



Australian Government

**Australian Government response to the Senate Rural and
Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
report:**

**Future of the beekeeping and pollination service
industries in Australia**

March 2015

Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee report on the *Future of the beekeeping and pollination service industries in Australia*.

The Australian Government recognises the contribution of the honey bee industry to the Australian community, providing honey and other apiary products and pollination services to crop industries. Insect pollination can be important to the production of many horticultural crops and some broadacre crops and pastures. The exact benefit of honey bee pollination to Australian agriculture is difficult to quantify, but is almost certainly valued in the billions of dollars.

The Senate committee tabled its report six years after the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Resources tabled its report *More than honey: the future of the Australian honey bee and pollination industries*. Work undertaken by the government in response to that report focused largely on the labelling of agricultural chemicals and honey bee biosecurity—in response to concerns expressed in evidence to that inquiry on the possible establishment of *Varroa destructor* (varroa mite) in Australia. The Department of Agriculture summarised this work in its submission to the Senate inquiry.

The government notes the emphasis on the effect of insecticides, particularly neonicotinoid class insecticides, on bee health in submissions and evidence to the inquiry. As the committee noted, the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) has reviewed the available international evidence on the effect of neonicotinoids on honey bee health and the decisions made by other international agricultural chemical and veterinary medicine regulators.

Scientists at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) are playing a role in global research networks to better understand the causes of declining bee health in many parts of the world. More recent innovation by CSIRO scientists has led to enormous improvement in microsensor technology for tracking bees in and around hives and the opportunity for new insights into hive health and bee response to diseases or chemicals.

The CSIRO is establishing an international alliance of researchers, in collaboration with beekeepers and farmers, to advance our knowledge of factors damaging bee health around the world. Through this new initiative the CSIRO will connect Australian research communities with leading international research institutions, technology companies, beekeepers and primary producers.

The government also notes the concern in submissions to the inquiry about the effects of the possible future establishment of varroa mite on the Australian beekeeping industry and the broader agricultural sector. Through various agencies and programs the government invests in activities to keep Australia free from varroa mite and, should it arrive here, to eradicate it. Should varroa mite become established in Australia the government has also been preparing to assist beekeepers to manage it and assist farmers to manage their crop pollination needs. These activities include maintaining Australia's world-class border biosecurity arrangements, funding fundamental research on varroa mite genetics, improving crop pollination by managed honey bees, increasing effectiveness of wild pollinators and extending information on varroa mite identification and management.

The *Future of the beekeeping and pollination service industries in Australia* report provides a useful review of the current state of the industry and policy community's thoughts and ideas. The government thanks the committee and all the contributors to the inquiry for their efforts.

Government response: Majority report

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the government should, in consultation with relevant industry participants and with consideration to world's best practice, develop and establish a national honey bee colony survey scheme to collect reliable and comprehensive data about the industry and inform future decisions. The survey should include the establishment of a residue monitoring project to analyse pesticide residues in plant and bee media.

Noted – a significant number of surveys are already undertaken.

The government supports the existing mechanisms for collecting data and information about honey bee health and the honey bee industry.

The Australian Government Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) is funding a project to survey chemical residues in bee hives adjacent to flowering canola. Chemical residues in beeswax, pollen and honey will be analysed to determine what chemicals are entering colonies of honey bees and the concentrations of any chemicals that are present. The results will be compared with a major study completed in the United States. This project is strongly aligned with the recommendation made in the APVMA's report *Neonicotinoids and the health of honey bees in Australia* (February 2014), which was noted by the committee as background to Recommendation 1. The project is due to report its findings in July 2015.

In addition to this targeted survey, the honey bee industry participates in the Department of Agriculture's National Residue Survey (NRS) National Honey Monitoring program. In 2013–14, 158 honey samples were tested for antibiotics, fungicides, herbicides, insecticides (including neonicotinoids) and environmental contaminants including persistent organic pollutants and metals. No residues above the relevant Australian Standards were found. National Residue Survey results and publications are available online at: www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-food/nrs/nrs-results-publications

RIRDC is also contributing funding to the CSIRO for a project to survey the health of Australian honey bees, focusing on viruses and certain non-viral pathogens (European foulbrood and *Nosema ceranae*). Over two years the CSIRO will collect samples from all Australian states, covering 12 regions that represent key areas for the honey bee industry. Across these regions at least 150 apiaries will be sampled. Brood will be inspected for signs of disease and samples of diseased brood and adult bees will be screened by molecular techniques to detect non-viral pathogens and viruses. This project is due to report its findings in 2015.

