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Submission to the Inquiry into the Future Development of the Australian Honey Bee Industry

INTRODUCTION

EDMONDS HONEY has operated since 1980, prior to that my father and myself were hobbyist beekeepers. We have always produced honey, pollination services, beeswax, Honeycomb, and at times pollen, and Queenbees. We have produced Manuka (Teatree) honey from the Grampians for 25 years. I supplement my income by working as a weekend manager for a Mitre 10 hardware store, although I enjoy meeting the many customers who frequent the store. Many people find it amazing that I work every day and have done so all of my working life. My father retired with the onset of GST, as he kept the books and could not be bothered by the extra work.

Recently I have started exporting honey to Japan, (Mitta Mitta Honey) at present it is from a small base but the demand for high quality natural Australian honey is growing with the help of my enthusiastic Japanese agent. Sales are mostly made through the Internet, after tasting promotions. The demand for quality to meet this market has resulted in improving my standards of production. The Japanese are looking for honey produced from natural environments free of agricultural chemicals. The Japanese are very critical of Chinese food products and treat them with suspicion of being contaminated or false. Testing of Chinese honey finds sugar contamination and results in a 50% tariff being applied.

The 10 years of drought has hit the business very hard with the nearby clover areas being decimated. It is hard to keep bees alive and I have had to change my techniques.

To supplement my honey supply, I have had to buy honey from selected beekeepers that do not use antibiotics for disease control.

I have always locally marketed honey by packing under the EDMONDS HONEY label, at present I sell approximately 60,000 kg's of honey worth \$300,000 wholesale each year. The quantity varies upon the availability of the best selling honeys of Yellow Box and Manuka. Over recent years I have supplied beehives for almond pollination and spent a lot of effort and Expense in changing the brood boxes to 8 frame Jumbos, which are better-suited hive for pollination of Almond orchards. I have also been building my hive numbers to approximately 750 and intend to increase this next season if the weather allows.

I had a large set back when bushfires burnt 70 beehives and over 250 died from the effects of smoke and heat, I was under insured.

At present I employ a worker for most of the week on a flexible working hours arrangement as he has other employment interests. I also have a part time worker for helping with honey extraction.

I believe a future exists for my type of operation as long as imported honey does not completely undercut the Australia honey market.

I believe if imported honey had not flooded into the Australian market in 2002 my business would have been double its present size and very profitable.

I find Australian farmers are very poor at paying for pollination services and do not respect the beehives and apply insecticide sprays to the detriment of the beehives. The corporate Almond farms are a refreshing change as they are professionally operated and pay immediately.

I believe a market is available for high quality queen bee production from Victoria. Although our season is shorter than the traditional Queensland and New South Wales queen producers they now have problems with small hive beetle. The varied pollens from European plants result in superior queens and drones to those bred from solely Australian floral sources.

I believe that in time live bee export will become an industry in Southern Victoria, especially if direct aeroplane flights to Los Angeles become available.

PROBLEMS

Third Party Audits. The industry is implementing food safety programs, but why do we suffer the cost of duplication of services. In our modern society the Local council Health Inspector should be able to complete this task. It costs \$340 per annum for the annual inspection.

To export honey in future an audit by Bee Safe or Bqual is also required. This is an expensive duplication of the same job. Or does this mean export standards have to be better than for our local market? My honey is tested locally by National Measurement Institute for sugar analysis and in Japan for contamination by chemicals.

If honey is contaminated during primary production then the honey packer is unable to rectify the problem so the present system is back to front. The producer should have to conform to the highest standards.

Fuel prices are a problem, as we are not competing on a level playing field.

Beekeepers often have by necessity operate old diesel trucks that do not attract the diesel fuel rebate, and the trucks are really the tractors of our operation and should be exempt of fuel excise just as farmers tractors. Often older trucks are more suited to the rough bush tracks that need to be travelled rather than the Highway speedsters. Overseas competitors like China, Russia, pay Australian 70 cents per litre for fuel.

Workers, it is almost impossible to get reliable workers to work honeybees. The work is hot, physical and long hours during the summer and being stung, results in them just not turning up for repeat punishment. When the bees are kept at long distances workers will just not camp out in the bush or put up with long hours of travel.

Workers are lured away by easier or higher paying jobs especially truck driving.

