SOUTH AUSTRALIAN FARMERS' FEDERATION

The Secretary
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission from the SA Farmers' Federation
to the The House of Representatives Agriculture, Fisheries and Foresty Committee
inquiring into
The Future Development of the Australian Honey Bee Industry

Introduction

The SA Farmers' Federation does not intend to address all the terms of the inquiry believing that much of the work has already been covered in the *"Future directions for the Australian honeybee industry"* released in July 2005 and the value of bees to the horticulture and agriculture industry in Australia has been well documented (conservatively estimated at $4 billion).

Indeed, it could be said that this committee should use that report as its main reference point and recommend ways of implementing the key conclusions and recommendations in the report.

That being said, the SA Farmers' Federation would like to make some key recommendations that add to or compliment the report of 2005. The recommendations will be presented under the headings of the terms of reference as outlined.

1. The research and development needs of the industry

Recommendation 1:
"That a Co-operative Research Centre for the Apiarist Industry be established as a matter of urgency"

We believe the CRC's mission could be:
'To conduct research and development with the goal of supplying the Australian Honey Bee industry with bees that are:

- disease resistant
- meet the requirements of the pollination industry
- are not dependent on the importation of international genetic stock'

The CRC could also be the centre to implement recommendations from the *"Future directions for the Australian honeybee industry"* that relate to research and development.
For example: - Chapter 8 Pest and Disease Management
There were five Key Conclusions, the fourth key conclusion being:
'The industry should also consider a comprehensive research project funded through RIRDC, to study in detail the New Zealand response to varroa mite and the lessons for Australia'
This project could be run from a CRC.

- Chapter 5 Diversification
There were six Key Conclusions, three of which related to R&D, those being:
'continuing to invest in research on the benefits pollination provides to the grower and advertise and promote these benefits across horticultural and agricultural industries'

'Remove supply side constraints to the queen bee sector by undertaking research into improving productivity and increasing access to queen bee breeding programs'

'Expand current research into improving the genetic stock of queen bees within Australia'

We believe the CRC model is well suited to the needs of the honey bee industry.
To quote from the CRC website... *"The programme emphasises the importance of collaborative arrangements to maximise the benefits of research through an enhanced process of utilisation, commercialisation and technology transfer. It also has a strong education component with a focus on producing graduates with skills relevant to industry needs."*

The last sentence is particularly relevant to the honey bee industry where the average of beekeepers is around 55 years old and has difficulty attracting young people to the industry. A CRC encourages young people to focus energies into areas (and industries) that they may not have thought about before and gives the industry a real chance of attracting new, younger entrants.

In a recent article in The Land (May 10th 2007), the former chief of CSIRO Entomology, Dr Max Whitten was quoted as saying: *"Bee research facilities, here and overseas, have been successively abandoned through the years as commercially focussed research replaced public good science, leaving local bee expertise at an all-time low".*

2. Biosecurity
Recommendation 2:
"That the appropriate level of funding of AQIS and Biosecurity Australia is maintained and enhanced to minimise the risk of exotic disease incursions, particularly across the northern coastline of Australia"

Australia is free of many of the major agricultural pests, diseases and weeds which are present in South East Asia and some Pacific countries. Their introduction into Australia could devastate plant and animal industries and would severely affect our way of life.

The National Sentinel Hive program acts like the miners' canary. Hives of bees form an early warning system around 27 Australian ports to signal the entry of any bee pests or diseases that could not only damage the honey industry, but all Australian agriculture. These "sentinel hives", owned and checked by private beekeepers, are Australia's first - and possibly only - line of defence against bee parasites like the varroa mite, which has damaged honey industries and devastated wild bee populations in every major honey-producing country except Australia.

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is responsible for keeping exotic pests, diseases and weeds out of Australia. AQIS has developed the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) in recognition of the unique quarantine situation presented in this part of the country. NAQS is designed to protect northern Australia from Broome to Cairns, including the Torres Strait, from the entry of harmful pests, diseases and weeds.

It has come to our attention that the NAQS is not adequately resourced and maintained, especially in the Northern Territory. One Apiary Officer for the entire NT is manifestly inadequate and it appears that the 'Readiness Team' of beekeepers (those who respond quickly to any incursion in NT) have left the industry.

We would recommend a thorough review of the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy, specifically as it relates to bees, which would include resourcing and incursion response issues.

3. The impact of land management and bushfires

Recommendation 3:

"That research funds are made available to measure the impact of managed beehives on different ecosystems"

We refer the Committee to the *"Future directions for the Australian honeybee industry"* report, Chapter 6, 'The Industry Resource Base' p.91:

'Analysis of factors affecting resource supply

Changing policies on access to public lands

As noted earlier there has been a marked trend in the transfer of lands between public land management agencies, primarily from unallocated crown lands and areas previously used for native forest operations, into agencies with a conservation management goal. In this transfer, land management agencies have generally had a negative view on the perceived impact of honeybees on the ecosystem.

Numerous synopses of the 'relevant' research have covered the subject of honeybees in the Australian environment. Generally the amount of research reviewed is limited, and the conclusions remain equivocal and open-ended. A recent AHBIC paper on managed honeybees in conserved forests has reviewed both sides of the arguments (Moncur 2005).

The overall conclusion reached is that the findings of the limited scientific investigations into competition between honeybees and native flora and fauna have been inconclusive.

In some instances honeybees have a negative effect while in others they have a neutral or positive effect. But while the research has been equivocal, conservation agencies have used the precautionary principle and desire for only native ecosystems in conservation reserves to justify an exclusion policy.

The precautionary principle, in effect, excludes activities for which the empirical evidence is equivocal. As a result, access to conservation reserves, has been a political compromise between the wishes of conservation reserve managers and beekeepers. This maintains a very tenuous hold by the beekeeping industry on the use of large areas of public lands, creating significant uncertainty within the beekeeping industry as policy detail changes from year to year and between states.'

We believe that a properly funded research program measuring the impact of managed beehives on different ecosystems will ensure that future negotiations for land access on public land will be based on scientific data.

Please direct any enquiries relating to this submission to: Mr Leigh Duffield, Chairman, SAFF Apiarist Committee on Ph: 0428 568278 or Email: nangbees@chariot.net.au