

MONSONS HONEY & APIARY PRODUCTS

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

Dear Secretary

SUBMISSION Re: Science Underpinning the Inability to Eradicate the Asian Honeybee

I am a commercial beekeeper and pollination specialist provider, having worked in the beekeeping and agricultural industries for more than 40 years, in several eastern states, and based near Mildura, on the border of NSW and Victoria. I have been both a member and chair of the Victorian Beekeepers Association and participated in several research projects, both here and overseas. More recently, I have been on the government Rural Industries Research and Development committee for Honey Bees and currently I am on the RIRDC committee for Pollination Research and Development. As I am closely involved with a large number of beekeepers and industry research, I consider I am in touch with the needs, feelings and thoughts of the beekeeping industry and the agricultural industries that depend on honeybee pollination. I manage the largest pollination contract in Australia, supplying some 120,000 hives this year for 80% of almonds grown in Australia, located in NW Victoria, Hillston NSW and South Australia. Subsequently, I am representing my honey and pollination business, the almond farms I service, the welfare and income of the 240 beekeepers I have on my database (which is constantly growing), the beekeeping industry as a whole, its research, honey producers, packaged queens and bee producers, and pollination services.

Our business pollinates a variety of vegetable, fruit and seed crops, but by far the bulk of our income comes from pollinating almonds, worth some \$9 million this year. The almond industry relies solely on honeybees to pollinate the crop – simply put ‘no bees, no nuts’. In fact it has been estimated that some 65% of all our food production needs bees, whether they are essential to produce a crop or whether they are used to increase production, improve size, colour and/or keeping qualities. Crop needs and requirements are fully outlined in the book, published by RIRDC: ‘Pollination Aware – the Real Value of Pollination in Australia’, and its associated case studies for the main crops grown in Australia that benefit from honeybee pollination. However, many growers are still relying on the country’s large feral bee population, so are unaware of how important honeybees are going to be in the future, if bee numbers are reduced.

The value of honeybee pollination to agriculture is huge, and demand for honeybees will continue to increase dramatically as industries continue to grow, and even more so when bees are affected by pests and diseases and become scarce. This year the almond industry is expected to hire around 200,000

hives to produce \$250 million of almonds. By 2015 production is expected to double to \$500 million, using a significantly higher number of hives. This example is just one of many industries that need honeybees, proving that even though the beekeeping industry may be small, bees are vitally important to this country's production and economy, and require support and protection.

Pollinating the almond orchards is no easy task and involves a huge investment of time and money, not only by me and my team, but by the beekeepers, who are planning and preparing bees for most of the year. I am constantly on the phone, negotiating, recruiting, organizing, training, consulting, supporting and preparing my contractors to provide the number and strength of bees required to pollinate the orchards during the cold, wet and windy month of August. Investing in vehicles and equipment has also been necessary to facilitate the operation. Beekeepers come with their bees on B-Doubles, Semis, trucks, utes and trailers from Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia. West Australian packaged bees are also part of the operation.

So, when anything threatens the security and welfare of beekeepers and their bees, it also affects the crops they pollinate, farmers' and workers' incomes, jobs and livelihoods, the supply and cost of food they produce, numerous local businesses that supply goods and services, local towns and economies, and the list goes on. For this reason, I am concerned that the government has announced that they will cease to eradicate the Queensland incursion of the Asian Bee, *Apis cerana javana*. I find it hard to understand that even after years of promoting the importance of protecting our bees; for Australian agriculture, our environment, and the food we eat; that government could think about giving up, when so much is at stake.

I have worked with the Asian cerana bee in Thailand and Laos, but apparently this strain from Java is somewhat different. Information says that it's aggressive, it competes with the European honeybee (*apis mellifera*) and native animals and birds for pollen and nectar, and takes over nesting places. It's not an affective honey producer, it invades bee hives and robs their stored honey when food supplies are short, and swarms prolifically. It disrupts queen rearing and hive buildup which is essential for preparing for pollination.

