

AUSTRALIAN HONEY BEE INDUSTRY COUNCIL INC

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SUBMISSION TO JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Consider policies for developing the parts of Australia which lie north of the Tropic of Capricorn, spanning Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Honey Bee Industry Council Inc (AHBIC) is the peak body for beekeeping in Australia. Its members are:-

Queensland Beekeepers Association (QBA)
New South Wales Apiarists Association (NSWAA)
Victorian Apiarists Association (VAA)
Tasmanian Beekeepers Association (TBA)
South Australian Apiarists Association (SAAA)
Beekeepers Section – West Australian Farmers Federation (WAFF)
Honey Packers and Marketers Association of Australia (HPMAA)
National Council of Pollination Associations (NCPA)
Australian Queen Bee Breeders Association (AQBBA)
Associated Members

In this submission, the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council Inc. has taken the terms of reference and used these headings as a guide for making our submission.

The main points of our submission are:-

- Pollination by honey bees is crucial to many of the crops currently grown in northern Australia. For this current pollination need to continue there needs to be a strong beekeeping industry in the area. Any expansion of crops relying on honey bee pollination will require the expansion of the beekeeping industry in northern Australia. **Food security needs bee security.**
- Biosecurity and border security is of great importance in the area. The Asian bee (*Apis cerana* Java genotype) is now established in the Cairns region due to a quarantine breach.
- There needs to be uniform enforcement of pesticide labels
- Removal of tariffs on honey in Free Trade Agreements
- Access to public lands

- **Examine the potential for development of the region's mineral, energy, agricultural, tourism, defence and other industries**

Pollination

Beekeeping is carried out across the top end from Queensland to Western Australia. The value of the honey produced would be greatly exceeded by the value of pollination provided by beekeepers in this area.

In Queensland the Burdekin area is serviced by beekeepers providing pollination for crops such as rockmelons, honeydews, seedless watermelons, pumpkins, button squash, zucchini plus various seed crops such as sunflower. In most of these cases if there are no bees there is no crop.

There is also pollination carried out in the Rockhampton, Mackay, Proserpine and Bowen regions. Here the crops include watermelons, pumpkins, rockmelons and honeydews.

In the Cairns and Atherton Tablelands region many tropical and sub tropical fruits are pollinated by beekeepers moving hives into the orchards. Other crops pollinated are avocados, macadamias, pumpkins, canola and mangoes. With the dairy farms on the Tablelands, many have clover as part of their improved pastures. There is a lot on incidental pollination that occurs on clover thus ensuring seeds for continued regrowth of the clover.

In the Georgetown region there are watermelons, pumpkins and mangoes being pollinated by honey bees which are being owned and managed by the farmers. As the area is away from the known beekeeping areas, the farmers have had to resort to purchasing and looking after their own hives to ensure adequate pollination.

In the Northern Territory valuable pollination is carried out in the Katherine region plus other areas in the NT where crops such as seedless watermelons, rockmelons, pumpkins, mangoes, zucchini, button squash and dragon fruit are serviced. Some growers are not fully convinced they need honey bees to pollinate mangoes but hire bee hives as "insurance". The other crops need bees for pollination. In the case of the seedless watermelons this is a multimillion dollar industry in the NT but would not be possible without honey bees for successful pollination.

In the Kununurra region of Western Australia, the crops pollinated are seedless watermelons, pumpkins, rockmelons, honeydews, and chia with trials being carried out on mangoes, passionfruit, beans and sunflowers. Sandalwood is now being planted in areas that previously were farms so the expansion of the area will be needed if further farming is to continue.

So it can be seen that any agricultural development in northern Australia that relies on pollination by honey bees will also need a commensurate increase in the number of bee hives available for that pollination role. There is a saying in our industry that **food security needs bee security**. Northern Australia is seen as the future food bowl for Australia and for the supply of food to southern States during winter is crucial.

Access to public lands

In north Queensland there are many public lands such as State Forests, recently gazetted National Parks and stock routes which are utilised by beekeepers. These areas are important for two reasons.

