said, that paper is only in its very early stages between the Forestry and Forest Products Committee and natural resource management programs and policies committee, so I doubt that they have actually gone to specific stakeholders such as the honeybee industry.

**CHAIR**—Do you know if there are any proposal of plans to include the honeybee industry into that?

**Mr Nicholson**—No, I do not know about that.

**CHAIR**—Would you be able to find out about that—

**Mr Nicholson**—We can try and find out.

**CHAIR**—because I think that is critical to getting some balanced information on it.

**Mr Nicholson**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Regarding the research and development needs of the industry, I refer to page 30 of your submission, which says:

The Australian Government matches the compulsory levy for R&D paid by the honey bee industry up to a maximum of 0.5 per cent of Gross Value of Production (GVP) on a dollar-for-dollar basis on expenditure. In 2005-06 this figure was \$189,672.

That is reading from your report, and I have four questions to ask on that. Firstly, what does the department see as the principal research and development needs of the honeybee industry?

**Mr Ryan**—I think the Rural Industries R&D Corporation has developed a five-year plan. That five-year plan is developed in consultation with the industry and is submitted to the parliamentary secretary for sign-off. That contains the R&D priorities for the industry. I think we would say that is the definitive article in relation to priorities—and I am afraid I do not have a copy of the five-year plan with me.

**CHAIR**—My question was: what does the department see as the principal research and development needs of the honeybee industry? If you have not got an answer, could you get back to me on that?

**Mr Ryan**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—The second question is: do we need greater funding for honeybee industry related research? Do we need more money for research?

**Mr Ryan**—The R&D model which this is based on is the same R&D model that all agricultural industries and rural industries operate under.

**CHAIR**—I understand that, but I am asking the question. We are making an inquiry into what we believe is going to be a very serious issue for agriculture and horticulture in this country, and if the research areas are not being funded as well as they ought to be funded, then we need to know that, so that we can make the appropriate recommendations to the appropriate ministers of the Crown to ensure that they get the message that we need to put more money in. That is why I asked the question; do we need greater funding for honeybee industry related research?

**Mr ADAMS**—I guess what we have seen is that because the levy only brings in a very small amount because it is a very small industry, we do not think the model works very well for the honeybee industry. It needs a bit more intellectual rigour and a bit of help in getting up there. We think that the processes are there for the research corporations to take it on, and they should be reacting to this. I think that is how we see it, and we would be seeing the department to say a role in that, but nobody seems to be moving on it, so we will—

**CHAIR**—Mr Adams pre-empted my third question, and my third question was: would you agree that the current funding model places significant constraints on the amount of research which can be done? That is emphasising what Dick is saying.

**Mr Ryan**—The model is the model that has been deemed appropriate for all rural industries. It tries to provide a balance between an industry contribution which is set by the industry and the government providing a matching contribution to that. So it is really for the industry to decide whether they want to increase the levy rate and then they can attract additional government funding up to the GVP cap.

**CHAIR**—Because of its size, the industry is not going to be able to do that. Our concern is greater than the ability of the honey bee industry to increase its levy to its members to get the matching dollar for dollar. We believe that, based on the evidence put before us so far prior to this inquiry commencing, there are not going to be sufficient funds, because of the size of the industry, to match the research that is going to be required to protect the industry.

The question I am asking is: do you think the current funding model places significant constraints on the amount of research which can be done? I believe it still will, given the size of the industry. I want to make that point. The industry is too small to absorb additional costs through a levy process. Therefore, the government has to understand that this industry is small and is unable to put money in from its levy process to the extent where it can undertake research that is going to help not only this industry but also the \$2 billion worth of benefits that come through the pollination process into other industries. The government is going to have to recognise that. That is what we are trying to get at.

In closing, I ask the final question—and it will tell you why I am asking these questions. In its rural skills report—that is our report—the committee recommended the establishment of a CRC-style entity for beekeeping and pollination. Has consideration been given to establishing a CRC-style entity, and how would it be funded? We see research as a critical issue, as part of the problem, for the beekeeping industry. Would you like to answer that question?

**Mr Ryan**—In terms of R&D overall, I think a lot of the questions would probably need to be directed to the Rural Industries R&D Corporation. They would have a better overview of not only the research they are supporting but also the research they are able to leverage out of a range of institutions such as CSIRO and the universities that also provide them money. They would have the best overview of the—

**CHAIR**—I understand all of that, but surely your department has some understanding of the need for research. If it has some understanding of research, it must have some understanding as to whether the research monetary level is significant to undertake the research required for the industry. I am sorry if I am being pedantic, but I have a very serious concern that there is a mindset within government departments that the status quo is ample, when, in reality, we are looking at possible incursion threats that are going to create a massive problem in a short period of time, and then there is going to be a scream from the departments and the industry: 'We need more money. We haven't got the research. We can't keep up with this process.' I am trying to pre-empt a process, through this inquiry, where we are able to stimulate interest in the government, in the supporting agencies and in the industry itself to understand that we need to put in more money to do some forward planning and be prepared for any incursion that is likely to come.

