


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

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Secretary:	

24 May 2007

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Discussion paper on the Future Development of the Australian Honey Bee Industry

The Victorian Farmers Federation represents 15,000 members including 1300 horticulture and apiarist members.

The honey bee industry in Victoria has around 250 commercial apiarists (those making a substantial income from honey bees) and accounts for approximately 15 per cent of the Australian honey bee industry. In addition to the industry's direct economic contribution, it also makes a significant contribution to the \$1.8 billion Victorian horticulture and seed industry through pollination services.

The industry currently has an opportunity for significant growth on the back of increased pollination services for expanding almond and other horticultural production as well as increased demand for locally produced honey and wax products.

At the same time, the industry is facing threats to this growth by way of a significant decrease in available public land for site leases, rising fuel prices, threats by exotic pests and diseases and the ability of the industry to attract next generation beekeepers.

Impact of pest and diseases

The threat of pest and diseases to the honey bee industry has been identified as the most important issue having an affect not only on the honey bee industry by also the pollination service industry.

If and when the Varroa mite and other pests and diseases enter Australia the potential to decimate the industry is widespread. This will have an affect on the "free" pollination service currently being provided by wild bees and increase the price of fruit and nuts significantly to the consumer by forcing growers to pay for the essential pollination service.

The VFF strongly supports the need for research and development into the impact of pest and diseases to the honey bee industry and the impact it will have to flow on industries.

The VFF supports the continued importation of breeding stocks under stringent quarantine guidelines, however, there has been a new disease (yet to be identified) where the bees fly out and don't return to the hives. For this reason the industry believes the importation of Queen bees should be temporarily suspended from the United States until the cause is known.

Access to high quality floral resources

Access to floral resources that provide nectar and pollen is fundamental to the honey bee industry. Recent bushfires and the introduction of new national parks and conservation reserves have contributed to the decrease in access to public land. Examples of this include the Grampians National Park which has decreased its available sites from 140 to 100 sites. The Otways has also now been closed to all bee sites. This is a major concern for the future viability and growth of the industry.

The VFF urges government to renew access to high quality floral resources on public land where previous sites were available and to provide new sites where high quality floral resources can be obtained. The VFF encourages state and federal governments to consult with industry on their requirements for floral resources.

The VFF also supports the need for research into the impact of honey bees on native flora and fauna.

Under current licensing arrangements bee sites are licensed for six months and can be closed at 24 hours notice. Apiarists are also seeking long term site security and the VFF supports the industry view that licenses should be issued for no shorter than five years to provide this security.

Creating a “pollination industry”

The VFF recognises the importance of the honey bee industry to its horticulturists and has recently formed an Apiarist Branch within the Horticulture Commodity. This gives both industries the opportunity to discuss relevant issues and to gain a better understanding of the needs of those that provide the pollination service to those that require it.

The VFF strongly supports linkages between the honey bee industry and those that use honey bee pollination services. A sustainable honey bee industry is vital to the horticulture and seed industry.

Research and Development

Research and development is critical to the future sustainability of the honey bee industry. Research is required in a number of areas including the impact of pest and disease incursions and the impact of honey bees to native flora and fauna.

The VFF supports the introduction of a CRC style entity for beekeeping and pollination as it is essential that there be a focal point for bee research. The VFF also supports a high level of government funding due to the small nature of the industry and in consideration of the importance to other industries.

Extension work is a vital part of any research and the VFF is currently lobbying for extension to be more clearly defined and sufficiently funded as part of all R&D projects.

The VFF is also the project manager for a FarmBis project identifying the gaps in training in the horticulture industry. The final report is due in early June. The VFF supports any initiatives by government that include the need for industry training as part of research and development.

Professional training and development

A major issue for the honey bee industry is the lack of a “next generation”. The industry has an aging workforce and little support is put into retaining the next generation.

The VFF supports initiatives by industry and government that would provide personal development and training for the next generation of apiarists to sustain the industry. Specific training in leadership, succession planning, business management and communications should be considered a priority.

Recognising and communicating the importance of the industry to Victoria

The VFF has recognised the importance of the industry to Victoria and through the newly created Apiarist Branch of the Horticulture Group believes it is in a good position to communicate to government and other industries the issues of concern to the industry. The focus of the Branch will be to increase awareness of the industry to other horticulture and seed industries and to participate in policy making with these industries.

The VFF supports a need for a pollination industries network and would be very keen to participate. The VFF Horticulture Group represents many organisations and growers in all horticultural commodities.

That VFF thanks the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for the opportunity to provide the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

- 1. The federal government provide funding for a CRC style research and development centre to look at issues including but not limited to minimising the impact of pest and diseases and the impact of the honey bee industry to native flora and fauna.**
- 2. Extension work and industry training be funded as part of any research and development proposal.**
- 3. Governments renew and increase the number of sites available to apiarists in consultation with industry.**
- 4. The government provide long term licences of no shorter than five years.**
- 5. The government consider personal development through leadership and succession planning training a high priority.**
- 6. That a pollination industry network be established and supported by government and relevant industry bodies.**

Yours sincerely

Peter Cochrane
President
VFF Horticulture Group

References

1. Future Directions for the Honey Bee Industry, CIE Report, July 2005
2. The Economic Value and Environmental Impact of the Australian Beekeeping Industry, Gibbs and Morehead, 1998
3. VFF submission to the Regulatory barriers to Regional Economic Development Discussion Paper, Victorian Competition & Efficiency Commission 2004