To me, the fact that the Asian Bee is a natural host for varroa mite presents the most frightening scenario. Unlike our European Bee, this bee manages to co-exist with the mite. Industry and government surveillance have been working to prevent and prepare for the incursion of varroa for some time. Varroa now inhabits most countries of the world, including New Guinea and New Zealand, destroying wild and domestic bees wherever it goes. Many beekeepers don't have the means to start again and have no choice but leave the industry. Adherence to strict and costly treatment methods and regimes is the only way to survive, resulting in dramatically reduced hive numbers and increased cost of honey production and pollination services. Having the Asian Bee already living here, will provide the perfect vehicle for varroa to enter silently and spread without detection, for quite some time. Even more worrying is the possibility of the Asian bee constantly reinfecting our bees with varroa. These mites not only suck the 'blood' from their host, but leave an open wound that encourages the entry of other debilitating viruses and infections which together deform and destroy the bee. Reinfection would easily double the already increased cost of inspecting and treating managed hives. More treatments would further weaken hives, reducing their limited life span and affect production even more dramatically. It is hard enough to manage bees with varroa, let alone constant reinfection. I would estimate that this cost alone would far outweigh any cost to eradicate the Asian Bee.

No one can be sure how badly this bee will affect us in Australia. We can only go on what has happened in other countries – the most disturbing being the decimation of 2,000 hives to just 5 in eight years in

the Solomon Islands. No two countries are exactly alike. But, we do know that its affects will be significant to catastrophic, especially when it facilitates an incursion of varroa.

Anyone would be crazy to think that seeing this bee is tropical it will naturally be contained within the tropics. Having seen where Asian Bees live in Thailand and Laos, there is no indication that it won't spread quickly to most parts of Australia, and exist quite happily along our rivers and streams, including the Murray Darling basin. This Asian Bee has the potential to significantly impact the health and number of our wild and domestic honeybee population, the crops they pollinate, the survival of our native flora and fauna, and increase the occurrence of bee stings. In turn, the Asian Bee will affect beekeepers, growers, the public, and ultimately our country, in time, effort, money, food supply and lost income.

The beekeeping industry is small, but demands for pollination are increasing, and will increase further as threats to wild and domestic bees increase. I don't know how severely our pollination commitment will be affected in the short term, but going by the information that the Asian Bee disrupts queen rearing and hive buildup, we will definitely struggle to find bees with sufficient strength. But, with the addition of varroa, the shortage will be extreme. Only a small percentage of Australia's 10,000 beekeepers have commercial operations, and are aging. So, we are relying on the younger generation and hobby beekeepers to become producers. I contract beekeepers with just 15 hives all the way through to 6,000 hives to fulfill my contract, because I want to see them grow and experience what it's like to be a good beekeeper and be rewarded for a job well done. The more threats hit our industry, the harder and more expensive it is for someone to begin or stay in it. Our industry needs help to grow, not fall by the way, as too many depend on us.

On behalf of us all, I am appealing for government help and commitment to save our bees. A good start is seriously investing in the eradication of the Asian Bee. It has been estimated that the program needs an input of 10 million dollars over the next 2 years to be affective. Beekeepers are more than willing to do the work, but need organization, support and financial backing. Reports seem to indicate that the eradication program was just getting into full swing when the decision was made to stop. The next step would be to implement the recommendations outlined in the "2008 More Than Honey" report by allocating \$50 million a year to maintain healthy bee populations to secure our food supply. And thirdly, to provide funding for the establishment and operation of the Co-operative Research Centre for Bee Research and Food Security.

I think the decision to stop the Asian Bee eradication program is premature. I don't believe the program has been given enough time or enough resources to prove that eradication is impossible. I also believe that the beekeeping industry should be allowed more input and involvement in its execution. The health and status of the honeybee is a serious situation, and we owe it to our country's future to protect them, no matter the cost.

Please contact me for further information if needed.

Regards

Trevor Monson

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Pollination Specialist and Provider