Accountants fees are killing us, I pay \$165 per week (\$8580 per annum) for my accountant (Fresh Numbers) to prepare my taxation, which is sent to him in on MYOB. I pay \$250 per quarter for a bookkeeper to lodge the information on computer. (\$1000 per year). I cannot do this myself and I believe that this is a wrought aided and abetted by the government. It is a bad government that cannot streamline the taxation system so it is easy for everyone to comply with. Just too many rules. When I tried to do my BAS I found it too confusing, and during the spring, summer and Autumn I do not have time for paperwork.

Overseas workers are a possibility as beekeepers from overseas can work in their off season, but I looked at the paperwork and it was too daunting.

I had the offer of a polish bee scientist to have his holidays with me teaching me instrumental queenbee insemination techniques. He is an expert in this field; he needed experience in Australian beekeeping for promotion in his country. I paid his airfare and in the week before his flight to Australia his visa was declined. After this experience I gave up.

National Parks are operated by the states, they should be operated by the Australian government and instead of making it hard for beekeepers to obtain access to resources it is far better to have a greater number of beesites available to make use of spasmodic rainfall initiated budding on trees. Too many rules have been introduced in National Parks which preclude beesites, many picnic areas were the flat clearings traditionally used by beekeepers. Since I had my beesites taken from me with the creation of the Otways National Park I now understand how the aborigines feel.

Research will prove that when the trees are in full flower and weather is suitable nectar secretion is unlimited and there is more nectar available than can be used by native birds, bees and the honeybees. Research conducted by Latrobe University in approx 1990 at Cobobonee State Forest proved that managed honeybees did not reduce available nectar for native bees; in fact the greater numbers of native bees were where the largest commercial apiaries were located. The main reason this occurs is because the insect eating birds and insects prefer to catch and eat the honeybee, and the species do not compete as they have differing preferences for nectar sugar composition. As far as I know because this research did not suit the environmentalists it has never been published.

In future Australia will be held in contempt as the world realise that while poor people starve we cull Kangaroos that could be used for a source of meat and allow nectar flows of eucalypts that produce the cleanest unpolluted honey in the world to be wasted.

Medicinal honey can be produced from our National Parks if access is available. In the charter for National Parks it is proclaimed they are held as reserves for the future when use may be found for the plants to benefit mankind, sure Medicinal honey that kills antibiotic resistant bacterial fits this criteria. I think it is the negative conservationists that do not want progress that are the problem.

Weeds such as Blanket weed in the Werribee, Melton, Bacchus Marsh, Bellarine Peninsular areas produce a bitter flavoured honey that is unfit for human consumption. If this weed progresses to central Victoria it will contaminate our fine Eucalypt crops.

Access to farmer's properties is becoming a greater problem as they worry about occupational health and safety issues.

Housing development along perimeters of forests has reduced the areas available for beekeeping on private land.

Acquisition by state governments of parcels of private land from within forests and National Parks has reduced beesites.

Farming practices have changed and the use of herbicides is revolutionising farming with no longer fallow paddocks with weeds to sustain honeybees and has resulted in the elimination of blackberry, gorse, and boxthorn.

Clearing streams of non native plants. Although this may be seen as good for the streams it is removing a valuable source of early spring pollen and nectar from the Willows.

Fire has a serious affect on beekeeping. My experience has been that hot wild fires scorch the trees so badly that it may take 30 years for the trees to come back into honey production. Examples of this are the 1985 Maryborough fire and the You Yangs fire approx 1983. The Ocean Grove Reserve fire burnt so hot that the majority of the rare Bellarine Yellow Gums died due to the heat scorching the bark, trees on adjoining farm land suffered less heat and the majority of these trees survived and went back into flowering cycles. The recent fires of the Brisbane Ranges and Grampians have reduced my income by a third. In the rest of my working lifetime I will most likely not see the trees of the Brisbane ranges fire area return to Honey production. Yet environmental cool burns have minimal effect and often stimulate trees such as Brown Stringybark to flower and yield honey. DSE and Parks at present tend to burn roadsides to ensure safe traffic movement during fire events but when lightning hits the unburnt areas for many years (68 years in the Brisbane Ranges) a wildfire driven by strong winds will jump even the best fire breaks as seen along the Anakie to Ballan Road. This resulted in the total destruction of the Reference area and it may never recover to be like that of prior to white man. I have asked for my beesite that was near the start of the fire to be shifted to the edge of the fire to be productive on the unburnt area and red tape within Parks will not allow this.

Labelling Laws need to be strengthened and enforced. At present imported honey can be blended into Australia produced honey and not disclosed or tested for by authorities.

