

Written submission to the Hearing by the Rural Affairs and Transport References Committee, Thursday 24 March 2011

My name is Maxwell John Whitten; and I appear before the Committee as Chairman of The Wheen Foundation, a not-for-profit Company which supports research and development to improve profitability of beekeepers and pollination-dependent industries.

I have been an amateur beekeeper since 1957. During my term as Professor of Genetics at the University of Melbourne (1976-1981) I assisted the Federal Council of Australian Apiarist Associations prepare the successful case for the establishment of the Eastern Creek Honeybee Quarantine Facility which was commissioned in 1981. I served at the first Chairman of the Commonwealth Government's Honeybee R&D Council from 1985 until 1992. As Chief of the CSIRO Division of Entomology (1981 – 1995) I secured funding from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) to recruit Dr Denis Anderson to study the Asian Bee and its mites following their spread in to PNG in the 1980s. One element in the rationale in recruiting Dr Anderson was to accumulate scientific information to assist Australia deal with the Asian Bee and its mites should they enter our country. That time has arrived. I have served as an advisor to the beekeeping industry since 1978 and was a major trigger for the parliamentary inquiry which produced the report "*More than Honey*".

I would like to lodge the following written statement. And I would also like to table a copy of an Editorial Opinion by myself on the Asian bee published in The Canberra Times on 2 March 2011.

I believe the Government should listen to the scientific evidence, and reverse its decision to abandon attempts to eradicate the Asian Bee. Furthermore, every effort should be put into eradicating the incursion currently confined to the Cairns area. My reasons are as follows:

The European Honeybee, *Apis mellifera*, because of its critical role in crop pollination, is the most valuable insect ever imported to Australia. By contrast, the Asian Bee, *Apis cerana*, would be the worst exotic insect ever to establish in Australia. I would put it on a level with screwworm. We should leave no stone unturned in our efforts to eradicate this pest before its spreads; and before eradication is lost as an option.

Based on the spread of Asian Bee in PNG following its introduction from Papua in the 1980s, the evidence indicates that the Asian Bee is likely to spread across Australia wherever the European Honeybee is present. Claims that its distribution will stop in northern NSW are not supported by any evidence. Its aggressive robbing behaviour towards European Honeybee suggest the Asian Bee will displace wild colonies of the European Honeybee; and cause significant management problems for managed hives of European Honeybee. The implications for incidental pollination are uncertain but likely to be detrimental. Likewise, the added effort to managing hives for paid-pollination services will mean extra costs for commercial beekeepers.

The major threat to Australia with the initial spread of Asian Bee will be to biodiversity, human health and public amenity. Describing the Asian Bee as a cane-

toad with wings, or equating it to European Wasp as a public nuisance, are valid comparisons.

However, the real long term threat from allowing the Asian Bee to become endemic is that it will create the conditions for the entry of the bee mite, *Varroa jacobsoni*.

Future incursions of Asian Bees would inevitably go undetected; and would introduce varroa without our knowledge. Australia will be totally helpless to stop this happening.

Based on recent experience in PNG, Korea and Japan, we will be creating the conditions for a host switch of *Varroa jacobsoni* from the Asian Bee to the European Honeybee. At the same time we will continue to face the prospect of another devastating mite, *Varroa destructor*, entering Australia on a swarm of European Honeybee.

The prospect of Australia hosting both the Asian Bee, and either or both of the two varroa species, presents a situation where we will destroy commercial beekeeping in this country. Paid pollination services to crops like almonds, worth over \$180 million per year and heading towards \$500 million in the next five years, will cease. Crops worth over \$4 billion pa will be put at risk.

Thus, if we let the Asian Bee establish in Australia, we face a serious threat to food security, biodiversity conservation, human health and public amenity, and exports generally. I don't believe the gravity of the situation was taken fully into account when the field staff in Cairns were laid off in mid-November because funding, under the cost-sharing arrangement, had run out.

We should not repeat the quarantine fiasco of the Small Hive Beetle which entered Australia around 2001. This major pest has spread along the eastern seaboard of Australia and is now moving inland. The beetle was detected in sentinel hives and two separate apiaries on the outskirts of Richmond Air Force Base in 2001. For a year or so it had been wrongly identified as a harmless native 'pollen beetle'. During that year, the beetle was spread with legal hive movements from Richmond to the central coast of NSW and as far north as Beerwah on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. When it was finally recognised as the African Small Hive Beetle, its spread was so great that eradication was completely out of the question. Beekeepers have now to live with the scourge of Small Hive Beetle due to a failure of our quarantine system.

Likewise, once the Asian Bee spreads south to the Sunshine Coast and into NSW, and across the north to Western Australia, any prospects of eradication will have evaporated, regardless of the resources thrown at it.

When DAFF say that the Asian Bee is not eradicable, I believe that claim only has validity when you judge it against the meagre resources made available for an eradication program. If the Asian Bee is just regarded as a modest and localised pest – say restricted to tropical Australia - then the resources needed for effective eradication would not be justified.

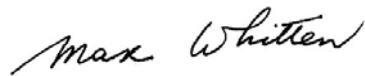
However, if we accept that the Asian Bee represents a very serious threat to food security, biodiversity, human health and public amenity, and exports generally, then the amount of resources required to mount a credible eradication campaign seem well justified.

We are talking about \$5m each year for two years to mount an effective eradication campaign – while the pest remains restricted to the wider Cairns region. A review after one year could assess progress before allocation of a second year's funding.

While the Asian Bee remains a Category 2 incursion, requiring 80% government and 20% industry contribution under the cost sharing arrangements, the decision to find the funding should not turn on the ability of one small affected industry – beekeeping – to provide the 20%. It is a Government responsibility to persuade the other affected industries, namely the pollination-dependent industries, to pay their way. It is not acceptable, for the wider public good, for the Government to walk about from eradication because support is not forthcoming from the disparate pollination-dependent industries.

An alternative option is to put the Asian Bee in Category 1 – **very high public benefit** – and therefore attracting 100% public funding.

In conclusion, let's find one way to eradicate the Asian Bee from around Cairns; and not deliver to the wider community and future generations a thousand excuses for why we dithered. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Max Whitten". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Max Whitten
Chairman, The Wheen Foundation
24 March 2011