SUBMISSION

The Future Development of the Australian honey bee industry

Summary

This submission is that of an amateur or hobbyist beekeeper. As such, it is view of the industry, its current situation and its achievable future, through the eyes of a devoted practitioner, not unduly concerned with the profitability of his craft. Nevertheless it is submitted in the hope that future generations of beekeepers will be able to continue a craft that is at least centuries old.

Beekeeping over the centuries has attracted to it, practitioners from all walks of life, famous, infamous and a myriad of ordinary people. It has in the past and to this very day, offered those with drive and a strong back, a reasonable living, whilst remaining affordable from the outset, and requiring little or no formal education.
I know of no other.

Submission

The submission covers but two of the seven topics listed in the Media Release of 26th March 2007, chaired by Alby Schultz

viz.
Role in agriculture and forestry
Bio-security issues

1. Role in agriculture and forestry

Doubtless many other submissions to this enquiry will explain the value, added to agriculture, through apiculture. Regardless of any negative impact honeybees may be considered by some to have on the environment, they are invaluable, when it comes to providing the population with food for the table.
Much of fruit industry, and all of the almond, apple and pear industry is totally dependant upon honeybee pollination.[1] In suburban backyards and very small orchards this pollination is often accomplished by honeybees living in unmanaged, feral communities in hollow trees nearby orchards. The larger fruit orchards pay beekeepers to bring their hives into the orchards to ensure that complete pollination takes place in the crucial weeks of flowering.

It has been estimated that the value to agriculture added by the honeybee in this country alone, is of the order of $1.7 billion annually.[2]

2. Bio-security issues

Honeybees along with all other forms of life, have pests and suffer diseases. Beekeepers in Australia have learned to manage their hives well in the past minimizing the impact of diseases and pests, yet doing so without resorting to the heavy use of insecticides and antibiotics. This has helped Australian honey achieve an international reputation of purity. Australia is among the top five honey exporters, and the producer of one of the finest and least contaminated honeys.[3]

However, there is one pest we have not as yet had to deal with, namely a mite called varroa. Mites are not insects, but belong to the family of spiders and scorpions. They are probably charming little things in their own right, but these particular mites cause massive damage to beekeeping wherever they and honeybees coexist.

Should an incursion of varroa lead to it establishing itself throughout Australia, all feral hives will be destroyed. Only the best managed of bee-hives will survive, and currently, this can only be done through the use of insecticides administered in such a way that the mites but not the bees are affected. The use of this insecticide however will ensure that Australian honey loses its contaminant free status. The absence of feral hives will necessitate orchardists paying for pollination services, and thereby raising the cost of agricultural production.

Australia is the only significant honey producing country in the world that doesn't harbour varroa. It is very nearly the only place on Earth that is free of it. Beekeepers and the honey industry see it as inevitable that the mite will arrive on our shores and have spent some considerable time and effort in monitoring likely arrival points with sentinel hives, hoping to be alerted early of an invasion.

The industry cannot rely on its own early detection of an incursion, nor can it expect to manage the eradication of the incursion on its own. Considering the many millions and perhaps billions of dollars of agricultural harm that varroa would unleash, I beg of the federal government to do three things.

Recommendation

Firstly, that the federal government ensure that the relevant ministers become conversant with the current value of the honeybee industry to other agriculture, and to the likely costs in terms of agricultural loss, should varroa become endemic.

Secondly, to ensure that every effort is undertaken at airports and sea terminals to minimise the likelihood of varroa coming in undetected.

Thirdly, that a strategy for containing any outbreak be prepared, a task force organized and a system of containment be thoroughly considered.

The writer of this submission is confident that every beekeeping association throughout the country would volunteer its members and lend its expertise should they be required.

Submission author.

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References

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