Level playing field. Imported honey should be produced by the same health requirements that Australian producers must comply with. At present honey from China, India and Vietnam is produced in conditions that would not be acceptable here, yet is given direct access to our supermarket shelves. When Woolworths imported Home Brand packaged honey from Denmark that was a blend of various countries, the customers reported becoming ill from eating it. My honey to Japan must meet strict requirements, an audit from the importer, (she will stay for a week and observe the honey production and inspect the forest where honey is gathered. A sugar analysis must be done in Australia, and then samples sent to Japan are tested for antibiotics and any other chemicals that should not be present.

Fake honey, it is reported Japan, and Taiwan have detected sugar in Chinese honey. At present Coles supermarkets are selling honey bears of Chinese honey and sugar blend. This should not be allowed, as honey is a pure product. Major manufacturers import honey for manufacturing breakfast cereals and honey health bars. This honey is most likely analog honey made in China. Why can a manufacturer sell product as containing Honey when sugar may be 20% or more of the composition and honey 1% as often seen in Honey Health fruit bars. When the greater quantity is sugar it should be labelled as "Sugar Bars with very little honey content."

During the 2005/2006 season pricing of honey was at below the cost of production, due to honey packers paying world market prices. For example beekeepers were paid \$1-50 per kilogram for average grades of honey that was on the supermarket shelves for over \$10 per kilogram. This is just unfair and the retailers need to be pulled back into line.

Genetically Modified crops. At present GMO Cotton is grown in Australia and beekeepers harvest honey from it. I am concerned that until the cause of the massive honeybee kill in USA (colony collapse disorder) caution should be shown before unleashing Canola, and Maize into our presently clean eco system. My market for honey to Japan could be compromised by GMO pollen pollution. The pollen from GMO maize is thought to be responsible for killing Monarch butterflies caterpillars and the toxin pollen may have been harvested by bees thus killing them. If it can be proved that GMO crops are safe to the environment then I would consider their advantages.

Varroa Incursion. All countries overseas were found to be flat footed when Varroa was detected and the time span before chemicals required were procured was too slow. We need registration of chemicals required prior to the problem. Research facilities in Victoria consist of a part time Extension officer and a microscope. Not good enough is it; once again we are asleep, the state government should back up all their big talk with some action, and invest in the future of the state.

Precaution Principal. The precaution principal is the reason trotted out by National Parks as the reason why they have excluded the commercial Honeybees from areas of forest. They cannot logically argue any negative effects from the honeybee so hide behind this. In fact the Australian native flora species seem to be created for the honeybee, so perfect do they complement each other's needs. Pollination for nectar and pollen reward. The reason is to be found in Tarlton Rayment's "A Cluster of Bees" page 554 *Apis Aenigmatica* is described. I believe this bee was actually *Apis Andreniformis*, which can be found in Indonesian highlands thus the climatic conditions are very similar to those of Victoria. Unfortunately with the murder of Marius Jensen we lost a beekeeper that also described these bees being in the Victoria Valley of the Grampians up to 1920. I believe the bees were nomadic and disserted the small nests (as big as your hand) and like *Apis Dorsata* migrated to other areas as the flowering cycles of the trees came and went. Why did they disappear? Most likely clearing of the landscape caused havoc with their migration and allowing the wind into clearings has a large effect on the flight of insects. Honeybees located within a forest always preform better than those that have to battle the winds of the open country. Honeybees had been through out Australia by the mid 1800's so the bees had lived together until the last sightings in 1920's. In "Diary of a Welsh swagman 1869 - 1894" William Evans makes comment about seeing aborigines hunting bees for honey. It does not say if they are feral honeybees or native *Apis* species. Certainly in Victoria the native species live like flies and do not store honey. I contend the forests; heathlands and mallee should be opened up so the honeybee can pollinate the floral species. Nothing is done about European Wasps which do a lot of distractive things to flowers and insects, fortunately so far the summer thunderstorms have flooded their nests and controlled them to a point. In the future our generation may be seen as the vandals that removed pollination from the native eco systems and resulted in loss of rare species.

POTENTIAL

Medicinal Honey has huge potential; I have had a loyal base of customers that report curing skin problems, acne, ulcers, and stomach complaints. Wounds with honey applied to them heal much quicker and often without scars. Customers report taking honey before retiring to bed helps with sleep. I find customer start eating Manuka (Teatree) for health reasons and often do not like the flavour but in time it becomes addictive and they feel so good that they must have it.

Research must be funded into finding more of the honeys that contain medical benefits, and access to National Parks to harvest it, one of the reasons for preserving the plants in National Parks is because one day they may yield plants that are needed for human medicine.

