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The Secretary  
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee  
R1.121  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

8 June 2007

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: The Future Development of the Australian Honey Bee Industry**

Firstly, I would like to thank you very much for allowing me an extension on the submission deadline. It has allowed me to provide you with my views that may assist in the inquiry.

I am a beekeeper from Castlemaine, in Central Victoria. I come from a family that has been beekeeping in this region for over 100 years. The business that I am part of runs over 2,500 beehives and is one of the largest in Victoria. For the past 60 years the business has become increasingly migratory as it has grown. It now supports 5 families, employing 3 permanent staff.

I have recently returned from a RIRDC sponsored study tour of NZ, where we examined the impact of the Varroa Mite on their honeybee industry. It was a sobering experience, some of which I will expand upon in further sections below.

**Its current and future prospects**

The current outlook for the beekeeping industry as a whole is dim. This is mainly due to a combination of factors which include fuel prices; poor honey & pollination prices; the possibility of imminent incursion of the major honeybee threat, the Varroa Mite; lack of support from government to the resource requirements of beekeeping, specifically in Qld; climate change.

However, the dim outlook is starting to get brighter now, thanks to recent publicity from news of Varroa on our doorstep and the Apis Cerana incursion in Cairns. It is also brighter thanks to the industry people and the politicians involved in setting up this inquiry into our industry. Hopefully now, after years of attempting, political leaders and

the general public at large will take notice of the importance of our small industry to our society, economy and environment and take action to assist beekeeping to survive.

One thing that would help that cause would be that funding to update the publication "The Economic Value and Environmental Impact of the Australian Beekeeping Industry". This would allow the government to really see the impact of our small industry in the economy, especially in light of the major advances in the horticultural industry since it was written in 1998.

### **Its role in agriculture and forestry**

In these times of lower rainfall, the honeybee in a managed environment is a great benefit to the native flora. Beekeepers move the bees to areas of major flowering and the bees help in the seed set of the native flora. Having a good seed set then maximizes the potential for re-growth, as long as the later weather events allow. So beekeepers provide the means to promote native forests even in times of climatic hardship.

Beekeepers know about trees. Many government forestry staff have said in the past that if you want to know about trees, their flowering and propagation that ask the beekeepers. Long before there was a green movement, the beekeepers were calling for sustainable resource usage in the forests, so I call beekeepers the original conservationists. Even though the cutting down of any eucalypt provides a detriment to beekeepers, I accept that forests are multi-use and that many people make a living from them and that society needs forest products. Australia needs to manage forests so that these resources are available to all to use. That also means that beekeepers need to be allowed access to forests.

In general agriculture also beekeepers provide huge benefits. The pollination of many broadacre and horticultural crops benefit greatly and sometimes rely entirely on insect pollination. The honeybee is a very efficient pollinator, and due to the magnificent honey we can produce in Australia, we have the ability to provide volumes of this efficient pollinator to the farmer. However, these pollination events are restricted to certain times of the year and beekeepers need to keep the bees alive and strong ready for these times. So beekeepers need forests to provide breeding for our bees and to collect the nectar that provides us with the clean and natural honey. Access to these forests is through both public and private lands. We need no restrictions to access the licensed public land areas and we need more licensed areas so that the industry can grow. If Australia want more, younger beekeepers then adequate resources for their beekeeping operations need to be available, otherwise it will be too hard and the industry will gradually decline.

### **Biosecurity issues**

Australia is the only country in the world that does not yet have the Varroa Mite parasite of the honeybee. The only one left.

I have recently returned from a RIRDC study tour of NZ. It was conducted in order to examine the NZ beekeeping industry and one of the major issues to look at was how they have coped with the honeybee parasite, the Varroa Mite. They have coped well with the

arrival of this pest through having money to allow them to cope. In Australia, beekeepers don't have that luxury. NZ beekeepers had, and still have, a more profitable industry than we do in Australia. Many of their beekeepers said that they would not have been able to cope with Varroa at all if they had similar profit margins to Australia.

One thing that would help in the event of an incursion of the Varroa Mite, or other exotic pests of the honeybee is if the beekeeping industry gets more than the 80/20 Govt/Industry split identified in the AusVet plan for compensation in the event of an incursion of the Varroa Mite. This would greatly assist in the protection of our industry through providing a lesser drain on personal and industry resources when loads of money will be required just to cope.

To assist in preventing an incursion in the first place, AQIS staff education is critical. When we returned from NZ, myself and a beekeeper from Tasmania had to explain and educate the AQIS staff there about what the Varroa Mite was and its potential impact on our industry. It astounded us that they didn't already know. They need to, now.

Another way to prevent an incursion is to protect the likely incursion points. NZ's point was in a port, a swarm of bees on a container carrying the Varroa Mite. We have a port surveillance programs to identify pests as soon as they arrive, but it needs to be bigger and better.