The government notes that information on the number of registered beekeepers and bee hives is collected and maintained by state and territory agencies. Estimates of the number of

commercial beekeepers and hives are also reported periodically by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Information on the gross value of production for the honey bee industry is published regularly by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES); its estimate of the volume of commercial honey production is available on request.

ABARES has conducted two national surveys of the physical and financial performance of beekeeping businesses in Australia, published in 2001 and 2008. These surveys were co-funded by the Department of Agriculture (through ABARES) and RIRDC. The government refers the suggestion of a survey of the physical and financial performance of the honey bee industry to RIRDC for consideration and will fully respect RIRDC's judgement on the relative merit of the proposal, recognising there are other competing investment priorities for RIRDC funds.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the government liaise with state and territory land management agencies to establish relevant guidelines to clarify access to public lands for beekeepers within the next 12 months.

Noted – this would primarily be a matter for state and territory governments to progress.

State and territory governments are best placed to progress the intent of this recommendation. Management of public land is likely to be determined by reference to the relevant laws of the state or territory in which the particular land is situated. Access arrangements for beekeepers would need to work within general state land use and land access policies that take into account other industry and land use objectives, resources and access needs.

The Commonwealth's land use practice generally favours multiple uses of relevant land wherever this is compatible with the Commonwealth's use of the relevant land. In this context, 'relevant land' means land in a state or in a territory that is vested in the Commonwealth.

To assist the beekeeping industry to engage with states and territories to progress access issues, RIRDC is currently funding a project to evaluate which types of public lands have management objectives compatible with access by managed European honey bees and those that do not have such objectives. The project will include a review of the different public land tenures in each jurisdiction and any policy documents about the use of public land by beekeepers. Telephone interviews will be conducted with each of the public land management agencies to determine how access arrangements are made and what criteria have been used to decide whether beekeepers should be allowed access or be excluded from particular areas. The project is due to report its findings in February 2015.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the government ensure that beekeeping and pollination services are considered as an integral part of free trade agreement negotiations, and consider the impact current agreements have on the industry.

Noted.

The Australian Government considers all industries when it negotiates free trade agreements (FTAs). The impact of tariffs, quotas and the rules of origin that facilitate the free flow of trade between the Parties are integral to the final provisions of all FTAs. The beekeeping industry is free to make submissions to the government when the intention to negotiate a new FTA is announced, and to consult with the government during the negotiation process.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that AHBIC, Pollination Australia and the Commonwealth Government enter into discussions about the best way forward to enable the pollination industry to make a contribution for pollination services to research and development, and to biosecurity.

Agreed in principle.

The Department of Agriculture has discussed the matter of a statutory levy on pollination services with the Australian honey bee industry on several occasions, and it has been identified as an option to be pursued in the medium term after the current changes to the honey production levy are finalised. This proposal will require a new legislative framework and extensive consultation with pollination dependent industries.

The government notes that Pollination Australia—the alliance of industry organisations representing the interests of the honey bee and honey bee pollination responsive crop industries—is no longer active.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends the categorisation of *Varroa destructor* be completed as a matter of urgency to provide industry with funding certainty in case of an incursion.

Agreed in principle.

The government notes that categorisation of *Varroa destructor* and other bee pests under the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD) can be initiated by any concerned Party to the deed. In the case of bee pests, it could be initiated by the honey bee and pollination dependent industries, a state, territory or the Australian Government. The Department of

Agriculture has been advised that the honey bee industry has commenced preparation of a submission to Plant Health Australia to seek categorisation of *Varroa destructor*. The government further notes that the EPPRD has provisions for cost-sharing of pests that have not been categorised at the time of an incursion and for the government to initially meet an industry's cost sharing obligations. The amount of funding would depend on the circumstances relating to an incursion.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government confirm, and consider enlarging, its commitment to the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program.

Noted.

The National Bee Pest Surveillance Program is funded until 30 June 2015 by the Australian Government, Horticulture Australia Limited and RIRDC (using matched levies and voluntary contributions from the Australian honey bee industry), and managed by Plant Health Australia. The Department of Agriculture has requested that a review of the program be undertaken before funding ceases to assess its effectiveness in detecting bee pests and pests of bees. Future investment will be considered after the review is completed.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government give urgent consideration to facilitating efforts by the industry to import suitable varroa-resistant breeding material into Australia, subject to stringent biosecurity safeguards being put in place.

