

Growcom submission to

Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport

Inquiry into the science underpinning the inability to eradicate the Asian honeybee (AHB), *Apis cerana*.

Introductory comments

Growcom is the peak body representing fruit and vegetable growers in Queensland. A second distinct role Growcom plays is the peak body and signatory to the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed for the pineapple industry. In this submission, Growcom's comments are made as the fruit and vegetable industry peak body. The pineapple industry has limited interest in this issue as it is not reliant on pollination from honey bees.

Growcom believes that the Asian honeybee (AHB) eradication program in Queensland should be reinstated and that sufficient funding should be allocated to the eradication program for at least a further 2 years. This position is consistent with other horticulture commodity groups and the Australian Honey Bee Industry Committee.

Growcom believes that the presence of Asian honeybees in Australia pose a number of unacceptable risks to horticultural and agricultural industries, the honey industry, Australian biodiversity and the public amenity and health of Australians.

Growcom's main concerns are with the potential impact of AHB on the pollination services provided by commercial bee hives to the horticulture industry. The Queensland fruit and vegetable industry is heavily reliant on the pollination services of honeybees. This service to agriculture is estimated to be valued at billions of dollars annually. AHB threatens these pollination services in two key ways: through direct competition for floral resources with European bees disrupting hive build up and through hosting a range of pests and diseases, most notably varroa mite.

Bee populations are declining world wide, but Australia has been relatively protected from many of the natural enemies and competitors of the European honeybee due to its isolation as an island nation and through the protective operations of our quarantine inspection services. Currently, Australia is the only honey-producing country in the world where the varroa mite is not present. Should AHB be allowed to become endemic in Australia, the impact on our bee keeping industries could be very high; it is estimated that 20 to 30 per cent of managed honeybee hives would die in the first wave of varroa infestation in Australia.

Biosecurity Queensland has managed an AHB eradication program in North Queensland since 2008. Currently AHB presence is limited to Cairns, Mareeba, Lake Eacham, and Innisfail. Most detections have been found in the city and port areas of Cairns, and immediately to the south of Cairns in the Gordonvale and Aloomba districts. Growcom understands that AHB is not as active during the wet season, so it could be argued that an increase in efforts over the wet season may be an opportunity to make significant

advances in its eradication. If this is the case, it could be particularly poor timing to allow the eradication program to cease at the end of March 2011.

Growcom believes that the risks associated with AHB are high enough to warrant an ongoing eradication program if there is even a small chance of success. A precedent has been set in the government resources committed to pursuing eradication of other exotic pests such as fire ants.

Fruit and vegetable industries have experienced severe impacts from recent natural disasters. Growcom is seeking commitment from federal and state governments and agricultural industry bodies to maintain the AHB eradication program to avoid further, unnecessary impacts on the horticulture sector and, indeed, on the security of our national food supply.

Growcom supports the recommendations of the honeybee industry, seeking:

1. Further funding to eradicate AHB in Cairns, Queensland
2. Increased research into honey bee pollination
3. Enhanced implementation of the 'More than Honey' Report – a bipartisan parliamentary report produced in 2008, suggesting the Federal Government could spend up to \$50 million a year assisting the industry through research and other measures to protect the Australian industry.
4. Continued resource access for honey bees for pollination purposes.

Growcom's comments regarding the science underpinning the assumption that it is not technically feasible to eradicate the Asian honeybee from Australia

While Growcom does not have the qualifications to comment on the science itself, it seems there are strong indications that the available scientific evidence could support a case either way; the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests was twice unable to reach a consensus on the feasibility of eradicating AHB.

Accordingly, Growcom believes that the AHB National Management Group's decision to cease the emergency eradication response program may have been pre-emptive.

Growcom sought the opinion of bee researcher, Dr Ben Oldroyd who acknowledged that while eradication would be technically very difficult and expensive, the AHB infestation has not spread as quickly as it could have and from a risk management perspective, it could be argued that eradication efforts could be justified

Growcom believes that if the science is not clear, then a cautious approach should be taken and the eradication program maintained while further research is conducted.

Growcom's comments regarding the science underpinning the assumption that the Asian honey bee will not spread throughout Australia

Growcom is concerned that the scientific evidence may be inadequate to support an assumption that AHB would not spread throughout Australia. Again, Growcom's position is that where the scientific evidence is incomplete or inconclusive, a cautious approach should be taken.

The Chair of the AHB Coordination Group acknowledged that there is inadequate science to fully determine where AHB may become endemic in Australia, saying that modelling suggested it may be restricted to tropical and coastal regions. Dr Denis Anderson has in turn provided an opinion that AHB possibly could spread to temperate regions, based on research of colonies now established in New Guinea (minutes of 15 March meeting of the AHB Coordination Group).

Growcom's comments regarding the science relating to the impacts of the spread of the Asian honey bee on biodiversity, pollination and the European honey bee

Scientific evidence of the viruses that may be carried by the AHB appears to be limited. Growcom is concerned, however, by comments from Dr Anderson that work in overseas AHB populations indicated they were carrying viruses not currently found in Australian or US European honey bee populations. It is thought this concern influenced a US decision to ban live bee exports from Australia to the US.

Personal communications at the recent teleconference for the Asian Honeybee Coordination Group on Tuesday 29th March noted that Plant Health Australia requested virus work be undertaken and that the request was made in March 2010 but was yet to be commenced. With the lack of data that this represents, we feel that lends further support to the notion that the decision to declare AHB as endemic is premature.

Researchers have indicated that the impact of feral bees on Australian biota remains unclear and further research is "clearly needed" (Oldroyd, 1998).

Estimates that AHB may only establish in tropical and coastal regions are of concern to Growcom as these areas are where our industries are largely located.

Growcom's comments regarding the cost benefit of eradication of the Asian honey bee

Horticulture is Queensland's second largest primary industry, worth more than \$2 billion per year and employing around 25 000 people. Pollination Australia has estimated that pollination services to the 35 most important honeybee dependent agricultural and horticultural crops could be valued at \$1.7 billion in 1999 - 2000. Pollination Australia has suggested that establishment of AHB populations in Australia could have devastating impacts on the horticulture industry. A precedent for significant public investment in an exotic pest eradication program has been set with the funds committed to Fire Ant eradication. Given the risks that AHB poses to the honey industry and the agriculture sector, Growcom believes that the cost-benefit of AHB eradication should be carefully considered.