

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

24 March 2014

Dear Mr Watling,

Please find enclosed my submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's inquiry into the future of beekeeping and pollination service industries in Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Committee. Please note I would be willing to appear before the Committee in a public hearing for this inquiry.

Kind regards

Robert Johnstone

## Introduction

My name is Robert Johnstone

I am 70 years of age and have been involved with Bee keeping for around 25 years.

I started off with 18 hives and now manage around 100 hives for Woolenook Fruits which is a mixed fruit growing property at Murtho in the Riverland of South Australia.

Woolenook Fruits has about 40 hectares of almonds .They have their own bees as it is difficult to be able to source this small amount of hives needed for almond pollination by Woolenook Fruits .

Normally a Bee keeping operation of this size would follow the floral activity and travel far but we are almost unique in that we do not travel more than 50ks from where Woolenook Fruits have their almonds.

This is because Woolenook have access for their bees to nectar and pollen from pumpkin and melon growing properties all within 50ks of Woolenook Fruits .

Because of our isolation we view all bees coming into the Riverland area as potential threats . In the past diseases such as Chalkbrood and AFB have been brought into the Riverland by Beekeepers from other states as well as beekeepers from other areas in SA.

However because of the threat of varroa and other pests and diseases we realise the need for all beekeepers to come together if we are to have a viable Honeybee industry.

Although I have no formal training over the past five or six years I have used the internet to increase my understanding of beekeeping in Australia and the challenges that are confronting the Australian Honey bee industry.

## Terms of reference

This submission does not seek to address all of the Committee's terms of reference.

**(b) *Current challenges facing the beekeeping industry domestically and internationally, and its future sustainability.***

### *Improving bee stocks*

I believe more needs to improve Australian stocks of European honey bee.

This season, I and other beekeepers I know have struggled to maintain hive strength in many hives because of the ravages of chalkbrood, which has been further compounded by earlier outbreaks of *Nosema apis* (and possibly *Nosema ceranae*).

It is recommended as a strategy to help manage chalkbrood to 're-queen' hives affected with the disease with queens from chalk brood resistant stock. Unfortunately this trait is not found in many of the queens that are marketed.

#### *Crown land access*

I consider that a fairer and more 'user-friendly' system needs to be put in place to better manage beekeepers' access to Crown land.

Keeping hives on good forage is part of maintaining healthy hives, and some Crown lands are highly suitable for this purpose.

I recently inquired about applying to have a bee site in forested Crown land adjacent to where I normally keep my bees. There was some confusion over who managed the area. There was also a \$380 application fee in addition to a \$70 annual site fee. Considering that many sites such as this do not provide an annual crop of honey (for example, red gum sites provide excess honey, on average, in three out of every 10 years), and that flowering at such sites often only lasts 3-4 weeks, beekeepers require numerous sites to maintain forage.

It can be quite frustrating and time-consuming to deal with departments for access to Crown land, particularly given the financial risk associated with receiving little to no return for this access.

#### **(c)     *The adequacy of the current biosecurity arrangements for imported and exported honey, apiary products, package bees and queen bees.***

##### *Expanding biosecurity*

I consider that Australian authorities should seek ways in which they can be involved in the monitoring of vessels and aircraft destined for Australia prior to their departure from overseas ports and airports.

In the past 20 years, biosecurity breaches have resulted in chalkbrood, small hive beetle and the Asiatic honey bee (*Apis cerana*) establish themselves in Australia.

Chalkbrood and small hive beetle have already created serious management problems for Australian beekeepers, while the experience of the Solomon Islands suggest *Apis cerana* may wipe out European honey bee populations where it is established in Australia.

Attempts to eradicate *Apis cerana* from its point of entry at Cairns failed, and given that no country has ever eradicated varroa mite, it makes sense for Australian authorities – if possible – to be

involved in off-shore monitoring of export consignments to prevent this destructive pest from reaching our shores.

At present, Australia has a National Sentinel Hive Program in place in areas where it is thought an incursion of varroa mite would most likely occur. The fundamental problem with the program is that it is predicated on an incursion which has occurred – it does not prevent incursions. More needs to be done to keep varroa mite – and other bee pests and diseases – out of Australia.

If a varroa mite incursion does happen, it's considered this would most likely brought on European honey bees entering Australia as the Asiatic honey bee hosts a milder form of varroa. However, the Asiatic honey bee hosts other mite species that would seriously impact the Australian industry. *Apis dorsata*, a large Asian bee, would also cause problems if it established itself in Australia.

All bee incursions into Australia over the past 20 years appear to have been by sea. From the information available to me, I consider these ship-borne hives had to be established on the ships well before leaving for Australia, otherwise they would not have survived in transit. Hence my recommendation for Australia to be more actively involved in monitoring of Australian ships at overseas ports.

I do not suggest Australian authorities take an adversarial attitude towards other countries in this respect, but rather offer training and incentives for countries to adopt a more stringent approach when monitoring ships destined for Australia.

**(f) Any related matters.**

*Controlling the spread of disease by feral bees, and the nuisance effect of feral bees*

Earlier this year my local newspaper published a story of mine in which I related my concerns about people's belief that bees – particularly feral bees – were under threat and that because of this belief, people were reluctant to remove hives found in their houses or backyards.

I pointed out that Australian feral bees are actually doing quite well, as the main threat to their health was the varroa mite, which is not present in Australia. I also pointed out these feral swarms could harbour disease, and that it was preferable to remove them not only for this reason but also to ensure hives did not swarm onto neighbouring properties. Some swarms can be quite nasty when they build up in strength and threaten humans.

I believe more could be done in controlling feral bees in suburban areas, with public awareness measures and with local government possibly offering a subsidy to those who seek to remove feral swarms from their backyards.