

Submission to the House of Representatives Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Committee into the future development of the Australian Honey Bee Industry.

Main Points of Submission

- Need to maintain secure access to Public Land Natural Resources for future viable Australian Apiary Industry.
- Competition from imports needs to be monitored with all imports needing to meet the same standards as Australian products.
- Quarantine and inspections is vital to help protect the industry from exotic pests and disease which could decimate the industry.
- Research to cope with pest and disease outbreaks needs to be increased to ensure we are ready if an outbreak occurs.

On behalf of all members of the Central Victorian Apiarists Association (CVAA) we welcome this chance to submit our concerns and ideas to this Parliamentary Committee on the future of the Australian Honey Bee Industry.

Its current and future prospects – The future of the honey bee industry in Australia will be limited unless we can attract more young people and retain those already in the industry. The population of Apiarists is ageing with a limited number of young participants. Increased learning opportunities may assist to increase interest in entering the apiary industry. More extension staff in Government roles or programs in schools to increase learning in all agricultural industries may assist to increase participation in beekeeping.

Current prospects for CVAA members are depressed due to recent low honey prices being paid and the ongoing effects of drought and bushfires on the honey and pollen flora. Pollination has provided a positive outlook for some apiarists; however, to be able to provide pollination services, apiarists need secure access to reliable native flora resources, to maintain condition of bees to undertake effective pollination. The main concern for future viability of apiarists is the continued access to the Public Land resources that they rely on for their income.

Role in Agriculture – The role of honey bees has been well documented in pollinating many crops including almonds, clover, lucerne and many others. If apiarists do not remain viable the flow on effects for agriculture and food production in Australia will be immense. If apiarists can not make a viable income from honey production then the cost for pollination services will need to increase dramatically to provide a sustainable annual income.

Biosecurity issues – Concerns have been raised with the recent sale of land where the current Queen Bee Quarantine Facility is located. It is vitally important to the future of the industry that Queen Bee breeders have access to a quarantine facility to import new genetic stock to Australia. The industry needs to be secure in the knowledge that this will be available for people to have confidence in the future. The other risk with the loss of this quarantine facility is that bees will be imported illegally into Australia and could carry exotic pests or diseases which could decimate the industry.

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Diseases and pests of honey bees that are affecting the rest of the world including Varroa Mite and Colony Collapse Disorder will have severe detrimental effects on Australian Apiarists if they are detected in Australia. Effects of Varroa Mite on the New Zealand industry have been well documented and as most believe it is a case of when, not if, then Australian Apiarists need assistance to help deal with a Varroa outbreak.

Apiarists require information on what will occur if an outbreak occurs to better prepare them for an incursion. Decisions on whether or not eradication will be initiated should be made with protocols in place to follow. These decisions should be being made now and advertised to the Apiary industry so that everyone is aware of the policy that will be followed. For example, if moving of hives will be restricted or prohibited then apiarists can be factoring this into their management decisions. If eradication is not successful apiarists will need control measures which have already been approved for use in beehives in Australia. Research needs to be increased so that Apiarists have options available and the best advice to deal with any possible new problems.

Trade issues – Competition with imported product has led to lower prices being paid for Australian honey. Apiarists believe that for fair competition the imported products must meet all the same standards required of Australian products, including a trace back system. Increased legislation in Australia is increasing the cost of production to Australian Apiarists making it difficult to remain competitive against imported products.

Impact of Land Management and Bushfires – Public Land needs to be better managed including increased control burning to try and minimise the impact of bushfires. If large tracts of Public Land are destroyed in bushfires, apiarists need access to alternative native resources to best manage their hives.

Apiarists need long term secure access to suitable resources and the move to “lock up” country and not allow access threatens apiarists livelihoods. Management of Public Land needs to take into account apiarists needs for access, cleared level sites away from high public visitations etc. As discussed, Australian apiarists need the access to Public Lands to manage their bees, not only for honey production, but also for pollination services. CVAA members would not remain viable if access to Public Land resources was restricted. There is simply not enough suitable Private land to maintain hive numbers at current level and for possible future increases.

Research and Development needs of Industry – Current research levels within the industry are very low. Research is critical in trying to stop and preparing for exotic pest and disease outbreaks in Australia. As discussed, safe control options need to be developed and approved for use before these pests/diseases reach Australia. The industry will not have time to wait for them to be developed and approved for use once the problem is already in Australia. Although, there are control options for Varroa, most are based around chemical use in the hive. Most Australian apiarists would like to avoid using chemicals in the hive to maintain our “clean, green” product image and would therefore support further research into other possible control options – such as traps outside the hive for Small hive beetle.

Future costs of treating pest/disease could make many apiarists unviable. Financial support may be needed for apiarists to treat future pest/disease outbreaks such as Varroa mite to maintain a viable apicultural industry.

Existing Industry and Government work – The apiary industry in Victoria has been fortunate over time to have very dedicated Government employees providing support to the industry in Apiary Inspector positions. Currently though, there is a high level of concern that there is no succession planning for these positions. The apiary branches of government provide an important service of advice, disease control, research and education and are a vital part of the Australian apicultural industry. The future success of the industry will rely on there being well trained appropriate people in these apiary inspector positions to support the industry.

The level of Government support to the Apiary Industry has been reduced over many years. The lack of staff in Apiary positions has affected the level of inspections for disease control and extension opportunities. It has also affected the level of surveillance for exotic pest/disease and has placed reliance of apiarists themselves to notify of any suspected problems. Research staff numbers have also been decreased with basically no research now being undertaken in Victoria.

The AFBSmart program has been a good model for American Foul Brood control in Victoria. This program developed in Victorian has been very successful in decreasing the amount and severity of foul brood outbreaks in Victoria. Up until now this program has been supported by Government at no cost to Victorian apiarists. In future if the cost of this program is placed onto apiarists it is a concern that Foul Brood outbreaks will again begin to rise having a detrimental affect on the Victorian apiary industry. It is important that this program continue to be supported by Government to protect the apicultural industry in Victoria.

In conclusion, most apiarists are proud of their industry and the quality products that they produce, be it honey, beeswax or queen bees. They are also proud of the service their managed bees provide to pollinate many crops for other farmers and ultimately Australian and World consumers. Apiarists have an affinity with the native bushland and pride themselves on their knowledge of the bush and have a desire to see it well managed for future generations.

There is a real concern though, that unless apiarists are given more security into the future, it will be very hard to retain apiarists and therefore hive numbers within Australia to support a viable industry.

Submission from:

Miss Judy Turner, Secretary, Central Victorian Apiarists Association, on behalf of members of the Association.