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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND  
FORESTRY

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

WEDNESDAY, 15 AUGUST 2007

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY**

**Wednesday, 15 August 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 Schultz, Mr Secker, Mrs Mirabella and Mr Windsor

**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**

**FEWSTER, Mr Stephen John, Chair, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council ..... 1**

**GELL, Mr Kenneth, Member, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council; and President, Federal  
Council of Australian Apiarists Association ..... 1**

**WARE, Mr Stephen, Executive Director, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council..... 1**



**Committee met at 5.06 pm****FEWSTER, Mr Stephen John, Chair, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council****GELL, Mr Kenneth, Member, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council; and President, Federal Council of Australian Apiarists Association****WARE, Mr Stephen, Executive Director, Australian Honey Bee Industry Council**

**CHAIR (Mr Schultz)**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for its inquiry into the future development of the Australian honey bee industry. This is the fifth public hearing of this important inquiry. I welcome representatives of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council. 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 and 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 Australian Honey Bee Industry Council. Are there any corrections or amendments you would like to make to your submission?

**Mr Fewster**—No.

**CHAIR**—Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or some introductory remarks?

**Mr Fewster**—Thank you for the chance to make some key points from our submission. Some of the key areas out of our 22 recommendations that we would like to focus on are the biosecurity issues with the incursion of mites—not just the varroa mite but other mites as well—the access to resources that will affect our industry, research, pest and disease protection, productivity profitability, pollination research and the increased pollination demands that came out in the honey bee industry linkages workshop. The Eastern Creek Quarantine Station is something else we would like to mention. Diversification of our industry through medicinal honey, packaged bees and paid pollination are some of the other key areas we want to talk about.

**Mr Gell**—I would like to apologise on behalf of the FCAAA, the Federal Council of Australian Apiarists Association. During the past 12 months there has been a bit of an upheaval in our association and I have just taken on the position. I would like to convey that we support AHBIC's submission as well as the Victorian submission. On recommendation 16 of the AHBIC submission we would like to include that Australian honey standards also be brought on line as in the Victorian submission.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I am interested that in the submission you point to potential growth in the market differentiation from other spreads as being the health qualities of honey. I suppose we can divide those into the ingesting of honey—eating it—but also using it for other medicinal purposes. There was some research undertaken between the RIRDC and Capilano. Is that research available?

**Mr Ware**—Yes, it is.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—It is publicly available?

**Mr Ware**—Yes, I believe so. Any research that is funded by RIRDC is publicly available and either it would be on their website or they could supply it. That is in relation to research that has been funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, but other research that Capilano would have funded in their own right—

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Funded by whom?

**Mr Ware**—By Capilano itself.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I can understand that if it is private research, obviously. But was this research undertaken between the two together?

**Mr Ware**—Yes. It was an original project that was jointly funded by RIRDC and Capilano, and that is publicly available. It led to the registration of Medihoney as a pharmaceutical product.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—We have received some anecdotal information from some honey bee growers that they do not have access to this research. That is why I asked.

**Mr Ware**—I think medicinal purposes and claiming to have medicinal purposes is an issue in itself. What is happening is that RIRDC is currently funding a proposal whereby we are trying to sample all the honeys in Australia to find out which ones are medicinal and which ones are not. Then there is also an issue of measuring the antimicrobial activity of honeys. If you go into a shop and you see people claiming it has plus-12, plus-17 or plus all sorts of numbers, whether these mean anything is arguable. There is no agreed testing mechanism by which you can measure the antimicrobial levels. Certainly, though, in relation to Medihoney, it has gone through all the hoops and has been registered as a pharmaceutical product. It has passed the test, so it can be used in hospitals and wherever. Capilano, until recently, has been spending a large amount of money registering that product in Europe and in the United States to be used for medical purposes.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—What do you mean by ‘registering’ it?

**Mr Ware**—It is the same as the way in which it is registered as a pharmaceutical product here.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So it is registered by the US equivalent of the TGA.

