Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs & Transport:

Submission to the Terms of References

Science Underpinning the Inability to Eradicate the Asian Honeybee

On behalf of: Capilano Honey Limited
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Introduction

Capilano Honey is the market leader of honey in Australia, packing premium quality honey produced by Australian beekeepers into retail and bulk products. Our company heritage spans over 58 years and generations of Australians have grown up with our trusted brand and quality honey. With global operations in Australia and Argentina, Capilano is now one of the largest honey packers in the world with a capacity to process and pack over 40,000 tonnes of honey per year. Capilano presently markets Australian honey to over 40 countries worldwide, with large markets in Asia, Nth America and the Middle East. Capilano is presently a public listed company on the Bendigo Stock Exchange.

Capilano's Australian honey is collected from the beehives of over 500 Australian beekeepers, who manage commercial beekeeping operations in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Between them they can produce more than 18,000 tonnes of honey and 250 tonnes of beeswax each year. To produce this honey, our beekeepers can travel more than 100,000 kms per year moving hives between various sites that are obtained from farmers, leased state forestry and rural lands protection boards.

It should be noted that Capilano is a financial contributor to Australian Honey Bee Industry Council (AHBIC) and that the Submission prepared by AHBIC to this enquiry is fully supported.

Response to the Terms of Reference

(a) the science underpinning the technical assumption that *Apis cerana*, the Asian honey bee, cannot be eradicated in Australia:

Capilano supports the Submissions provided by Dr Max Whitten (Retired CSIRO Entomologist) and Trevor Weatherhead (Chairman of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council's Pest & Diseases Committee) on the scientific deliverability of Asian honey bee eradication. Their position is supported by Capilano that eradication is deliverable.

The decision made to declare the Asian bee as endemic was made with little and inadequate consultation of honey bee science experts such as those stationed at CSIRO or within State and Territory Departments of Agriculture. Chief Veterinary Officers and the like have little exposure to the science and entomology associated with honey bees, especially when it comes down to the programs that could be employed to manage and control bee populations in an effort to eradicate. The ineradicable decision was based on personal opinion of State, Territory and Federal Government Officers rather than a robust consultation of evidence based scientific data. It has been perceived as a runaway incursion, however in fact industry representatives assisting eradication (many of whom are supplier shareholders of Capilano) were confident of the progress being made in Queensland by those involved.

Furthermore, the ineradicable decision is now Government policy, which is hindering expert advice that may be contrary to that provided to the Government by the Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry.

The data provided in eradication attempts is self-generating (ie. colonies located, age, size, bees in sweep nets etc.) and can be used to better decide on the feasibility of eradication. To determine this we need to reinstate the program on a large scale and review the data intelligently to predict the ability to eradicate. This information in a scientific format does not appear to have been documented and used to best establish a decision. In summary, it would seem that the decision not to eradicate was not made on the basis of sound review of scientific evidence both in the literature and from the field at the incursion site.

(b) the science underpinning the assumption that the Asian honey bee will not spread throughout Australia:

Capilano supports the Submissions provided by Dr Max Whitten (Retired CSIRO Entomologist) and Trevor Weatherhead (Chairman of Australian Honey Bee Industry Council Pest & Diseases Committee) on the scientific likelihood of the Asian honey bees spread throughout Australia.

Evidence from other countries whereby *Apis cerana* is endemic shows a widespread proliferation of the pest. Capilano encourages the Senate Committee to better consult Dr Denis Anderson from CSIRO who was first-hand experience at visualising the expansion of *Apis cerena* as it conquers lands overseas.

(c) the science relating to the impacts of the spread of the Asian honey bee on biodiversity, pollination and the European honey bee:

Capilano supports the Submissions provided by Dr Max Whitten (Retired CSIRO Entomologist) with respect to this Term of Reference.

Australia has witnessed significant impacts on the environment and biodiversity as a consequence of the incursion or release of exotic pests. Capilano questions the rationale behind exposing Australia to adverse risks to biodiversity, provision of current natural pollination services and possible negative influences on European honey bee sustainability that may arise from an endemic Asian bee proliferation. This is especially the case considering such a modest cost for eradication.