1. Building up of hives to carry our pollination and rebuilding those hives once they have carried out the pollination service. Pollination is usually very hard on bees as the area is over stocked with bees to ensure adequate pollination and often the bees are affected by the pesticides used. So it is crucial that areas be available where the bee hive can be returned to a reasonable strength.

In Queensland many areas that were previously State Forests have been converted to National Parks and apiary sites that had been on these State Forest were transferred over to the National Park. However, as the industry has not been large in north Queensland there were not a lot of sites on these State Forests. For any future expansion that may occur, there are limited sites available in these newly created National Parks. So consideration should be given to allowing more sites in these National Parks if the industry expands.

Sites in current State Forests will be available and, under current State legislation, new sites can be created.

2. There is the potential for honey to be produced from these public lands. Whilst beekeepers can achieve a particle income from pollination fees, there needs to be honey produced to make the beekeeping business fully viable. Very choice honey is available from flora on these public lands which is not available elsewhere.

In the Northern Territory, sites were lost from some public lands. Again it is crucial that the beekeepers have the maximum area available so as to keep the business viable. Often these areas are close to the beekeepers base so it means that savings are available in fuel and truck costs. Having to travel further to either rehabilitate hives or produce honey means that the profitability of the business suffers.

Diseases

Many of the common diseases of honey bees are present in northern Australia. However the Northern Territory is free of many of these and currently has a ban on the importation of live bees, other than queen bees, and second hand equipment.

The diseases present are:-

American foulbrood – *Paenibacillus larvae*

Small hive beetle - *Aethina tumida*

Chalkbrood – *Ascospaera apis*

Various viruses including sacbrood and Kashmir bee virus are present

Small hive beetle is now well established in north Queensland and is responsible for the loss of many hives. As this is a pest of honey bees along the east coast of Australia, it is hoped that research being conducted will allow a control method to be found for this pest. It is not as big a problem in the Kununurra area.

Northern Australia has a pest that is not common to the rest of Australia. It is the rainbow bee eater (*Merops ornatus*). These birds can sit at an apiary and swoop down and eat thousands of bees. When they are in the area, the bees will stay in the hive and not go out to forage.

Pesticides

With all the agriculture in the area comes the need to use pesticides. It is well known that pesticides kill bees. However in many areas there is a good relationship built up between the farmer and the beekeeper.

As an example, in Kununurra, one beekeeper is told by the grower if he is spraying a highly dangerous chemical and the beekeeper can lock up the hives to prevent the bees from flying and the spraying is carried out at night. For the not so deadly chemicals, spraying at night will mean that by morning, when the bees go out to forage, the effect of the chemical has dissipated.

In the Katherine region, one beekeeper says he expects to lose up to 35% of his hives during the season due to exposure to chemicals.

With the use of chemicals, a problem has been identified in southern Australia where there have been significant losses of bees due to pesticide poisoning. It would seem that the enforcement of directions on the label is the responsibility of the States. There seems to be different interpretations of the label by different States or even different Departments within that State.

As this Inquiry is looking at two States and one Territory there remains the possibility that different interpretations of the label could be made by the various authorities. So whilst the label is approved by one authority, the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority, the enforcement is by States and Territories. There would appear to be a case to look at uniform enforcement across all States and Territories.

Biosecurity and border protection

Sadly there has been an incursion of the Asian bee (*Apis cerana* Java genotype) in the Cairns region and Governments decided against continuing eradication despite there being insufficient evidence that the eradication program would not work. This will have serious repercussions for trade of live bees from Australia to the rest of the world.

As Governments have now walked away, the beekeeping industry has been lobbying the Queensland Government to have a control line put in place along the latitude of Cardwell in an effort to re-open the live bee trade with the USA and the possibility exists that Canada will require some control measures to be put in place. To date this lobbying has been unsuccessful.

