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The future of the beekeeping and pollination service industries in Australia

HISTORY

When the Europeans first settled America and Australia they soon found that their food crops, due to the lack of pollination, were failing. After many attempts, they successfully introduced European Honey Bees and both colonies prospered into strong countries with sound economies.

The honey bee was imported into Australia in 1822 as the crops were also suffering and therefore the colonists were suffering from diseases such as scurvy. Australia has been a supplier to the world of quality food ever since that time.

In 1942 the South Australian government with the support of the Commonwealth government established a queen bee breeding program on Kangaroo Island. This action was to ensure that Australia had access to good quality queens in order to protect the food supply by way of pollination for both the country and their fighting forces..

To ensure Food Security, we need Bee Security.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The importance of these industries from a food security, environmental and financial point of view;

In the past, the pollination services in Australia have largely been provided by the vast number of feral European honey bees, which existed in the natural environment adjacent to the farmlands.

The development of large scale monoculture farming practices over vast areas of land has eliminated the availability of feral European Honey Bees and the native pollinators which in the past provided the incidental pollination.

In recent years, the demand for professional pollination services has been recognised as an essential part of food production, to ensure quality products, consistent size and shape and adequate returns per hectare to meet the market demand.

It is estimated that approximately 450 commercial apiarists provide the hives currently under contract for paid pollination Australia wide.

This service is estimated at between \$5 billion and \$7 billion to the Australian economy.

The South Australia Strategic Plan has a projection to increase food production to \$20 billion by the year 2020. In order to achieve this figure, the pollination industry will have to both grow and provide healthy strong bees in order to meet the requirements.

Local and international consumers are now demanding food of high quality, perfect shape and complete seed set. This cannot be achieved without the introduction of pollination service adequate to cover the complete acreage of planting.

The estimate of crops requiring pollination service in South Australia has been valued at \$500 million in a paper prepared by Coles and Willmott. This paper stated that 37 of the food products grown in South Australia required the introduction of commercially prepared honey bees in order to set the crop.

2. Current challenges facing the beekeeping industry domestically and internationally, and its future sustainability;

Access to native vegetation where there is an abundant supply of pollens of various quality and a supply of nectar is necessary to build strong bees suitable for pollination or honey harvesting. Australian apiarists are experiencing difficulty in accessing much of the native vegetation due to the policy of restricted access being adopted by Government Land Managers.

The natural environment, as well as providing the necessary nutrients to support bee health, acts as a protection area where bees can be rehabilitated after performing a monoculture crop pollination service. These monoculture crops consist of one variety of pollen and, in many cases, the protein content is inadequate in supplying a balanced diet to support the bee colony.

With the advent of large scale monoculture crops and the use of herbicides to control all weeds and plants considered alien to the crop, access to the natural environment is critical to provide the variety of diet required to ensure health bees.

This policy of restricted access needs to be reviewed and conditions of access for apiarists need to be written recognizing the environmental awareness of the apiarists.

Australian honey bees is free of many of the problems which are causing great concern in other countries. Therefore, we must protect our borders in order to prevent the importation and incursion of apiary products or genetic material which could put at risk the integrity of the Australian product.

Evidence from countries such as United States, Europe and New Zealand clearly indicate

that the production of quality food is seriously effected by the outbreak of such diseases as colony collapse disorder and pests such as varroa mite.

3. The adequacy of the current biosecurity arrangements for imported and exported honey, apiary products, package bees and queen bees.

A concise quality standard for Australian honey needs to be written which reflects the true unadulterated quality of apiary products produced by Australian Apiarists.

The current standard simply allows Australia to be a dumping point for any sub standard honey in the world which is unacceptable in many other trading countries. This is then blended with the Australian product and is sold as 'Product of Australia'. This can then be sold on the domestic market or exported into the world trade. This has caused great concern in the past for the Australian producer when our product is condemned for containing chemicals not permitted to be used in Australian food production.

The current biosecurity arrangements for importing apiary products fall short in its ability to protect the Australian honey bee industry. The industry and Government must form a greater alliance in order to manage the port surveillance necessary to protect any incursion being established on our shores.

Australia has a good record in preventing the introduction of such pests and diseases, e.g. the screw worm, fly and foot and mouth disease and with care and planning this security should apply to the Apiculture Industry.

I would submit that due to the vast distances travelled by the Australian apiarists in order to service hives and access resources, that any incursion once established in Australia could become endemic. This would seriously affect the pollination result in many crops. Currently thousands of honey bee colonies are shipped from southern Queensland southern Victoria and the western border of South Australia onto almond orchards covering approximately 150km of the river Murray almond growing orchards. These orchards being totally dependent on European honey bees for a crop would suffer serious financial loss for a period of at least 4 or 5 years should a problem such as Colony Collapse Disorder or Varroa Mite be introduced into the area. This would then flow over to the lucerne pollination in the South Eastern corner of Australia.

Australia as a priority should conduct an import risk assessment in order to determine the diseases and pests not present in Australia and therefore actions we should take to prevent their introduction.

4. Australia's food labelling requirements, and how these affect the beekeeping industry.

The Australian food labelling requirements are causing concern to many industries within

Australia and this includes the Apiculture industry.

Recently the industry submitted samples of a product called 'Victorian Honey' to the government authorities for assessment. This product it would appear had no relationship to honey or honey bee activity but was presented to the consumer who believed it to be a quality health product of Australia.

As yet we are still to be advised of what action is to be taken.

Australia has the ability to produce some of the finest quality food in the world. Many industries are now complaining about the lack of protection against products which are not produced under the same strict safety conditions as in this country.

5. The recommendations from the House Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Resources 2008 report More than Honey; the future of the Australian honey bee and pollination industries, and the Rural Affairs and Transport references Committee 2011 report Science underpinning the inability to eradicate the Asian honey bee; and ;

The 'More than Honey' report of 2008 was accepted by the industry and many industries dependent on pollination as an excellent document which, if implemented, would support and protect the industry. The recommendations made in that report are still valid and the submissions made to that inquiry are well worth reviewing in the context of this inquiry.

It is a great disappointment to the industry that such an important document has been neglected for over 6 years. This in action has had the potential to put food security in this country at risk.

6. Any related matters.

The Australian natural environment produces many varieties of honey, pollen and propolis which have pharmaceutical properties and could be useful in sustaining human health. With the current situation where bacteria is mutating and becoming resistant to many of our antibiotics, these products may well be a very useful product to promote human health.

Apiarists can access the honey, pollen and propolis by using well prepared bee colonies and will leave no impact on the environment from which they have been harvested.

One area that should be addressed in this inquiry is a maximum residue level set for oxy tetracycline allowed in Australian honey. Currently the Australian level is set at .3mg/kg which arguably is the highest in the world. This level will have serious side effects for the industry in the near future should the use of these chemicals continue as is.

The establishment of a National Centre for honey bee and pollination industry research

training and extension would be beneficial in securing food production and bee security in the future. This is in line with the recommendation 24 and 16 of the “More Than Honey” report 2007.

This recommendation needs to be put into place sooner rather than later in order to establish linkages between the pollination providers and the pollination dependent industries.

As history indicated, the introduction of European Honey Bees was critical to provide the necessary pollination services to sustain a healthy population. The situation has now become that we need to create a healthy and protective environment for European honey bees in order to maintain the production of quality foods.

Food Security needs Bee Security.

Yours faithfully

Leigh Duffield

I am prepared to attend the hearings on 15th April 2014 at Murray Bridge should my contribution be seen as useful. Further, if the committee is available on Wednesday, 16th April we would like to meet with the committee on Almond orchards, pack houses and other food producing enterprises in the Loxton area.