We have some pretty nasty things sitting out there offshore ready to move in. When they move in here, it is only going to be a matter of three or four years before we start feeling the impact of

it. The first bees to disappear are going to be your feral honey bees. Then the mites, or whatever parasite gets in here, are going to start impacting on the hive bees. Then you will have a massive problem flowing out into the community which is going to affect our agricultural and horticultural industry dramatically.

That is why I am asking the questions. I am sorry if I sound a little bit aggro about it, but it is frustrating from our point of view when we are trying to get some unsolicited information from people and they are not prepared to go over the boundaries because they are worried about an incursion into another department's area, if I can use that word.

**Dr Biddle**—Could I make some comments about the CRC process. You rightly identified it as an avenue for increasing industry relevant research. There are a number of models for CRCs, a variety of models. Some of them involve direct government participation. I am aware that this department participates in some CRCs for different industry sectors. Its usual participation is in the form of contributions in kind, with expertise and so forth, to the overall programs and priorities that the CRC might be established for. Certainly, it is true to say that, if a CRC were to be agreed for the honey bee industry—and I am not aware of any concrete decision; I have seen some material suggesting that this might be an avenue to pursue, but no decisions have been taken that I am aware of—and if that were to be pursued, it would certainly enhance the amount of research that is able to be done. Presumably it would be research which the industry views as a key priority for its needs and which would supplement the work that is able to be done by the R&D corporation process and the other areas of universities and so forth that would do some research of relevance to the industry. I think your thesis is quite correct: a CRC would boost. If the R&D—

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Dr Biddle. One of the concerns that I have is about evidence we took, and you have made reference to it in your submission on page 20. It said:

The Eastern Creek Quarantine Station has been leased by AQIS since 2001 and the current lease is due to expire in 2010. There is a further five year option available to AQIS after 2010, but AQIS has been advised by the lessor that a further lease beyond 2015 will not be possible.

In light of these developments, AQIS is developing a range of alternatives for the future provision of post-entry quarantine facilities for consideration by the Australian Government. A meeting between AQIS and AHBIC was held in late 2006 and the views of AHBIC have been taken into consideration as part of this process.

That illustrates to me that there is a lot of short-term thinking going on, and it is a natural cycle that has occurred because of the time frame of the political cycle: three years in and three years out. What we should be doing as governments is starting to think like private enterprise and doing some forward planning 10 years or 20 years into the future, because these sorts of issues have the possibility of very serious implications for the country regardless of the political persuasion of the government of the day, and that is what I am concerned about. I am not a government person; I have come out of private industry, and I know that, unless we get information that allows us to make strong recommendations to government, whatever political persuasion it is—we have to extend our thinking out into the future rather than the political cycle of three years. That is the only reason I raise the issue.

**Mr FORREST**—I make out that, with the figure you mentioned and the contribution of government, plus these levies, we have got less than half a million dollars, \$500,000. It is just a pittance. It is insignificant, given the real value of this industry. You have ended up where I have started, so I will have to try and pursue it, I suppose. Are we going to hear subsequently from AQIS about this question, or is the department going to find out? The question is whether imported and exported are having the same standards of testing. You will respond to me on notice?

**Mr Lihne**—Yes.

**Mr FORREST**—I will wait for that.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—On the point you raised about the facility, what options are being considered at this stage for the facility? How far down the road are we on that?

**Mr Lihne**—When the government made the decision to divest itself of the quarantine stations and to lease them back, the lease arrangements had leasing options that ran for 15 years. We are about halfway through that leasing frame at the moment. We are currently looking at what the options are that can be put to government to see about alternative arrangements, or arrangements to ensure the continuation of access to those post-entry quarantine facilities in the long term, but at this stage there is no decision, so that is a matter for consideration by the government.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—Is there any thinking about incorporating such a quarantine facility in some larger research facility?

**Mr Lihne**—There are certainly quarantine facilities that are aligned with research facilities and other commercially based organisations for lower risk material. The real question is: can that be done for some of the higher risk material? You would have to say that, from the perspective of importing bees, it is not a very large level of activity. In the past two years we have had five applications for importation of bees, of which two permits were cancelled because they could not meet the requirements or they were coming from a source where concerns had been raised about the potential for importation of bees from those sources.

Two of the imports were found to have tracheal mites when they were brought in. Therefore the import was completely destroyed and no progeny was allowed out. Only one was successfully brought through the process. There is not an exceedingly large flow of genetic material coming into Australia in that sense, so there is a real issue about capacity to support that sort of facility from industry contributions or on a user-pays basis.