Agreed in principle – subject to competing priorities and the availability of resources.

The Department of Agriculture completed a review of the importation of queen honey bees in 2012. This was in response to continuing interest from the honey bee industry to import new genetic material into Australia to improve the production and disease resistance qualities of local honey bee colonies. Queen honey bees were successfully imported from Europe in 2014 under import conditions based on this review.

Stakeholders have requested that the department undertake an analysis of the biosecurity risks associated with importing bee semen. An import risk analysis of honey bee semen commenced in 2002 but was not completed because of a lack of scientific information on how honey bee diseases are transmitted through semen. Consequently, it was not possible to develop workable biosecurity management conditions to allow honey bee semen to be imported into Australia. However, work done in the 2012 review to reassess the risks posed by importing queen honey bees means that some of the risks for honey bee semen are now better understood.

A RIRDC project to develop a set of markers that are diagnostic for *Apis mellifera scutellata* (Africanised bees), and distinguish this subspecies from commercial and feral populations present in Australia, is nearly complete. Once this project is complete, an assessment can be made of the effectiveness of markers as a diagnostic tool, the cost of these tests and how they can be used in the current import conditions for queen bees or in any future import conditions for semen.

An analysis of the biosecurity risks associated with importing honey bee semen will be considered for inclusion in the department's future work program, subject to competing priorities and the availability of resources.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends the Department of Agriculture consult with relevant industry groups to ensure quarantine concerns are addressed, either as part of the proposed facility relocation or through the establishment of a specific bee-centric facility.

Agreed.

The Department of Agriculture agrees with this recommendation and notes that it has been consulting with relevant industry groups and individual stakeholders on this issue for several years. It will continue to do so to ensure concerns are addressed up to and following operational commissioning of the new bee quarantine facility in Victoria.

The project to design, construct and commission the new post entry quarantine (PEQ) facility has been underway since 2009. Since this time, the department has consulted extensively with staff, affected industries and users of the facility.

Considering a whole-of-life view, the government decided that a single PEQ facility which will meet the needs of all commodities—built, owned and operated by the government—was the most suitable option for the future provision of PEQ services.

A single site provides greater biosecurity control and operational efficiencies including single administration and management oversight, multi-skilling of staff, single supplier services contracts, management of one port of arrival, a single set of operating procedures, and a greater level of assurance in effective emergency back-up facilities for essential services than can be provided at multiple sites.

Extensive evaluations of more than 25 potential locations were considered before settling on a short list and finally deciding on the Mickleham site, which was purchased in 2012.

The location of this single facility was chosen based on a number of criteria, including a careful balance of the needs of several different species that it will house and proximity to an international airport and to the greatest number of commercial industries handling different species and products entering the facility.

Victoria, compared with New South Wales, had a greater selection of suitable sites available within close proximity to an international airport and at a lower cost. The Victorian site is located in a land zoning area designated by the Victorian Government as predominantly light

industrial, so urban encroachment adjacent to the facility is not likely. Victoria is less prone to many vectors of diseases affecting both plant and animal commodities.

It is notable that commercial beekeepers (honey production and pollination services) operate successfully in hotter, colder, wetter and drier areas than the chosen site.

The Department of Agriculture has consulted about the site of the new PEQ facility with the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council (AHBIC), the Federal Council of Australian Apiarists Associations, the Victorian Farmers Federation and the When Bee Foundation. The industry suggested it could provide land at a site owned by the When Bee Foundation in western Sydney and build an industry-operated facility. This proposal was eventually abandoned by industry because it was not cost-effective when taking into account construction, registration, auditing and running costs. This decision was conveyed to the department in correspondence, acknowledging that the Melbourne facility was an acceptable option.

The new PEQ facility proposal was referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works (PWC), and was considered at length by the committee including at a public hearing on 27 March 2013. The committee considered and weighed the issues outlined in submissions from a considerable number of stakeholders and on 15 May 2013 presented its report to the Parliament. It endorsed the proposed design and location of the overall facility in an 'Expediency Motion' (approval) that was passed by the Parliament on 16 May 2013.

Construction of the new PEQ facility commenced in March 2014. The bee compound will be one of the first buildings completed. The Department of Agriculture will continue to work with industry to operationally commission the facility to ensure its operational readiness before the Eastern Creek facility is closed.