**Mr Ware**—Yes, by the FDA—the US equivalent—and the European equivalent. All that has cost a lot of money. Capilano have sold their Medihoney division now. They were spending enormous amounts on supporting the development of that product and so have on-sold that division to a New Zealand company and have held onto some residual shares and supplier agreements.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So all the research other than that which was privately funded by Capilano is publicly available for use by other growers?

**Mr Ware**—Yes, it is.

**Mr Fewster**—And there is some research being done by the University of Sydney into honeys around Australia which I do not think is complete yet, but that will be available soon.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Is that the only other research that we know of—the additional research being conducted by Sydney university?

**Mr Fewster**—That is all I am aware of.

**Mr Ware**—That is all we are aware of, and that is one of the issues that we have raised in our submission. In our R&D funding, we raise about \$250,000 or \$300,000 and we get matching government funding, so in any given year we have \$500,000 to throw at R&D. The area of Medihoney has tremendous potential, but as a small industry we cannot afford to keep throwing money at that alone.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Is there anyone else other than Capilano—any other significant group of growers—that has investigated developing Medihoney?

**Mr Fewster**—Wescobee, the largest packer in Western Australia, has done some tests on jarrah honey and on red gum honey, as far as I know. It is their private research, I think.

**Mr WINDSOR**—Could you flesh out the concerns that you have about access to public lands, possible ramifications and what you would like to see this committee do in resource security matters.

**Mr Ware**—Resource access to beekeepers is incredibly important. We produce 60 per cent of the product from public lands and, in the majority of states, we have a good relationship with the state governments and continued access to those lands. In Queensland, however, we have found ourselves a political football in that the Queensland government have indicated that they would like us out of all the south-eastern forests by 2024. That is not based on any scientific argument. It is not based on recommendations by the government bureaucracy itself. It is based purely on political reasons—the green vote that the Queensland government wanted to hang on to. Certain green groups up there said, ‘We want you out of those forests, so you have to move.’ The timetable was set based on it being far enough away that somebody hopefully will change it before the time we get to it. If we do not have access to those resource areas in Queensland, then beekeepers in Queensland are going to be in trouble.

We have been given promises by the Queensland government that there are going to be alternate resources found for us. These have not eventuated and, given that we have been trying to find new resource areas since the settlement of the state up there, if they were there we would have found them by now. Various committees have been set up by the Queensland government to find these additional resources. At one stage we were not even invited to attend the committee meetings or told who was on the committee, so there has certainly been an element of secrecy about the way those committees went about finding these new resources. Then we were told that new plantations of forestry were going to help us with additional resource reserves, but most forestry operations end up felling the trees before they start flowering, which we pointed out to them. We have not heard much from them since then. On the issue of resource security, we have

said to the Queensland government—if anybody would listen—‘This is just ridiculous policy.’ We have been very afraid that the Queensland policy, made on irrational grounds, would suddenly catch on with other state governments and that from one end of the country to the other we would be thrown out, but we are pleased to say that this policy only appears to have caught on in Queensland, and other states have reassured us that we will continue to have resource access.

We have also taken it upon ourselves to display our environmental credentials and to prove that these have a small environmental footprint by developing a national code of practice. We eventually want to push on and develop an environmental management system, but everybody who we have spoken to who understands the science says, ‘Your environmental footprint is so small. Why would you bother?’ An auxiliary of this is that it is rather ironic that the very trees in Queensland that we are now told that we cannot utilise are the ones about which we said to the then Bjelke-Petersen government, ‘Don’t cut these trees down.’ We were the ones who saved the trees from being logged in the first instance. We have been at the forefront of green politics in a real sense and we are bitterly disappointed with the attitude of the Queensland government, to be honest.

**Mr Fewster**—I will add to that. Stephen was saying that 60 per cent of our honey is produced on public lands, but a lot of the land is used to build up bees for pollination and that sort of thing rather than just to produce honey. In Western Australia in all our wintering sites, while we get no honey production we get small amounts of pollen and honey to keep them alive and build them up ready for pollination services that might come our way.

