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Tuesday, 4 February 2014

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: A Submission to the Senate inquiry into the future of the beekeeping and pollination service industries in Australia

Dear Secretary,

Lucerne Australia is the peak industry body for the Australian lucerne seed industry and is based in south-east South Australia. Our vision is to lead and enhance a sustainable Australian lucerne seed industry.

The overall lucerne seed industry in Australia is currently worth around \$AUD 95 million per year with exports contributing around \$AUD 30 million and domestic sales of \$AUD 8.7 million. The remainder of the value lies in associated inputs and the allied industries (eg. seed processors and marketers) that are crucial to the lucerne seed value and supply chain (*Economic Analysis, lucerne seed industry RIRDC publication no. 08-103*)

Honeybee pollination services provide significant value to agriculture and horticulture in Australia. Honeybees are significant pollinators of many crops, including lucerne, due to the efficiency of their foraging activities.

The health and viability of bees is closely aligned with the operation of the lucerne seed industry in the upper- and mid-south east of South Australia and in Western Victoria.

Pests and Diseases

There are many pest and diseases that can have a serious impact on the productivity of the honeybee. In particular, varroa mite remains the serious threat to the industry and has destroyed honeybee populations around the world. The lucerne seed industry in Australia supports enhanced biosecurity efforts to ensure exotic pests such as varroa are not able to be introduced or spread in Australia.

Australia is the last food production area in the world which is free of varroa mite. The presence and impact of varroa mites into Australia would have a substantial impact on all agricultural crops which are reliant on bees for pollination. There would also be a negative impact on native vegetation currently pollinated by both managed and feral bees.

Australia is a clean and green producer of food with an emphasis on skilled and conscientious producers. We are fortunate we are to have a varroa mite free status. The incursion of the Asian honey bee in Queensland in 2007 (a known carrier of varroa mites), highlights the importance of being proactive rather than reactive.

Therefore, government investment and industry leadership is required to establish a robust, endemic disease program focused on varroa mite, as well as Small Hive Beetle (SHB), American Foulbrood bacteria (AFB) and other diseases. The procurement of additional inspectors to implement programs is recommended.

Feral bee contribution

Feral bees are essential contributors to the seed set of lucerne plants. However, lucerne seed growers cannot identify the level of their contribution.

Lucerne Australia conducted a telephone survey with 56 grower members in April 2013. Growers were asked for their first preference for R&D investment in the next 2-5 years from the following list:

1. Pollination: self-pollinating bees and/or impact of wild bees
2. Integrated Pest Management strategies.
3. Weed control: resistance testing and/or alternative management options.
4. Seed varieties: new varieties tested on dryland and irrigated sites.
5. Animal nutrition: maximising animal productivity on lucerne and minimising losses

Pollination was clearly the preferred option for R&D investment in the next 2-5 years with 24 growers (over 40%) selecting this as their first choice.

Consequently, Lucerne Australia would like to see more government and industry investment into the contribution of feral bees. This will how much feral bees contribute to pollination and determine how reliant we are on managed honeybee colonies.

Lucerne seed grower comments from the survey:

*"Can we pollinate without bees? Need to make more of the bees we've got? Maybe breeding lucerne varieties that don't require pollination is one approach. The other items on the list are insignificant – minor things – without pollination being right. The pollination issue is a big one which will take a lot of money over many years". – **Grower response***

*"Pollination is critical. I'd like to understand what the contribution is from feral bees and quantify this. It will assist to rate the importance of existing bees". – **Grower response***

Lucerne Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide the Standing Committee with this submission.

Kind regards,

Warrick Thorpe
Chairman