

Department of Primary Industries
Department of Regional NSW



BN22/6760
28 October 2022

Mr Gerry McInally
Committee Secretary
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee
The Senate, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite

Dear Mr McInally,

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify some key points raised regarding the ongoing eradication of Varroa mite in NSW, as discussed at the hearing into the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness of 12 October 2022.

As the committee is aware, NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) has been working to eradicate the parasite since it was first detected in biosecurity surveillance hives at the Port of Newcastle on 22 June 2022.

To protect the honeybee industry, we immediately launched an eradication plan which restricted movement of honeybee hives and equipment and involved the euthanasia of infected hives and all other hives within the eradication zones.

The eradication program is progressing well, with almost 90% of managed hives in eradication zones euthanised (as of 20 October 2022) and wild bee management well underway in several zones.

The response has been greatly assisted through the involvement of the apiary industry, including the participation of representatives from some of the key industry bodies, and NSW DPI is grateful for the ongoing cooperation stakeholders.

However, some statements made at the hearing on 12 October 2022 require clarification, either because circumstances have since changed or because the statements did not accurately reflect events.

Mr Stephen Fuller noted there "is no [Owner Reimbursement Costs] at the moment" in "purple zones". Mr Fuller did, however, note that discussions were underway with NSW DPI on this issue.

On 18 October, Agriculture Minister Dugald Saunders announced beekeepers in Surveillance zones (purple zones) were now eligible for reimbursement payments under the agreed National Response Plan.

This announcement recognised that despite not needing to have hives euthanised like beekeepers in the eradication zone, these beekeepers have also been adversely affected financially by the response.

The limited Owner Reimbursement Costs offers eligible registered commercial beekeepers two options:

- Commercial beekeepers can choose to euthanise their existing hives and receive reimbursement of \$290 per standard hive to re-establish new hives outside of the purple zones; or,
- They can choose to not euthanise their hives and instead receive a one-off loss-of-income reimbursement of \$117 per standard hive.

More information is available from dpi.nsw.gov.au/varroa

Ms Sheila Stokes claimed the NSW DPI beekeeper registration system is not fit for purpose and should contain “the current contact details of every beekeeper in the state, along with accurate information about the number and location of their hives”.

In fact, the NSW DPI beekeeper registration system does contain this information. Any person in NSW who keeps honeybees or manages or is responsible for a hive of honeybees is required to register with NSW DPI.

Registration includes the provision of contact details (phone number, email address etc).

Registered beekeepers are required under the Code of Practice to keep legible records of:

- The dates of all apiary inspections and observations from the inspections including an assessment of the overall strength of the hives in the apiary, any pests or diseases found in the hives and the method used for detection of arthropod pests
- Details of all actions taken to manage any pests or diseases in the apiary.
- Details of sampling method, date(s) of collection, testing body and the results of all honey tests or other independent assessments for the presence of American foulbrood.
- Details of movements of hives (including swarm catch boxes); including dates, numbers, geographic locations.
- Details of introductions of any bees and used hives or hive components (with or without bees) from external sources including the date of introduction and the supplier or source.
- Details of biosecurity-related training by the beekeeper and any employees of the beekeeper.

The current response has highlighted that the system is fit for purpose, but that many beekeepers had either failed to register, or failed to keep their details current.

NSW DPI saw a marked increase in the number of registrations following the detection of Varroa, and in beekeepers updating their contact details.

This register has been a key part of our communication with beekeepers, along with messaging through the professional and amateur associations.

NSW DPI acknowledges these systems can always be improved and we continue to discuss with the ABA, AHBIC and others how we can refine and simplify the system for ease of use while maintaining the rigour required.

Ms Sheila Stokes claimed that NSW DPI had "no process for dealing with volunteers" and that it took "at least five weeks" to engage volunteers as casual employees to assist in the response.

This is incorrect, the first volunteer was engaged by the response on 1 July – one week after the response stood up. By 4 July, there were 24 volunteer beekeepers assisting us in the field.

To date we've had more than 280 volunteers involved in the response, all of whom have been covered by Treasury Managed Fund, in terms of insurance.

Ms Sheila Stokes stated she did not have "a high level of confidence that DPI compliance are following up on" compliance matters involving beekeepers who may have breached Varroa emergency orders.

NSW DPI has issued 31 infringement notices in relation to the Varroa mite emergency orders. All the penalty infringement notices that have been issued so far are still actively being pursued.

These infringement notices have been for illegally moving hives or supers, failing to notify location of hives and failing to comply with codes of practice for record keeping of disease checks.

A number of additional cases are still under investigation and may go beyond penalty infringement notices.

I would like to reiterate my thanks for this opportunity to clarify the above points, and for the opportunity to appear before the committee.

If there is any other information we can provide to assist the committee in its review, NSW DPI will be pleased to do so.

Yours sincerely,

John Tracey

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NSW Department of Primary Industries

31 October 2022