**CHAIR**—You will be interested to know that we took evidence in Brisbane last Friday and the Queensland government elected not to turn up to defend their position or to give evidence. I think that that is an indication of why you are concerned about the action that they have taken. We also heard that, contrary to what you said, 70 per cent of the honey that is produced in Queensland comes out of crown lands.

**Mr Fewster**—I think it varies from state to state, but the average would be around 60 to 70 per cent.

**Mr Gell**—In Victoria, the national park policy in their regulations is that there will be no commercial activity, even though they say that beekeepers are still able to keep bees in national parks—there is a clause in there saying that there will be no commercial activity.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Perhaps they think you can do it just for charitable reasons.

**Mr WINDSOR**—In terms of priorities, what are the two most important issues that you would like to see this committee do something about?

**Mr Fewster**—Biosecurity: we are the only country in the world that has not got these mites. If we can do something to keep it that way, we can supply the rest of the world with bees—if they find something to get rid of the mites.

**Mr Ware**—The other issue relates to research and development. Clearly, the amount that we are putting into research is looking rather thin. We now have this workshop at which we are

trying to build alliances with industries—the almond industry and those that are dependent on bees—to work forward a plan to put more money into research and development. We need to develop a mechanism to be able to do that. Clearly, it is a federal issue. We cannot set up a cooperative research centre because we are not big enough. We need to find a hybrid that lies in between what the existing function is and bringing these other industries in under an umbrella to get some more research and development. It has happened in the United States and is happening in New Zealand, and the almond industry have pointed out that they are going to go right under and are going to be in big trouble if these mites enter the country and there is no fallback plan or no research and development. The amount of money that we are spending is minuscule. We cannot even feed our existing researchers—and we have not got that many—to look into new projects. The issue of Medihoney was mentioned. There is enormous upside in research projects that we could put in if we had the money. The community as a whole would benefit from it.

**Mr WINDSOR**—There is some discussion in the document about the role of the supermarkets in the domestic market. Could you elaborate on that.

**Mr Ware**—Our experience with the two supermarkets has not been a pleasant one. We acknowledge the fact that we have got two supermarkets that dominate. We have got to sell our product through the supermarkets. The introduction of internet bidding systems and the like has basically driven money out of the industry into the hands of the supermarkets. For example, in the last round of contracts, we lost about \$7 or \$8 million just out of this internet bidding system. Anybody can bid on the system but whether or not they can supply the product is arguable. The price gets driven down to such a level that people take the contract and that money simply gets transferred over to the supermarkets, because we do not see it as a larger corresponding fall in prices at the supermarkets. Usually they fall by very little, so the margin that we had ends up in the hands of the supermarkets. In the longer term, it is not a very good thing for Australia in that we are going to become even more dependent on overseas food supplies. That would be fine—we are all happier in a competitive market; the problem is that in the honey industry we have spent a great deal of money setting up a quality assurance system to make sure that the food we put on people's plates is safe. One of our competitor countries—China—has had all sorts of problems. Anybody can go out and import Chinese honey into Australia and put in onto the supermarket shelf regardless of the food safety concerns. We have had a couple of instances with imported honey where there have been residues in them. Regarding the supermarkets, we are somewhat concerned that, if they keep squeezing people's margins, in the longer term all they will end up doing is driving the local producers out.

**Mr SECKER**—Why would the Greens be opposed to the bee industry, which is only going to enhance the pollination of native species?

**Mr Ware**—There are a couple of arguments. The precautionary principle is the main one. It is very hard to argue against the precautionary principle. There is no scientific evidence. Bees are an introduced species—the European honey bee came out in 1822. They are saying, 'It wasn't here to start with so—even though it's been here for 100-odd years and even though we can't find any research that says that it's a problem—you're out of there just in case.'

