

Disease-free bees make global impact

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Talking with owner-director of Australian Honey Products Lindsay Bourke about exporting bees. Owner-director of Australian Honey Products Lindsay Bourke examines a hive frame full of pillen while explaining the process of using the starter boxes for breeding queen bees.

TASMANIAN beekeepers have tapped into a new market of live bee exports to countries where pests have destroyed hives.

Earlier this year Tasmanian beekeepers, including Australian Honey Products at Sheffield, sent 14 pallettes of bees - 9.8 tonnes of live insects - to Canada.

Tasmania's season finished in February before Canada's season started, and many of the bees exported from Tasmania would have died anyway.

Each palette shipped this year had 500 1.4-kilogram packets, each with drones, workers and a queen.

North America's bee populations are currently affected by the varroa destructor mite, which carries the disease that kills entire hives.

Canada and the United States are picky about importing live bees, which benefits Tasmania's pest-free bee populations.

Biosecurity was important to maintaining the live export market, Tasmanian Beekeepers Association president Lindsay Bourke said.

Mr Bourke and wife Yeonsoon run their business, Australian Honey Products, at Sheffield.

They recently won the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation Small Business Award at the 2014 Tasmanian Export Awards.

The couple is not sure if the live bee exports helped with the latest award, but the business has won numerous awards for its various honey and hive products.

Live bee exports will increase after the end of the upcoming season, Mr Bourke said.

"The whole world needs bees," Mr Bourke said.

Each year as the seasons turn from summer to autumn, hives get rid of their male bees (drones).

Sometimes, the females bite the males' wings off and dumps them metres away.

Australian Honey Products' male bees would die anyway as Tasmania entered winter next year, so the new market for varroa mite-free bees was a smart move, Mr Bourke said.

It's a busy time of year for Tasmania's beekeepers, with drone breeding completed weeks ago and the process of breeding queens starting.

Soon they will take the queens to meet the males so new hives can start.

This week the Sheffield beekeepers were separating hives to breed queens.

Bees in the top part of hives could not see their queens, would panic, and produce new queens, Mr Bourke said.



Honey bee worker carrying a parasitic Varroa mite. THE AGE . news . SEPTEMBER 06, 2007 . image courtesy of ARS/USDA Scott Bauer . story by Chee Chee Leung .

"The bottom part of the hive (has a queen)," Mr Bourke said.

"We're making (the top half) think they don't have a queen any more."

When the new queens are nearly hatched, they will be put in new hives in time to meet the drones, which have already been hatched and have grown to a mature size.

Tasmania's climate means the state's beekeepers have a period of just two months for the bees to collect pollen.

Producers on the Mainland have up to 10 months, with some places in flower most of the year.

Tasmanian beekeepers can plan effectively for their busy period.

"If we do it correctly we'll produce as much honey (in two months) as they can on the Mainland in eight-to-10 months," Mr Bourke said.

Not having to deal with pests that plague the Mainland and other countries also helps.

The small hive beetle turns hives in Australia's eastern mainland states to slime, while the varroa mite has affected hives in other countries, including New Zealand.

Tasmania's exports of live bees would be in trouble if biosecurity across the Bass Strait was compromised, Mr Bourke said.

Hive beetles can survive in soil and if a shipping container arrived with dirt that contained hive beetles, the state could be at risk.

Mr Bourke said there was some wharf security and protections were stronger against diseased queen bees imported into Tasmania.

"Every queen that comes into the state is quarantined before it's released," Mr Bourke said.