**Mr FORREST**—That is what you know about. You can walk in with it in your coat pocket. We have seen the mite over in—

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—You could bring in a bag of bees in your purse. I would like to ask about the National Sentinel Hive Program, the 2005 review, what the outcomes of that review were and how far down the road you are to implementing that.

**Dr Biddle**—Yes. That is an important issue. I want to amend slightly the opening statement that was made with regard to the involvement of Animal Health Australia with the Sentinel Hive Program. At this stage, the department is working with Animal Health Australia to draw up a business plan to ultimately station that surveillance program under the management of Animal Health Australia. We have not got past the business-planning process, so the program is still vested within the department.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—When do you expect that to be finalised? Do you have a time line on that?

**Dr Biddle**—In coming months. One of the issues is a cost-sharing model for the ongoing conduct of the program.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—Just take us through the features.

**Mr ADAMS**—Are there traps in ports?

**Dr Biddle**—Yes. There are 30-odd sentinel hives located near key ports. Not all ports are covered under the existing program, but there has been a risk assessment process to give priority to certain areas under the program. They are checked a number of times a year for evidence of ill thrift in the sentinel hives, and there is specific examination for mites and other agents of quarantine concern. In 2006, as our submission indicates, there were quite a number of examinations made without finding anything of quarantine concern, including the particular mites that are of great concern.

The program has grown up over the years with a lot of in-kind contributions by industry, giving their labour and time in many instances, and by state governments. In other words, there is a lot of soft money around the program. It is functional but relies on the goodwill of a number of players, including industry players. The costing given before of approximately a quarter of a million dollars is what the program on this present scale would look like when the in-kind contributions are costed, plus the real physical contributions for materials and laboratory time. All of those are added in. The scope of the present program is of that order of magnitude, but the actual expenditure is far less than that because much of the hard work is done through industry contributions.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—Are elements of that review designed to formalise these sorts of arrangements that have grown up over time to this point?

**Dr Biddle**—Yes.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—Is there an expectation that this particular program will be expanded?

**Dr Biddle**—I would describe it at this stage as consolidated and made sustainable with less reliance on the goodwill of individuals—specialist beekeepers, commercial beekeepers—who happen to be near ports and are prevailed upon to provide some services, so it is a more organised and formalised program of that sort of magnitude.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—Listening to you, I have come to the conclusion, given what is at stake here, that perhaps this program ought to be formalised more and funded properly to carry out its function. Is that a recommended outcome of the review? What is the review saying about this?

**Dr Biddle**—Yes, it is to move it on to a firmer business basis to ensure that the program operates at a reliable level into the future and we can be confident of the number of examinations done on each sentinel hive and that there is a proper process for siting hives, giving priority to the siting of hives, depending on external risk factors.

**Mr ADAMS**—Can we get a list of the tariffs against us in the world? So if we could get a list of tariffs on honey products.

**Mr Ryan**—Yes.

**Mr ADAMS**—Another question is about the outcome of the national environment code of conduct. Is that a written code of conduct?

**Ms Anderson**—Yes, it will be.

**Mr ADAMS**—Can we get a copy of it?

**Ms Anderson**—It has not yet been produced. The project is due to conclude in about August.

**Mr ADAMS**—So that was the action plan that was taken to the industry?

**Ms Anderson**—Yes, that is right.

**Mr ADAMS**—So we could get a copy of that in August?

**Ms Anderson**—Yes. It will be public then, presuming the project winds up on time. It is currently scheduled for August.

**Mr ADAMS**—Is there a set of guidelines of what that is doing?

**Ms Anderson**—We could provide you with something in writing; that would probably be easier.

**Mr ADAMS**—That would be good, thank you.

**Mr FORREST**—Dr Biddle, as you are the acting chief veterinarian, it seems to me this issue concerns entomology, the study of bees. If one of my beekeepers wants new queens, he gets them sent to him in the post from Sydney. That is why I raised this question before about what we know about this. How do we know that bees are not being imported into the country? We know they can come through the post. In a little styrene container, there is the queen plus two drones, and they are sedated and can come in the mail.

**Mr Liehne**—Under the increased quarantine intervention program that is funded by government, 100 per cent of mail is X-rayed and inspected for quarantine material. Those sorts of things would be picked up. Indeed, there would be action taken through our compliance area to deal with the people who imported them.

**Mr FORREST**—I know it is highly illegal. But are you confident that we could detect them, given that they could come in in an ordinary envelope?