**Mr SECKER**—That is the favourite weapon of the Greens, by the way.

**Mr Ware**—We are on a hiding to nothing, because we have gone about researching this. We have paid researchers to go and look at the problems. We have said to the national parks people: ‘If you’ve got the evidence, we will move these out of sensitive areas, which might include areas in which you think there’s going to be a problem with additional seed set, perhaps, or something. If they’re sensitive, let’s put them off limits; we’ll move them; we’ll cooperate.’ But a lot of these areas we have been thrown out of in the south-east forests are forestry areas that were switched over to national parks. That is an absurd argument. We had a professor from the University of Melbourne come along and lecture public landholders about what he thought about the Victorian forests and how they had evolved over time. We have gone out of our way to produce the scientific arguments. When you get into this debate there is nothing other than this precautionary principle, and that is it.

**Mr SECKER**—What was the second reason?

**Mr Ware**—They have argued that bees have taken pollen away from native animals. They have used the example of the honey possum in Queensland. But we brought in a researcher who said that that was not the case. It was birds from Western Australia.

**Mr Fewster**—Yes. They had taken nesting hollows.

**Mr Ware**—Yes, they were nesting in the hollows. We proved that that was not the case. They are pretty long bows to draw, I can tell you.

**Mr SECKER**—Two of the problems that we are getting through quite clearly in this inquiry are the lack of funding for research and the biosecurity problems. We could easily spend \$50 million instead of the \$600,000 or \$700,000 a year that we are spending at the moment. What has your group done to get support funding from those industries that obviously rely on the bee industry? You are a secondary group, but are very important just the same. You have canola, lucerne seed, small seeds, almonds, horticulture—you name it. They rely very much on bees. If varroa mite gets into Australia, there are not going to be so many around. What have you done to try and get these groups involved and to perhaps pay their fair share?

**Mr Ware**—First of all, we held a little workshop. We wrote to them saying that we had these problems and brought them all here to Canberra. We brought a scientist from New Zealand and some experts from Australia and explained to them the effects that things were having. Pleasingly, the almond industry and a couple of other industries that had made a considerable commercial investment had also been to the United States and New Zealand, said that they realised that it was a problem and something had to be done now. In fact, at the end of that conference, the almond industry put their hand in their pocket and said: ‘We can’t wait any longer. We’ll sign a cheque now to push this further.’ We have established a steering committee to investigate this. We have brought in consultants to identify where the research is up to at the moment, future funding models that we could use to get additional money in and means by which these other industries can contribute. There is also the issue of equity and trying to get some of the industries to contribute, because some of them do not have levies. But we are trying and we have come a long way in educating them about the importance of this. The developments in New Zealand and the United States have made it a lot easier for us because we can point to the fact that we are sending \$2 million worth of live packaged bees out of this country to California to pollinate their crops. If we get any mites here, they are in big trouble.

**Mr Fewster**—I think one of the problems, because they have been receiving free pollination for so long, is just convincing the growers of the benefit of bees, which they have already had. Until they do not have them, they are not going to recognise it. But since that workshop they really have turned the corner, for sure.

**CHAIR**—In July this year Minister McGauran announced funding for the formation of a pollination industry alliance. What part has AHBIC played in the formation of that alliance, and where do you see that alliance going?

**Mr Ware**—That came out of the workshop, and we are part of the steering committee that is trying to develop those models. We are hoping that that will set the scene for long-term funding arrangements between the industries, and hopefully some agreement can be reached with the Commonwealth as to the long-term funding so that we can get some research done into some of these areas.

**CHAIR**—You obviously believe that there should be certain research priorities for the honey bee industry. What are they? What do you believe should be the priorities?

**Mr Ware**—We have listed a whole host of them, from the development of new products to the control of varroa. Our No. 1 fear is the introduction of the varroa and other mites into the country, because that would be devastating not only to us but also to the other industries that depend on us. There are avenues of research that we can see would be beneficial. It must be remembered that it was the CSIRO in Australia that actually discovered that *Varroa destructor*, the mite which has caused all the problems in the United States and New Zealand, was a separate species of mite. So the CSIRO in Australia led the way in research in this area, but they have one researcher who is about to retire and he spends 30 per cent of his time trying to find new funding sources to get his research going, which is an odd thing when he is the world expert and leader in this area.