There are Asian bees on the top most islands in Torres Strait, having come across from Papua New Guinea, and have been there since about 1993. So far they have not naturally migrated to the next island, Gabba. It would seem that the distance is too far. However the possibility does exist that these Asian bees could accidentally be brought down to mainland Australia by boat or even to islands further south with Torres Strait from where they could island hop to mainland Australia.

These Asian bees do have the varroa mite (*Varroa jacobsoni*) with them. It was fortunate that the swarm that established in Cairns did not have the varroa mite on it. However should the Asian bee come from Torres Strait to the Cairns region and bring varroa mite with them, there is a big reservoir of Asian bees present in the Cairns region in which the varroa mite would readily breed thus putting the honey bees at risk.

Programs such as the Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) are crucial in keeping pests out of northern Australia. The beekeeping industry is fully supportive of the NAQS program having actively engaged with the staff over many years now.

With the proximity of the area to Asia, where most of the exotic bee pests are located, it is crucial that border security be kept at a high standard so these pests do not enter Australia. We have already had the Asian bee incursion in Cairns.

In 1998, there was an incursion of the Asian bee in Darwin but fortunately the nest was found before it could swarm and start other colonies in the area.

- **Provide recommendations to:-**

Enhance trade and other investment links with the Asia-Pacific

Establish a conducive regulatory, taxation and economic environment

Address impediments to growth; and

Set conditions for private investment and innovation

In the past there have been several attempts to export honey directly from the northern part of Australia to Asia. One enterprise used to send bulk honey directly to Singapore from Darwin. With the moving away of the major beekeeper and better prices in Australia, the trade dropped off. One of the draw backs for export is that in northern Australia there is often a couple of years between good honey flows so being able to continually service an export market has its difficulties.

The other was prepacked honey from the Atherton Tablelands to Japan. However the global financial crisis came at the wrong time, just as the business was building, and exports stopped. There have been enquiries since so export of pre packed honey to Japan from northern Australia is still a possibility.

One obstacle in exporting is the tariff imposed on Australian honey by countries worldwide. Looking at the Asian countries, which are the closest to northern Australia, typical tariffs imposed are China 15%, Japan over 25%, India 60% and Korea can range from 150% to 250%. Many of these hopefully will be addressed in the current round of Free Trade Agreements (FTA). Disappointingly, the FTA with South Korea did not include honey. Let us hope that future FTA's will include honey.

If there was an expansion of the beekeeping industry in northern Australia, the opportunity to again export honey into Asia would exist.

- **Identify the critical economic and social infrastructure needed to support the long term growth of the region, and ways to support planning and investment in that infrastructure**

Freight

When talking with beekeepers in the northern parts of Australia there is one common theme that is always mentioned – freight. There is only a limited market for the sale of honey in the local areas. Any extra needs to be shipped to a honey packer in the southern parts of Australia. For Queensland beekeepers that usually means shipping to Brisbane. For Northern Territory beekeepers it means shipping to Adelaide and in Western Australia it would be shipped to Perth.

Whilst there can be some savings in obtaining rates for back loads from north to south, the higher costs are involved when empty honey containers need to be shipped back from the south to the north. Even one way trip containers need to be shipped empty from south to north.

Then there is the need to obtain equipment which usually has to be sourced from beekeeping equipment manufacturers which are normally situated in the southern areas. This means high freight costs as the cost from south to north is greater than north to south.

Fuel and roads

Along with all people in the north, the cost of fuel is much higher than in southern States and thus adds to the production costs for industry. Whilst there is not much that can be done for reducing the cost of fuel, primary industry does have the fuel tax rebate scheme which is a big help in keeping production costs down. There is talk of this scheme being axed. AHBIC would submit that this scheme should be kept in place.

Roads are crucial for the beekeeping industry as it is highly migratory and bees are often shifted long distances. It is crucial for our industry that the road infrastructure is kept in good condition and expanded to allow for access to different areas.

Trevor Weatherhead
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Australian Honey Bee Industry Council
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