**Mr Liehne**—We use quite sophisticated screening at the mail centres to put all parcels through X-ray facilities, and anything of any concern is then diverted to AQIS, where it is opened and examined in some detail prior to release. If there is any quarantinable material at that point and if it is apparent that there is a deliberate attempt to bypass, then further investigation and action are taken.

**Mr ADAMS**—But this is quite legal, isn't it?

**Mr Liehne**—Yes, it is.

**Mr FORREST**—It has got a certification on the envelope as to domestic mail.

**Mr Liehne**—It is normal to transport bees in that manner domestically; it is about the international mail coming into the country, which is routinely screened in that way.

**CHAIR**—Take the phenomenon of bees leaving hives and not coming back. I had a phone call from a beekeeper in Victoria who told me that he had experienced this problem: the bees had left the hive, had not come back and had not gone into any other hives and he did not know where they had gone. I reported that to the minister's office, and I understand the department was doing some investigation of that process. Do you know anything about that at all?

**Mr Ryan**—No.

**CHAIR**—What do they call that?

**Dr Biddle**—Collapsing hive syndrome is a major concern overseas. There is no evidence of it being a problem or occurring in this country, but that is not to say that from time to time domesticated bees do not like their particular hive set-up or whatever and they just up and leave. When they desert their brood and so forth, that is very unusual behaviour. The proper course of action would be for the apiarist to contact his state agriculture department or primary industries department as they have access to expert apiary advice and, if necessary, could take samples for laboratory examination and other approaches. That is the normal approach. As for the particular case that you have mentioned, I have not heard of the details of any particular referral to our minister's office. This is a recent matter, presumably?

**CHAIR**—I do not know what the minister's office did in terms of advice to the grower, but I gave him the contact names and, indeed, phone numbers of people to contact.

**Dr Biddle**—It may have been that the minister routed them back to a state agriculture department.

**CHAIR**—He could have done that. I will check with the minister. I just asked that as a general question. Given that the varroa mite is now in New Zealand, what are we doing in terms of some fairly vigilant monitoring of New Zealand?

**Mr Lihne**—The issue for us is really about looking at the risk and the pathways through which it may come to Australia. There is the sentinel hive program that has already been discussed. All ships, yachts et cetera coming into Australia are inspected. Generally around the ports, port staff are aware that bees are a concern and therefore they would normally report activity of that sort to AQIS and an appropriate survey would be undertaken to deal with that.

In terms of direct imports of bees, there is the mechanism by which they are imported. As you rightly pointed out, normally they would come in as the queen and a small number of attendants. The process that is applied in AQIS to manage those imports is that the queen and the attendants would be examined microscopically, the queen would be separated and put into a cage and introduced to some new attendant bees drawn from a clean hive that was maintained by AQIS while the worker bees would be destroyed and then dissected and examined in detail for the presence of any mites or other diseases. After a period in quarantine of some months with the new clean attendant bees, the queen would again be separated and put into a starter hive to produce larvae. The former small group of attendant bees would again be destroyed, dissected and examined to see if there were any pests or diseases associated with them. The queen would then be allowed to produce brood larvae and we would then get a person or a specialist to come in and remove the larvae and put them into graft cells, which would then be removed from quarantine and introduced to a normal hive. The imported queen bee, all the attendant bees and the starter hive that had been set up within quarantine would then be destroyed. There is a stepped process to check at each step of the way to make sure that there are no pests or diseases associated with it. In fact, none of the animals from the original importation actually make it out of quarantine.

**CHAIR**—Thank you; that is very helpful.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—As for the National Sentinel Hive Program, obviously, if this business plan that you are developing is going to be adopted, it will require some degree of cooperation between a lot of players, restitution and funding and will involve AHA, the industry and state and territory governments. What happens if you do not get it?

**Dr Biddle**—We still have a program that is functioning now but, as I said, we wanted to put it on a more sustainable basis. There has been a lot of goodwill up to the present, and I cannot see that that is dissolving. If anything, the importance of the issue is gaining momentum. I am confident we will get across the line. With the model I mentioned before there is the issue of cost sharing for this program into the future. At this stage it involves in-kind contributions by many players and some moneys from government. Even on that aspect, I think the parties involved will see the necessity of the program and the benefits it offers and will be willing participants.

**Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR**—I think the committee would see the benefits in this and, obviously, if such a recommendation were to come from this committee it would lend some weight to that.

**Dr Biddle**—I am sure that any recommendation that this committee would make would be carefully studied.

**Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR**—Thank you very much, Dr Biddle. Chair, I would just make the comment, for the benefit of the people who are assembled here, that there are a lot of b’s in the political arena as well. We might want to study some of them.

**Mr FORREST**—Present company excluded!

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Gavan. I thank members of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for their attendance here today. If there are any matters on which we might need additional information, the committee secretary will write to you. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make editorial corrections.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Forrest**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 6.27 pm**