**CHAIR**—Would you support the creation of a national centre for research, extension and training for the industry, and how do you believe that centre should be structured, funded and operated?

**Mr Ware**—The centre could be run in many ways. I guess it goes back to the amount of resources that you have and the best way you can utilise them. The centre itself, if it were a bricks and mortar type university, would be expensive and we do not think that is the way to go in the longer term. There was evidence to suggest before it was disbanded that something like the weed CRC was a way of getting more researchers online and delivering services better.

As to how it would be funded, one model that we would certainly look at is, leaving aside the existing funding that is in there, having a percentage of GDP that is dependent on pollination set as a target and allowing the other industry groups, irrespective of what they are putting into their current research, to also put extra money into pollination. That would be one way of ensuring that research dollars are aimed at areas where industries believe they should be spent because they have a vested interest in the research outcomes. You would have a means by which you could measure the effectiveness, because if the industries are putting in their own money then they are going to keep an eye on where the money is going to make sure that the research that comes out is effective.

**CHAIR**—The CSIRO, whom we have taken evidence from, has estimated that expenditure of up to \$50 million per annum could be justified on varroa research alone. If there were \$50 million to spend on honey bee related research, what would you recommend be done with it?

**Mr Ware**—If we had \$50 million!

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—You are shocked.

**Mr Ware**—Given that we have been going on \$500,000 a year, with \$50 million we would have a party to start with, just thinking about it.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—That is not a good start.

**Mr Ware**—No, that is not a good start.

**Mr Fewster**—No, that is probably not the right thing to say.

**Mr Ware**—Excuse that comment. That was not a serious comment—I am sorry.

**CHAIR**—I picked up that that was a light-hearted response from you, but it is quite evident from the evidence we have taken and the educational process that has been out in the public arena since we started this inquiry that people do not understand just how important the honey bee industry is. They think only about the honey; they do not think about the pollination process and what the honey bee industry does for the nation. The \$50 million per annum that came from CSIRO core research does not, to me, appear to be a significant figure in terms of what the honey bee industry actually delivers. Whilst it is a shock to you because you are used to only seeing \$350,000 to \$800,000 at the top end being available for research and development, do you think that is a realistic figure to provide for the areas of research and development, including a national research extension and training facility?

**Mr Ware**—Please do not get me wrong. We are more than aware of the importance of research and development. We know from the American studies that, for every dollar we and the community put into research and development, we are likely to get up to \$20 in benefit out of it. If you put that amount of money into research and development in the honey industry, I am sure that you would get that back twentyfold. There are an enormous number of areas where research dollars would make a lot of difference. The varroa mites are one area and medicinal honey is another. They are genuine commercial prospects. Even the *Economist*, two editions ago, mentioned the potential of honey for medicinal purposes and the fact that more research should be done. A respected magazine such as that is starting to talk about the importance of it. We have real golden staph problems in our hospitals. Honey has been shown to be one of the few things that can tackle golden staph. There are enormous commercial opportunities available. We know that we can do more work as far as the varroa are concerned. That would be of benefit to not only us but the Americans and New Zealanders. We know that we can be more efficient in the way we deliver pollination services. The small trials that we have done on broadacre agriculture crops show that we can lift yields by large incremental amounts so that those agricultural sectors can get the benefit of better and improved pollination services.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I want to go back to my queries about medicinal honey. You said in your submission that not all jellybush trees can be used to produce medicinal honey. Is that information only from the RIRDC research or has there been additional research? Where did that comment come from?

**Mr Ware**—To produce Medihoney, we tested microbial activities. We found over time that whether a jellybush has any microbial activity depends on where it is grown.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So it is dependent not on the variety of jellybush trees but on where they are grown?

**Mr Ware**—It is both. There are some members of the family that produce natural antibiotics and some that do not.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Where are some of the best places to grow it?