The Asian bee will actively compete for food resources and will predate existing European honey bee feral and managed hives, thus delivering a notable impact on their capacity to pollinate and survive in marginal environments. The Asian bee is prone to swarm and as nectar and pollen resources become readily available the reproduction of the Asian bee will be prolific.

Asian bees will naturally predate and threaten existing species of native bees, therefore threatening their extinction and further impacting on biodiversity and eco-systems.

(d) the cost benefit of eradication of the Asian honey bee:

The impact of an endemic Asian bee is concerning for business confidence in both the primary production and packing sectors. Industry has faced drought and honey price pressure arising from a greater Private Label retail market share and a high Australian dollar. The halt of business investment and development is ensuing as a result of the uncertain impact of the Asian bees on industry.

How does one put a price benefit on the conservation of existing biodiversity and the natural pollination eco-systems that operate under the existing Australian environment, whereby Asian bees are not endemic? There is an expectation of Government to protect biodiversity and the environment in the interests of public good. Denying a more scientifically based resourced attempt to eradicate Asian bees is not in the interests of continuing public good. Funding eradication is in the public good from not only from an environmental and biodiversity perspective but to support an industry that provides food security directly and indirectly, and which does not have the resources to respond independently to such an incursion.

The Asian bee establishes itself in small cavities and its density is therefore much higher, hence the impact on biodiversity and food competition is likely to be heightened when compared to existing European and native bees.

There have been 10 interceptions of Asian bees in Australia since 1995, with most incursions hosting the parasite Varroa. Two incursions were undetected at the point of entry, with the colony in Darwin destroyed before it could reproduce and the incursion in Cairns reproducing before detection. From this data, we can draw the conclusion that 10% of future arrivals of Asian bees will not be detected and will likely carry the dreaded Varroa mite. Asian bees provide a natural host for the most significant pest for honey bees the Varroa mite. The impact on managed bees and pollination that would result from the incursion and proliferation of Varroa is well documented and well understood by Government. The presence of Asian bees in Australia will provide a natural host for Varroa that will significantly decrease the capability of eradication attempts should a Varroa incursion occur. Varroa has single handily removed feral bees from native environments overseas and has deemed insect pollination impractical without the presence of managed bees, which are themselves threatened for survival by Varroa without chemical control.

Live bee exports now represent a notable source of income for the honey industry and the US has already suspended its live bee trade with Australia, which is valued at about $5 million a year, and we understand Canada is considering following suit. Such impacts put at risk beekeeping families and the employees they support in rural and regional Australia.

Existing resources of pollen and nectar will be under increased competition as the Asian bee establishes itself in native environments, evidence of this has been documented in Papua New Guinea where European bee honey production dropped considerably. This will have a direct impact on beekeeper yields in Australia. The nutritional health status of managed bees will be adversely affected, which will impact industry's abilities to gather honey and service paid pollination, such as almonds.

Beekeepers will need to modify existing beehives to ensure limited access to their honey and pollen stores in managed hives that will be under attack by robbing Asian bees.

Society will incur pest control expenses as they remove aggressive stinging nuisance colonies of Asian bees from small sheltered cavities in domestic environments not suitable for European bees. The risk of stinging will increase as will the associated medical expenses managing stings and allergies. The increased population of aggressive bees in urban environments will pose a greater threat to human life than currently posed by European and native bees.

The Australian honey industry has an enviable international reputation as being 'clean & green' that provides us with an unparalleled competitive advantage in export markets. This advantage is not replicated by any other continent due to their necessity to chemically control pests and diseases not endemic in Australian managed bees. The incursion of Asian bees and Small Hive Beetle threatens this competitive advantage and burdens industry with significantly higher husbandry management practices and applications of therapeutic chemical controls that may result in residues.

Conclusions

Government was ill advised that the Asian bee is ineradicable.

Federal, State & Territory decision makers considered limited data arising from the efficacy of field eradication work, nor was there a detailed consideration of scientific literature and expert advice from specialised bee experts.

Eradication attempts should be reinstated to better consider feasibility so that we can protect biodiversity, the environment eco-systems, human health and the economic security of food and the Australian honey industry.

The modest funding of an eradication attempt is justified.