Once an incursion occurs though, better communication to industry and public when incursions occur would be nice too. The news coming out of Qld from the recent Apis Cerana incursion there was limited and had to be searched for. At the very least there should have been regular updates on the QLD DPI website about the progress of the incursion and the associated Varroa Mite tests that occurred. I checked and there wasn't. Are they too short staffed to be able to communicate the rest of the Australian industry?

## **Trade issues**

International trade affects us greatly in many ways, some good, some bad:

- International prices drag our domestic prices down,
- Cheap imports drag our prices down,
- Lower standards of food regulation in foreign countries provide a bad image for honey in general and we get hurt,
- Provides a large market for our honey and bee products.

To help protect our industry from the bad affects of international trade I see an easy option. Make the imports of honey match the standard to what we produce and export our honey to. If that were the case then we would increase the cost of the cheaper imports as they would have to work as hard as we do to provide a quality product, and then we would be able to compete on the basis of quality and efficiencies.

So specifically, I think there should be more resources to the conduct testing of imports to guarantee healthy food and make imports match the standards imposed on our industry's exports through the recent AQIS Export Control (Honey and Bee Products) Orders 2007.

## **The impact of land management and bushfires**

Land must be managed for multiple uses, not just for tourism and keeping 'pristine' forests. Keeping bees out of the public land forests would be counter productive to Australia's interests, yet that seems to be the attitudes of some people, specifically within the National Parks systems. The "precautionary" principle is often stated in that we'd better be careful that the exotic honeybee doesn't interfere with the native ecosystems. This attitude is wrong. I don't understand how a creature that has been continually in the Australian environment for nearly 200 years could be considered exotic anymore. It surely must be a naturalized Australian by now and not be kept from any part of the Australian landscape at all.

Bushfires affect us greatly. The loss of the flora to everyday Australians is only temporary, they generally recover relatively quickly. However, they take much longer to recover in terms of beekeeping and we may be unable to use the resource again for 10 or more years and the trees re-grow.

We are the same as all other forest users in that we want the forest managers to keep the forests safe from bushfires. They must ensure that clear communication of fuel reduction burns to achieve this aim is given and be prepared to listen to beekeepers that request changes to these plans if they conflict with major flowering events occur. Whilst fuel reduction can be flexible at times, we are at the mercy of the weather and climate and trees for the timing of honey flows.

## **The research and development needs of the industry**

We need more. More funding for research positions and more research. Pests and diseases research, better beekeeping management practices, pollination best practices and new products and equipment to improve the profitability of our industry. Today's society seems to need proof of things before they are accepted. We need research to prove what we've known for years, what our parents and grandparents accepted, that honey and honeybees provide:

- A clean, natural & healthy food
- Medicinally beneficial products
- Pollination benefits to many crops

Over the years much has been provided to the beekeeping industry in Victoria through the DPI. Staff numbers who provide support, research, inspection and other services has gradually declined through position not being filled when they become vacant. Hence much needed assistance has been gradually eroded. Full time inspectors have become multi-tasked part-timers who also look after other industries. This erosion should stop and be reversed. Extra funding for the DPI should be granted to allow these support services for our small but integral industry to return to what they once were.

In order to provide better research and development for the industry, I think we need distributed research facilities throughout Australia, managed through a central research organization such as the RIRDC. They should be linked with Universities, CSIRO & DPI research institutes in both regional and metropolitan centres in either all, or at least

the majority of the states and territories of Australia. I feel it should be a distributed structure as there are many differences in beekeeping throughout the different regions of Australia and hence many current resources, (beekeepers, DPI Apiary Inspectors and Extension staff) that could provide expertise & resources on local issues. A centralised model would tend towards local expertise where it is setup to support the research, which may not provide the best results for all Australian beekeeping.

Finally, I would like to thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for the opportunity to provide my thoughts on the future of my industry. To end, I would like to offer the following recommendations:

**Recommendations:**

- 1. Fund the updating of the publication "The Economic Value and Environmental Impact of the Australian Beekeeping Industry"**
- 2. State and Federal Governments support increasing the number of beesites available to apiarists in public lands.**
- 3. The current AusVet plan be reviewed with the aim to increase the government funding for compensation in the event of an exotic pest incursion.**
- 4. Federal Government provide funding to the industry to provide essential training to AQIS staff on the Varroa Mite and other honeybee pests that threaten the industry.**
- 5. Federal Government provide funding to support and expand the Port Surveillance programs currently in effect.**
- 6. The Federal Government examine the recent Apis Cerana incursion in Cairns and its handling to determine if any improvements could be made.**
- 7. The Federal Government provide funding to the industry cease imports of bees from the US until it is determined that their CCD problem will not be transferred to Australia through the import of bees.**
- 8. The Federal Government provide funding for a larger distributed network of research and development centre to look at beekeeping and pollination issues**
- 9. That Governments recognize that the honeybee is part of the Australian landscape and should not be restricted from accessing public land resources.**
- 10. Support for increased funding for beekeeping extension work through State Government DPI organisations be given.**

Peter McDonald