**Mr Fewster**—I think Queensland is the best. I think it has the highest activity.

**Mr Ware**—And then there is the jarrah honey, which has a different activity. Up until now we have not known which honeys are natural antibiotics and which are not. The current research project with Dr Shona Blair at the University of Sydney has involved testing all the Australian honeys to find out which ones are active and which ones are not.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So which varieties of jellybush trees are? You told us that the ones in Queensland are the most productive. Which sort is that? Is there somewhere the committee can go to get some of this information?

**Mr Ware**—We can give you the information. There is no problem with that.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Would you mind following up with some additional information, thanks. I have a couple of other questions on an unrelated issue—

**Mr Gell**—It is probably a little bit like New Zealand Manuka. Not all of their Manuka is active. Some of it is. It just depends where it is grown. It is the same thing over here. It is exactly the same story with the leptospermum jellybush.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—You said in your submission that there are some moves to introduce the bumblebee from Tasmania to the mainland, particularly for the tomato industry. Has that got legs? Has that push progressed to any level that we should be concerned about?

**Mr Ware**—In the last letter we had from the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, he still had not made a decision. They had set up a committee of review to look at the whole issue—

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Who had?

**Mr Ware**—The federal government. There was an inquiry. In the economics of glasshouse growing of tomatoes, bumblebees are far more efficient. They lead to a substantial reduction in pollination costs for tomato growers.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Do they make the tomatoes taste any more like tomatoes than cardboard?

**Mr Ware**—I do not think that has any effect on taste. Right now, I think that most tomato growers are pollinating by hand. The introduction of the bumblebee would reduce the cost of pollination. That would be quite considerable in a large greenhouse. Our issue was not about the efficiency of bumblebees as pollinators; the problem was the threat of the bumblebees escaping into the wild and reproducing.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Sure, but have you as an industry written to Mr McGauran?

**Mr Ware**—Not only Mr McGauran but the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources—

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Mr Turnbull?

**Mr Ware**—Yes.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Are you waiting for responses from both of them?

**Mr Ware**—Yes.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—In those letters, did you request that they not grant permission?

**Mr Ware**—That is correct.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Chair, perhaps we can follow up on those responses and, depending on the committee's view, look at supporting that.

**Mr Fewster**—I think the bumblebees are vectors for mites as well. One concern is that the mites will survive on the bumblebees.

**CHAIR**—You might give us a little bit of further information—

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—Or give us copies of your letters.

**Mr Ware**—Yes.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—The other question I had was regarding organic labelling. You made the brief comment that there is really no standard or security for what is labelled as organic. Have there been any particular experiences or examples that you can expand on?

**Mr Ware**—If you look at our submission you will see that not only us but the ACCC have made mention of this. It is one of the biggest areas of complaint that they have received, to the extent that they put out a press release saying, ‘There may be no domestic standards but you are certainly misleading people if you keep claiming that these things are organic when they’re not.’

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—What is organic honey as opposed to non-organic honey?

**Mr Ware**—Organic honey is produced by the organic standards, which were developed through the various bodies that are recognised by AQIS under the Export Control Act. When we export organic honey, AQIS agrees that it is produced under certain conditions under an agreed method of production. For instance, if it is produced in a pristine forest area where there is no farm land or other land where chemicals are used, you can label it ‘organic’. The problem is that there are no domestic standards, so people are saying, ‘Oh, well, if there are no domestic standards, we can call anything organic and put it in the shop.’ The ACCC said, ‘That is a bit misleading.’ When we spoke to them, they wanted to write to Food Standards Australia New Zealand and say, ‘Get on with this domestic standard.’ The problem is that Food Standards Australia then said, ‘We agree because people are complaining here as well’, and they wrote to Standards Australia and said, ‘Develop a standard.’ The organics industry thought that was a good idea too, except then Standards Australia said: ‘Hang on. These organic things are a philosophy and an ideology apart from being a standard, and they are not actually standards as such. They are a means of production.’ So I understand that Standards Australia was having second thoughts as to whether they could put their name to it.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—I do not understand. Are you saying that, separate to the objective standard for exportable honey being described as organic, domestically there is a difficulty reaching some acceptable standard because there is no objectivity, that there is some philosophy attached to it? What, do they make the honey more lovingly or what?

