



Jenni McLeod
The Bee Collective

23 August 2022

Submission to the Standing Committee's Inquiry on the Adequacy of Australia's Biosecurity Measures and Response Preparedness, in particular with respect to varroa mite.

On August 13 and 14, my [Sister Hives](#) co-founder and I successfully organised and implemented the 'Amazing Honey Festival'. This Festival was imagined in 2018 when we took two interstate beekeepers out to dinner to one of Hobart's Premiere restaurants. The food was mostly Tasmanian – except the honey. When we asked about the honey, we were presented with a squeeze bottle from an interstate provider.

In that moment we knew we could do more to elevate Tasmania's unique honey and our hardworking producers. The festival has allowed us to start a state-wide conversation about honey with the aim of making this conversation national. We included Australia's only Honey Sommelier, Jess Locarnini, to feature at our inaugural Festival to assist beekeepers and the public in describing honey and food pairings. The event culminated in a 4-course honey themed meal at Amaze restaurant, with 70+ guests.

This event was planned and executed against the backdrop of the varroa mite incursion in NSW.

All beekeepers have been watching with horror and dismay as this tragedy has unfolded. Many of us have been connecting with beekeepers online, over the phone, offering support to our local biosecurity teams, volunteering in the containment/eradication program and finding ways to offer our skillsets to try and stop the spread of varroa mite in Australia while keeping hope alive for the next generation of beekeepers. The stories coming back from the frontline have been heartbreaking and I have personally encouraged beekeepers to seek mental health referrals from their GPs.

Sanctioned Creep

The decision by the NSW government to allow a permit scheme for beekeepers to move hives within NSW is deeply concerning. Any movement in this eradication phase, whilst the incursion remains uncontained, risks new incursion zones, bringing the mite closer to areas that are not infected. Bees are livestock, but unlike other livestock they can't be fenced in and will forage within a 10 km radius for food. In other words, NSW has effectively sanctioned, slow creep towards other jurisdictions such as Victoria, SA, Queensland and Tasmania.

The [NZ experience](#) shows us how difficult varroa mite is to stop once it has a foothold and in fact this report recommends to Australia - "The difficulty of eradication warrants the approach of

emphasizing early detection coupled with a rapid integrated control scheme, being taken by the Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.”¹

Fipronil Baiting

Under this permit scheme, broadscale [fipronil](#) baiting is continuing in NSW. This is not selective killing of bees impacted with varroa mite - fipronil kills every insect that drinks from the poisoned sugar feeders and impacts further up the food chain. This will have downstream impacts on bio diversity with some species never having the capacity to recover.

Value Add

Until two months ago, Australia was one of the only places in the world free of Varroa mite. This resulted in our bee and honey products being highly sought after because they are free of the chemical contaminants overseas beekeepers use to manage mites. If the sanctioned creep of bees in NSW is continued and the mite is allowed to spread, Australia will no longer have a claim this value add for our industry. Not to mention the financial burden beekeepers would be forced to carry due to increased hive checks, monitoring and the cost of treatments for their hives.

Bee Loss

This is not just a simple ‘learn to live with it’ model that we have been asked to adopt with COVID 19. With a Varroa mite incursion, bee loss occurs on five different fronts:

- The initial incursion, with hives being burnt in situ as we are witnessing in NSW now.
- The ‘live with it’ phase of the incursion and loss of hives (in the US 30% of beehives were wiped out in the first year of the incursion and losses have [continued to rise](#), 90% of bees were initially lost in NZ)
- Loss of bees due to the varroa mite acting as a vector for other diseases such as [Deformed Wing Virus and Acute Bee Paralysis Virus](#)
- Over treatment of bees resulting in [acute toxic overload harming bees](#).
- Loss of pollination services in Australia, an industry [worth between \\$8.3 and \\$19.97bn](#)

These bee losses come at a significant cost to the beekeeper, pollination and honey industry with many operators never being able to recover.

Commodification of Bees

Bees underpin our economy, providing [one in three bites of the food we eat](#) delivering a valuable service to Agriculture as a whole and assisting the NSW government to [smash growth records in 2021](#). However, our existing industrialised farming models commodify bees. Bees are viewed as a means to an end rather than as an end in and of themselves. This is played out en-masse every August with the mass migration of bees from across Queensland and NSW to the almond orchards. [Bees are effectively asked to ‘go to war’](#) for an industry that this year, is overlaid with the risk of varroa mite super spreader event, sanctioned by the NSW government. It begs the question, just

¹ Iwasaki JM, Barratt BI, Lord JM, Mercer AR, Dickinson KJ. The New Zealand experience of varroa invasion highlights research opportunities for Australia. *Ambio*. 2015 Nov;44(7):694-704. doi: 10.1007/s13280-015-0679-z. Epub 2015 Jul 2. PMID: 26133152; PMCID: PMC4591231

how much sway did lobby groups and vested interests play in the government's decision to issue these permits? Were beekeepers considered in this decision? Were bees?

Too often bees are viewed by other industries as disposable and replaceable. They are not.

Cost of Living

[Inflation is creating headaches for consumers](#) and all levels of government. Prices keep rising while wage growth has stagnated, the effects of climate change is starting to be felt on supermarket shelves. People are struggling to pay for fruit and veggies, with recent news reports of [\\$7.00 lettuces](#) flagging a potential recession in Australia. If the sanctioned creep of varroa mite is continued, consumers will have a lot more to worry about than \$7.00 lettuces. There will be no berry or cherry season. Almonds and almond milk- gone. Apples will be difficult and expensive to source, not to mention, melons, cucumbers, pears, peaches... the list goes on. The current cost of living pressure will seem like a fond memory.

As a beekeeper it has been interesting to witness the Australian Government's response to the threat of Foot and Mouth Disease in Bali – a disease that has not reached Australian shores. Anecdotally, Bio-security staff have reported that every resource has been thrown at the threat - while the reality of varroa mite on our shores has had little support in states outside of NSW. It is a real time demonstration of how bees and pollination are not understood or valued as underpinning our economy.

My co-founder and I are already planning the next Honey Festival and we are aiming to make it bigger, engage more people, create more local business opportunities and provide more education openings for everyone. Witnessing this varroa mite incursion has made all of us acutely aware of how much we rely on the Australian Government to respond to bio- security threats in a way that is consistent and overarching. State based responses under a federated model fails all Australians as the system is too easily corrupted. My request to the Australian Government is to commit to Australian Beekeepers and ensure that varroa mite is eradicated, and that the current permit scheme to move bees in NSW ceases.

We never want to be showcasing honey from somewhere else, ever again.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Jenni McLeod

The Bee Collective

Lead petitioner – Save the Leatherwood change.org



FROM the backyards of
tasmanian beekeepers