This facility will be used to manage biosecurity risk associated with the introduction of bee genetic material to Australia. It is not a queen bee breeding facility. Biosecurity risk management is the primary purpose of the PEQ facility.

The Department of Agriculture has listened to the bee industry and taken its concerns into account during design development. The bee compound has been designed to maximise the time that flight rooms are at a temperature conducive to brood production through, for example, building orientation and light penetration. Suitable plant species that will support local bee hives will be selected for adjacent landscaping purposes.

Biosecurity arrangements for importing queen bees are robust. If varroa mite (the major pest of concern) is ever to become established in Australia, it is likely to enter on a swarm of bees that arrive on a shipping container or yacht rather than through the importation of European queen bees performed in accordance with established biosecurity policy. The department has border processes in place to inspect ships and shipping containers for various agricultural pests, including bees.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends the Department of Agriculture, in consultation with industry groups, review the Import Risk Analysis for honey bee commodities, with a view to protecting the Australian industry and its 'clean, green' reputation.

Noted.

The biosecurity aspects of importing honey bee commodities are currently managed under Section 42 of the Quarantine Proclamation 1998, which allows some products to enter Australia without an import permit—for example, honey (if pure and free of extraneous matter). A review of the biosecurity risks associated with importing honey bee commodities could be considered for inclusion in the department's future work program, but it will be subject to competing priorities and the availability of resources.

With regard to food safety and compliance with Australian food standards, the testing applied to surveillance foods, such as honey, are subject to periodic review. Honey testing is currently being reviewed taking into account Standard 2.8.2 of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code and recent compliance issues that were the subject of action by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government, in consultation with the AHBIC and other relevant stakeholders, investigate the viability and benefits of producing an annual industry report in the terms outlined in paragraph 3.73.

Noted.

The government notes that the committee's proposed annual state of the industry report would be a matter primarily for industry to pursue. The Department of Agriculture would be available to participate with industry to assist the development of the report.

Government response: Additional comments

Recommendation 1

The Government postpone any changes to the reregistration process until specific enforceable requirements are in place relating to the independence of information provided to the APVMA regarding agvet chemicals, and that the registration and re-registration processes require testing on the effect of long-term exposure to these chemicals on native bees and honey bees.

Not agreed.

The *Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals Code Act 1994* was amended to remove requirements to re-approve and re-register agricultural and veterinary chemicals from 21 July 2014. These amendments do not affect the APVMA's ability to request further testing of the effects of chemicals on bees if that information is deemed necessary for registering new chemicals or reviewing existing chemicals.

Data provided to the APVMA in applications for chemical registration should be generated according to an acceptable code of good laboratory practice (GLP)—that is, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) GLP or equivalent—and carried out according to an internationally acceptable test guideline (most commonly the OECD Guidelines for the Testing of Chemicals or the test guidelines published by the US Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention). Studies that are not compliant with GLP and/or are not conducted according to recognised guidelines will be considered case-by-case on their scientific merit. This information is provided to applicants in the APVMA's data guidelines available at: apvma.gov.au/registrations-and-permits/data-guidelines.

It is now common that companies wishing to have new insecticides registered provide regulators with the results of tests to assess the effects of prolonged exposure of bees to sub-lethal doses of the insecticide and looking at the effects on different stages of bee development. Australia has been working with the OECD Pesticide Effects on Insect Pollinators Working Group, which is developing requirements and guidelines for the extended testing of pesticides on insect pollinators (including tests on repeated exposure to low doses and on exposure of bees at different life stages). Australia has also been involved in work by the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry in this area. Australia is working internationally to develop test methods and guidelines and, once agreed, they will be incorporated into the APVMA's data guidelines.

Recommendation 2

The APVMA and/or EPA implement specific 'no spray' zones for chemicals where hives are located or bees are foraging, with particular attention to the off-label use of chemicals.

Noted.

The APVMA is currently conducting a project to review and extend its policy on protecting sensitive areas from spray drift. This project includes an analysis of how best to conduct spray drift risk assessments and to implement mitigation measures on product labels (such as no-spray zones). The need to specifically consider bee hives as a specific off-target site is being investigated as part of this project.

Changes to the current spray drift policy are expected to be developed by early 2015, when public consultations will be held.

Recommendation 3

The Department of Agriculture and other relevant agencies hand down their recommendations in relation to the labelling of chemicals that may impact bee health within the next two months, to be implemented before the end of 2014.

Agreed in principle.