**Mr Fewster**—I think all Australian honey should be organic. It is all produced in some pretty pristine forests.

**Mr Gell**—I am afraid that ‘organic’ does not sit too well with a lot of beekeepers.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—That is why I am trying to understand.

**Mr Ware**—The organic movement and the organic standards that Australia adopted basically came straight out of the European standards. It really is a tool in marketing—dare I say it. There is no difference between organic and other honey, in my opinion. But if the consumer wants organic honey and we have a definition of what organic honey is then he should be able to buy it. That is our belief. So some of the standards in the organic production system were based on European standards which were not Australian standards but we agreed to them because that is where our export markets were. So testing the soil types and things like that, which was an issue in England after World War II because they had turned so much of the countryside into ammunition dumps, really was not an issue here. So when you sit down and say, ‘If we want to develop an organic standard, what does the consumer want?’ Then you start running into these philosophical questions as to how the honey should be produced, what you can do with the queen bees and the distance your area has to be away from farmland and so on.

**Mrs MIRABELLA**—So with these different issues over which there is significant dispute with regard to organic classification, what about the queen bees? What is the issue there?

**Mr Fewster**—They have to be bred naturally, the wings are not allowed to be clipped, but I am not really sure about anything else.

**Mr Gell**—They are really just a couple of silly little items which have no bearing on the quality of the honey that comes out of the hive.

**Mr Ware**—But what we have said is that if the organic movement—if we call it a movement and I suspect it is a movement—and AQIS are all in favour of having a domestic standard, and as well the ACCC and Food Standards Australia are happy to have a domestic standard, then it means the consumer gets more information and it is a level playing field. If producers want to produce organic honey under those conditions let them do it, and if the consumer wants to buy it then so be it. But the current situation is a bit of a dog's breakfast, so it would be better to be resolved rather than to continue in the way it is.

**CHAIR**—I have some questions going back to resource security. But first it has been agreed that the committee continue the hearing as a subcommittee. With careful management would it be possible in the long term for the honey bee industry to survive without access to public land?

**Mr Fewster**—No.

**Mr Gell**—No.

**CHAIR**—Setting aside access issues, do we currently have sufficient floral reserves to allow for a significant expansion of the honey bee industry for the purpose of managed pollination?

**Mr Fewster**—You could expand a bit but—

**CHAIR**—What you are saying is that there is the possibility, given the access issues, of a very real risk—and I am not trying to put words into your mouth, I am just trying to interpret what you are saying—that there are insufficient reserves available to assist the industry to continue the level of pollination that is occurring today?

**Mr Gell**—That certainly is the case in Victoria. All our resources are either tied up or the beekeepers are holding their licences, which allows no-one else to get them, so there are no extra resources out there for the industry to expand into country that could be opened to the industry.

**CHAIR**—Given the very significant impact of the legislation introduced by the Queensland government that locks the industry out of national parks and state forests and given that in many instances in Queensland, as I understand it, there are significant pastures and other crops surrounding public lands, do you see that ban having some marked impact in the long term on the yield levels of those agricultural and horticultural flowering processes?

**Mr Fewster**—Those pastures only yield honey for about two or three months of the year, so the rest of the year you have nothing.

**CHAIR**—How significant is the environmental management problem of bee swarms escaping managed hives?

**Mr Gell**—I believe that it is not significant at all, because it is to the benefit of the beekeeper in the long run not to have his bees swarm; otherwise, he is left with no bees in his hive to collect honey. I think that it is a minuscule obstruction.

**Mr Fewster**—Well-managed hives do not swarm, generally. Good managers will keep on top of them. The main swarms are ones that are already out there. Wild bees will swarm. That is a tendency they have in their breeding, whereas we try to breed that out of them.