The Investment and superannuation funds have invested heavily in the almond industry because it is very profitable and well suited to the Australian climate and heavily mechanised rather than reliant on cheap labour costs. So far enough honeybees have been found to meet the pollination requirements of 2 strong beehives per acre. In the near future a shortage of bees for the almond orchards will occur and more importantly the industry will struggle to find places to keep the bees alive let alone breed them up to required strength for pollination. At present some operators have taken to dumping 500 beehives per beesite and I think this is expecting too much from the natural environment, and is unfair on the beekeepers on adjoining beesites with the normal truckload of 100 to 150 beehives.

As bees die out in the countries affected with Varroa demand for honeybees to replenish these stocks will occur. The export of packages of bees will need air freight services from Victorian airports. Direct flights are needed to the destination. The much-talked about airfreight from Avalon airport needs to be implemented.

Pollen collection has potential from dry areas with heavy pollen flows. This industry is more suited to Western Australia. The main competitor in Spain has recently been found to have problems with contamination from pollution.

Beeswax from Australia beehives does not contain the contaminants from the use of chemical to control bee diseases like Varroa. This makes it higher quality for the use in cosmetics.

Tourism, I am ideally located to be able to have a Tourist outlet but the large amount of money required to meet the local council requirements makes it hard to get started.

SOLUTIONS

Common sense management of public lands and forests.

Current management of forests is wrong and damage is occurring that will forever change the forest composition. Aboriginal firestick management resulted in open forests of greater productivity.

Beesites in Victoria should be made into Standard Beesites of 1 kilometre radius and be made available on all public land, including roadside, water reserves and railway reserves.

More revenue would be available to the government and using computers, maps and Internet the system would be easily controlled. More beesites in Victoria are required. 10% of Victoria's beesites have been burnt in the current bushfires.

At times due to fire, drought and lack of flowering some beesites will not be used, but other areas will be in demand as rainfall brings on flowering cycles.

Change Diesel fuel excise tax.

Simplify the employment of workers, too much paperwork at present especially for overseas beekeepers to come here in their off season.

Imported honey must be tested and be of the same standard as demanded of Australian beekeepers.

Imports of products that are not honey, but pretend to be should be banned or made be labelled as sugar products. Labelling laws are too flimsy and exploited by devious people. Eg Chinese

imports of Honey blended with Sugar syrup. If it were labelled sugar syrup blended with honey it would most likely have no demand.

Honey should be tested regularly for illegal chemicals.

Labelling laws should demand the percentage of Australian honey to be shown. At present some Honey labelled as "product of Australia" has two-thirds imported honey in the blend.

GMO crops should be studied more before plunging into possible problems with toxic pollens killing honeybees.

Testing for the incursion of Varroa and tracheal mites must increased, as when they pests invade Australian honeybees every effort must be made to exterminate them. If Varroa enters the Australian honeybee industry with our mild climate and lack of broodless times we will face a greater problem than other countries with cold winters.

Greater surveillance of airline passengers by sniffer dogs to detect smuggling of honeybee queens. Often migrant beekeepers return home and think the honeybee queens of Europe are better and are tempted to bring in queenbees.

Blue Gum plantations for wood chips should be encouraged to thin the plantations for wood chips and leave the selected best trees for hardwood production. This would help with the concerns of over harvesting the native forests; the mature trees would provide habitat and be a rich source of nectar and pollen for native fauna, insects and honeybees during the spring and early summer flowering. Trials conducted by Midway Forest Products at the Werribee Treatment Plant have resulted in a mess of tree tops left after harvest, a poor regeneration, many multi coppice stems issuing from the butts and will be of no further commercial use. I fear if this is going to be the standard, a lot of prime agricultural land will be ruined. I understand many investment plots planted without contracts with the Japanese will have difficulty in selling the wood chips.

Swarm trapping boxes located at shipping ports to monitor swarms that are around the ports. Kill by freezing and identify if mites are present.

Environmental burns need to be cool and never damage the tree canopy. When the tree canopy is removed the light comes in and changes the forest composition with the germination of the shrubs. When trees are damaged and epicormic growth occurs, then wattles germinate and create an even greater fuel problem in the future.

Many forests have too much fallen timber lying on the forest floor and this increases the dry grass content as animals cannot forage it and when dry make a tinder dry fuel starter for bushfires. Also rabbits tend to use it to create warrens.

Firewood collection would clean up this problem and bring the forests back to a state as white man found them on arrival in Australia.

John Edmonds