The APVMA, as the statutory agency responsible for assessing and registering agricultural chemicals for use in Australia, must be satisfied with the safety, efficacy, trade and labelling criteria under the *Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals Code Act 1994* and associated regulations, before registering a chemical. As part of this process, the APVMA must be satisfied that the product is safe for animals and the environment when used according to the label instructions.

The APVMA has worked with representatives of the honey bee industry to implement revised pesticide product labelling to reflect the potential impact of pesticides on honey bees and other pollinating insects. This includes developing additional warning and protection statements that indicate specific additional hazards where required. The APVMA has also worked with industry to make more product-specific information available for beekeepers.

Examples of label statements, including reference to specific additional hazards (for example toxicity to bee brood), that should appear under the 'Protection of Livestock' heading (noting that bees are an introduced species and therefore classified as livestock under the legislative framework) are:

- if there is an unacceptable risk to bees—'Highly toxic to bees. Will kill bees foraging in the crop to be treated or in hives which are over-sprayed or reached by spray drift'
- if residues are shown to be toxic—'Residues may remain toxic to bees for several days after application'

- if bee brood effects are a concern—‘Bee brood development may be harmed by exposure to residues transported into the hive by foraging bees, overspray or spray drift’.

The APVMA held a workshop of regulatory stakeholders, including representatives of the honey bee industry, on 24 July 2013 in relation to more detailed safe-use instructions. Examples of new insecticide labels that the APVMA now requires, containing safe use instructions for bee safety, include:

- Sulfoxaflor in the product ‘Transform Insecticide’, which is approved as a foliar insecticide spray in canola. The label bears a number of bee warning statements and contains advice on safe use for protecting bee pollinators, as follows:
 - a bolded caution states that ‘this product is highly toxic to bees: read the PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK section in this booklet before use’
 - the use instructions advise that ‘if honey bees are present in the target area during flowering, see the PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK directions’
 - PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK section
 - Highly toxic to bees. Will kill foraging bees directly exposed through contact during spraying and while spray droplets are still wet. May harm bees in hives which are over-sprayed or reached by spray drift.
 - **Do Not** apply this product while bees are foraging in the crop to be treated.
 - Treatments made to crops in flower or upwind of adjacent plants in flower that are likely to be visited by bees at the time of application, should not occur during the daytime if temperatures within an hour after the completion of spraying are expected to exceed 12°C. It is recommended that orchard floors containing flowering plants be mown just prior to spraying. Beekeepers who are known to have hives in, or nearby, the area to be sprayed should be notified no less than 48 hours prior to the time of the planned application so that bees can be removed or otherwise protected prior to spraying.
- Cyantraniliprole in the product ‘Exirel Insecticide’ which is approved as a foliar insecticide spray in cotton. The label bears a bee warning statement and contains advice on safe use with respect to the protection of bee pollinators (under the PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK heading) as follows:
 - Toxic to bees. Will kill foraging bees directly exposed through contact during spraying and while spray droplets are still wet. May harm bees in hives which are over-sprayed or reached by spray drift. Beekeepers who are known to have hives in, or nearby, the area to be sprayed should be notified no less than 48 hours prior to the time of the planned application so that bees can be removed or otherwise protected prior to spraying.

Accordingly, in addition to standard label statements appearing under the ‘Protection of Livestock’ heading, product-specific use instructions are applied to new insecticide products coming onto the Australian market. The APVMA endeavours to ensure a degree of consistency with similar label information applied internationally, especially in the United States and Canada, which have broadly similar agricultural practices. This is facilitated by increasing participation in Global Joint Reviews in which Australia works with other key agencies in North America and Europe to jointly review new pesticide chemicals.

Recommendation 4

The Commonwealth enter into discussions with the relevant state and territory bodies to ensure integrated fire management practices that take into account the needs of the beekeeping industry are in place within the next 12 months.

Not agreed.

As noted in the Australian Government's response to the *More than honey* report, fire management practices are primarily state and territory government responsibilities.

Industry sectors affected by fire are provided opportunities to participate in existing state and territory fire management forums.

The government notes that a strategic objective of the *National Bushfire Management Policy Statement for Forests and Rangelands*, which was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments and released in May 2014, is to encourage involved and capable communities. This objective aims to improve community engagement in the development of fire management and mitigation strategies, and engagement with stakeholders whose 'economic assets and objectives ... might be influenced by fire, or the strategies intended to reduce its impact'.

