



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture

Ref: 2014/12590E

Rick Wilson MP  
Chair  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Water Resources  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Wilson,

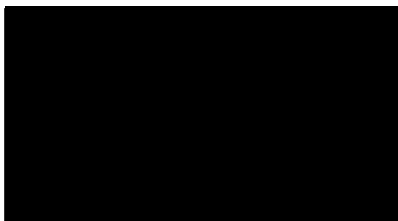
The purpose of this letter is to report on the status of the six recommendations contained within the House of Representatives report, *Safekeeping: Inquiry into the biosecurity of Australian Honey Bees*.

The department recognises the importance of healthy honey bees to our plant and honey production industries and is proactively engaged in honey bee biosecurity throughout Australia. The department remains actively engaged with State and Territory Governments and industry to ensure the effective implementation of activities across the biosecurity continuum. We are committed to protecting Australia's enviable freedom from the honey bee mite *Varroa destructor* (and the diseases for which it is a vector) as well as other exotic pest bee species that may compete with our healthy honey bee population.

The department's summary of the status of the six recommendations is enclosed (Attachment A).

I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Agriculture for the opportunity to improve honey bee biosecurity through our response to the report.

Yours sincerely



Dr Robyn Cleland  
Australian Chief Plant Protection Officer

6<sup>th</sup> September 2019

## ATTACHMENT A

### **Recommendation 1**

The Committee recommends that the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program implement, by 30 June 2017, the proposed enhanced Model 3 program, as outlined in the recent review and redesign. The appropriate proportion of funds should be provided by the relevant Commonwealth agencies involved in the program partnership.

#### STATUS: COMPLETE

The department's response to the *Review and Redesign of the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program* indicated full support for Model 2 implementation before moving to Model 3. Model 2 has been implemented since July 2017 and has led to surveillance at 10 extra sea and airports and other enhancements compared to previous surveillance arrangements. Model 2 was used as the basis for the agreed cost-shared program which will conclude in December 2021.

The Australian Government contributes to the program through matched R&D levy funds for Horticulture Innovation Australia Ltd. The department also provided \$587,757 to the program under the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper to implement the following enhancements: integration of bee virus testing into the program, improving Asian honey bee surveillance, developing standard operating procedures, establishing electronic data capture and management, improving remote catchbox technology, and piloting Asian hornet trapping.

Plant Health Australia will lead funding negotiations for the program after December 2021. This process is expected to reassess operational effectiveness, high risk locations and surveillance requirements.

### **Recommendation 2**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate the development of an easy to use smart phone application which may help members of the public to more easily contribute to eradication programs.

#### STATUS: COMPLETE

Plant Health Australia has been funded through an AgriFutures (formerly RIRDC) funded project to develop a bee pest identification application, called the BeeAware App which is expected to be completed in mid-2020. This App will include a reporting element, with bee pest and disease profiles (exotic and established), and a questionnaire to assist users in identification for particular pest and diseases.

In addition, the existing BeeAware website includes information on exotic and established bee pest and diseases and encourages reporting through the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government immediately initiate the necessary research and development that will allow the efficiency of the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program to be assessed, with a view to the development of any program refinements, adjustments or modifications. The rigorous statistical analysis of all methodologies should be the highest priority, with particular focus on the effectiveness or optimisation of standard and remote catch boxes. The research and analysis should aim to be completed by June 2018.

#### **STATUS: ONGOING**

As stated under recommendation 1, the department provided funding for a number of enhancements to the program. The areas for enhancement were identified through an earlier project funded by the department to investigate surveillance sensitivity and efficiency, and include activities to capture data and information needed to analyse surveillance methodologies (e.g. bee virus testing, remote catchbox improvements, floral mapping, surveillance operational protocol development etc).

In addition, the department's original response to the report indicated that appropriate mechanisms were in place to assess the effectiveness of the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program (e.g. the National Bee Biosecurity Steering Committee, response debriefs etc). These mechanisms are still in operation and were further tested and honed during a series of jurisdictional *Varroa* response scenario workshops ('Bee Prepared') conducted throughout 2018.

An operational review of the program is expected to be conducted in the first half of 2020. This process will include assessing research and development needs to address program limitations and constraints. The terms of reference for this review is expected to be presented to the National Bee Biosecurity Steering Committee at their meeting in November 2019.

The operational review as well as lessons learned through response scenario workshops and other mechanisms will be considered in defining surveillance requirements for the next phase of the program from December 2021.

### **Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government complete the analysis of pest bee risk ratings for the Australian ports that do not have such ratings. The assessment should include airports, and it should also include pre-embarkation inspections and processes at various ports. The assessment should be completed by the end of 2017 and a copy of the completed assessment provided to the Committee.

#### **STATUS: ONGOING**

A proposal for a new risk assessment of Australian ports stalled in 2017 due to resource limitations. A new project proposal for this work is currently under development in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Risk Analysis with an expected start date in late 2019. This work will conduct a new analysis of the ports covered by previous work published in 2013 and include additional ports not previously considered. Plant Health Australia have

expressed support for this work and are directly involved in defining a methodology and scope that will maximise benefit to the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program. This work will also consider accessibility of the model and ease of updating so that the risk ratings can be updated as the biosecurity risks and operating context changes. Upon completion the analysis will be published.

#### **Recommendation 5**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake a detailed analysis of the smuggling of bees into Australia. The analysis should include, but not be limited to, the total number of incidents, the percentage of incidents where pests were discovered, the potential for further incursions, and how to prevent, detect or combat such incidents. A copy of the analysis should be provided to the Committee upon completion.

#### **STATUS: COMPLETE**

The original departmental response to the report indicated that the Government has systems in place to allow the importation of queen bees and bee semen from specific overseas countries. The department responds to all reports of bee smuggling and has previously taken enforcement action where appropriate.

There have been two investigations into bee smuggling incidents, both which ended in no offense detected. There have also been three intelligence reports relating to bee smuggling which were all recorded for information only. This indicates that we have had no matters where pests were discovered.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with domestic and possibly international industry partners, initiate research and development into selective breeding of honey bees that are resistant to pests and diseases that may have a detrimental effect on the Australian honey bee industry.

#### **STATUS: ONGOING**

The department's original response to the report indicated that the Australian Government and industry jointly invest in honey bee research through the rural research and development system. Research and development levies on honey and pollination-dependent industries are supported by matching Commonwealth funding. Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited and AgriFutures (formerly RIRDC) in consultation with industry stakeholders determine research priorities and project funding in the interests of the honey bee and pollination-dependent industries respectively.

The department has worked with the honey bee industry to provide access to new genetic material (live queen bees and/or bee semen) for selective breeding. Industry has indicated that it believes current import conditions are overly restrictive and dialogue to resolve this is ongoing. Project MT18019 is in progress to 30 June 2021 through Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited and CSIRO as the research provider. This project will lay the groundwork to

allow the first importation of desirable honey bee germplasm into Australia, with a focus on sourcing genetic material from bees with a tolerance to *Varroa* mite and its associated viruses.