**CHAIR**—It would appear from the evidence that we have taken so far that state governments looking to restrict the honey bee industry access to national parks and public land is short-sighted and is centred around environmental issues that do not have science attached to them, which you have elaborated on today. Has anybody in the industry sought some information from governments of any political persuasion in the process of locking public lands and national parks on what damage firestorms have done to the environment and how that compares to the alleged damage done by honey bees?

**Mr Gell**—They claim that that is a natural phenomenon and so does not count. We get that thrown at us all the time. We say, ‘What about bushfires that have occurred?’ They say, ‘They are a natural phenomenon. What you are doing is bringing in an exotic insect and we have control over that but we do not have control over a fire.’

**CHAIR**—Is it true to say, because of the unique Australian flora right across this country from state to state—some states not having the flora that other states have—that you as a honey bee industry have the potential to continue to supply honey with a taste that is not available anywhere else in the world? I am saying that you have a niche market that you can address because of the wide cross-sectional variety of native flora, leaving aside the other naturally available pollination processes that give you honey. Do you think that is an argument that governments at all levels should take on board in terms of what appears to be a short-sighted attitude that you make a low level of contribution overall to the economy of this country with a \$60 million industry and a blinkered lack of knowledge about the direct and indirect benefits that you give to the economy of this country through the pollination process? I ask that question because it is quite obvious to this committee that our exposure to what pollination from bees does has generated a significant amount of interest in the country, with a realisation from most people that we talked to that they did not really think about that process of beekeeping.

**Mr Fewster**—We have some of the cleanest, greenest honey in the world, with the most unique flavours, but I think our marketers have not marketed it properly and so we do not get any advantage from it. We do not use chemicals like other countries do when treating mites and so on. For some reason, we have had no benefit from it.

**Mr Gell**—It is possibly because we are so small in the world market. But there is no reason we could not have a niche market. Overall, we are just a drop in the ocean as far as the honey that is supplied to the world market.

**Mr Ware**—In fairness to the industry, there are approximately 2,000 full-time commercial beekeepers and we have managed to export honey to 30 countries in the world. We have a growing market share in the European Union. We are out there getting markets. Two years ago, Australian honey was voted the best in the world out of 110 countries. So there is a tremendous upside and there are tremendous opportunities. The industry, to some extent, does not want government handouts; it just wants government to sometimes stay out of the way, which is what the Queensland government appears not to want to do. What they have done is just a shabby political trick, to be quite honest. They have pushed the timeline so far out that no-one is going to worry about it while the current generation of politicians gets over the next election. They are saying, ‘Don’t worry about it because it is not tomorrow.’ It is populism at its worst.

**CHAIR**—Governments have a tendency to think about the government cycle, which is three or four years, and not the ramifications of some of the decisions they make. The point that you made about exporting to so many countries is centred around a point I made about the unique and clean honey that we produce in this country. I recently hosted a number of German politicians and talked to them about honey bees. They told me that they do not have as many honey bees as in Australia. I said, ‘That is one of the reasons why you blokes are always envious of how productive we are in this country, because we have a lot of honey bees in this country and that makes our farmers efficient.’ They freely admitted that their yields were not as great as ours and that they did not think of pollination as a process that makes our production a little bit higher than theirs. I would just make that point for what it is worth.

Thank you very much for your evidence today. I do not know whether it is the cuteness of the honey bee itself or the fact that ladies like honey bees because they give them the lovely flowers that us males give to them from time to time or that honey bees have a sexy image, but, in any case, we have taken some pretty significant evidence in this inquiry. If nothing else, I think that, through this inquiry, we are making people sit up and take notice of your industry, which, in our ignorance, in the view of the committee members, has been ignored for far too long. The possible incursion of the varroa mite and other parasites and insects into this country has the potential to hit us very hard economically.

We thank you as members of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council for your attendance here today. If there are any matters on which we might need additional information, the secretary will write to you. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make editorial corrections. I take the opportunity to thank the secretariat staff for their due diligence in making sure that we were well-briefed coming into this inquiry and I thank Hansard for their patience and professional attitude in making sure that the evidence that we take is recorded in a very professional way.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Mirabella**):

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 6.01 pm**