Recommendation 5

State and territory land management authorities review the impact of clear fell harvesting in areas that overlay bee sites and restrict these activities accordingly.

This recommendation is not directed to the Commonwealth.

Forest management is primarily the responsibility of the state and territory governments, and forest harvesting is subject to their regulatory frameworks.

Recommendations 6 and 7

As part of a comprehensive approach to revitalising the beekeeping and pollination industries, the Department of Agriculture and relevant state and territories bodies should actively seek to support the industries in a variety of activities, including marketing.

As a matter of utmost urgency the Government, including the Department of Agriculture and other relevant agencies, work with industry groups and state and territory governments to develop an Australia wide approach to protect and support the beekeeping and pollination industries. This should involve a report and action within 6 months.

Noted – substantial support is already available.

The Australian Government, through a number of separate agencies and programs, already offers a substantial range of support to the Australian honey bee industry. The government will support efforts to meet the needs of beekeepers and the beekeeping and pollination services industries, where possible, through these existing and any future programs.

The government observes that as a consequence of the decentralised nature of government it can be difficult to effectively communicate the full breadth of this support. The absence of a centralised whole-of-government honey bee industry program should not imply that the government is not aware of the importance of the honey bee industry or is doing too little to support the industry.

The government notes that the honey bee industry receives significant benefits from the more than \$500 million allocated by the government each year to the Department of Agriculture to safeguard Australia's animal and plant health status. Australia has a world-class border biosecurity system and has remained free of many major pests and diseases which affect agriculture, including beekeeping, in other parts of the world.

As part of its commitment to Stronger Biosecurity and Quarantine, the government is enhancing rapid response capability to address urgent biosecurity issues. This includes dedicated resources to support a pool of skilled and experienced personnel and a best practice national network for diagnostic and response management expertise. It is available to assist state and territory governments, at their request, to contain an incursion in the early stages to reduce adverse impacts, including to the environment. The commitment includes a range of preparedness activities to build national capability and provide long term benefits beyond the completion of this initiative. The allocation of resources between response and preparedness activities is flexible and will vary depending on the number and scale of incursions requiring a response.

The government notes the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council's proposal to increase the statutory honey levy to contribute to onshore biosecurity activities across Australia, including the development of the National Bee Biosecurity Program, as well as to fund the National Bee Pest Surveillance Program. The government will consider this specific proposal in due course. Nevertheless, as a general principle, the government supports initiatives such as this which increase the industry's self-reliance.

The government appreciates that the industry, in some regions, is experiencing a 'honey drought' as a consequence of drought and bushfires reducing the flowering of native forests. On 26 February 2014, the Prime Minister, the Hon. Tony Abbott MP, and Minister for Agriculture, the Hon. Barnaby Joyce MP, announced a drought assistance package worth \$320 million to support those farm businesses, farming families and rural communities in Queensland and New South Wales facing hardship brought on by drought. Beekeepers can access the support measures available through this package.

Beekeepers throughout Australia that are experiencing financial hardship may be eligible for the Farm Household Allowance (FHA).

The FHA is paid fortnightly at a rate equivalent to Newstart Allowance (or Youth Allowance for those under 22 years). Eligible beekeepers and their partners will be able to access up to three years of payment. A Health Care Card will be provided to recipients. Support will also be provided through a dedicated case manager to help recipients assess their situation and develop a plan for the future. This is designed to give farm families time to get back on their feet and the opportunity to take steps to improve their circumstances.

Information about FHA, and other Australian Government programs available to assist farmers in need including concessional loans and free rural financial counselling, is available at www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-food/drought/assistance.

The Australian Government is providing \$100 million over four years from 2014–15 for a competitive grants program for Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) to deliver cutting-edge technology and applied research, with an emphasis on making the results accessible to Australia's primary producers. The Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper may help inform research and funding priorities for subsequent funding rounds.

RDCs will be principal recipients of the funding, but other partners will be sought. To qualify for the funding, project proposals will need to demonstrate collaboration between RDCs and partners such as other funding agencies, experienced researchers, producer groups and the private sector. The government encourages parties interested in honey bee and pollination research and development to collaborate and provide a submission to this program.

The Australian honey bee industry is able to pursue implementing a statutory marketing levy in accordance with the principles outlined in the Australian Government's *Levy principles and guidelines*. Consistent with government policy that applies to other primary industries, any statutory levy funded marketing expenditure would not be eligible for government matching funds.