

Additional Comments

Nick Xenophon, Independent Senator for South Australia

‘Not enough sting in the tail’

1.1 While I am generally supportive of the comments in the committee report, I am concerned that the committee should not minimise the role of government in these vitally important issues by offering in some instances general statements and suggestions rather than firm recommendations. Given one of the main reasons behind calling for this inquiry was a lack of action from previous inquiries, including the More Than Honey report in 2008, I believe it would be incredibly disappointing for both the participants in this inquiry and the broader industry to see that the committee has not seen fit to make strong recommendations about a necessary course of action.

1.2 Australia’s beekeeping and pollination industries are, quite literally, ‘more than honey’. As the committee report notes, both the honey production and pollination industries are worth billions of dollars to the Australian food production industry, both in terms of direct and flow-on benefits. It is worth repeating the statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations:

...out of some 100 crop species which provide 90% of food worldwide, 71 of these are bee-pollinated. In Europe alone, 84% of the 264 crop species are animal pollinated and 4 000 vegetable varieties exist thanks to pollination by bees. The production value of one tonne of pollinator-dependent crop is approximately five times higher than one of those crop categories that do not depend on insects.¹

1.3 The committee report also notes that bee pollination improves the efficiency of crop production, and therefore has both financial and environmental benefits way beyond the immediate cost.

1.4 It is important to note the high level of public and industry interest in this inquiry. I believe it is generally acknowledged that there needs to be urgent and significant action to protect Australia's bee population and its associated industries and benefits, and I am concerned that this report does not adequately reflect that will.

1.5 There has also been a significant amount of media coverage of these issues recently, including a series of articles in response to the committee inquiry. These have covered a wide range of issues, including the importance of bees to the agricultural industry, the need for better labelling from a consumer point of view, and the state of the industry as a whole. A more recent article in *The Australian* discussed the potential shortage of honey due to a poor summer season, with production halved

1 United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Honey Bee Colony Disorders and other Threats to Insect Pollinators*, 2010, p. 1.

in some areas and with losses of up to 90 per cent in others.² These issues have clearly struck a chord with the broader community as well as industry.

1.6 The committee report also outlines the significant challenges facing the beekeeping and pollination industries, and in particular the possible side-effects of pesticide use on bee populations. I note that the Government is currently seeking to change the re-registration process for chemicals through the APVMA, and that this change could lead to reduced oversight. Further, as the committee report notes, concerns were raised about the independence of information provided to the APVMA.

1.7 Recommendation: The Government postpone any changes to the re-registration 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.

1.8 In my view, the committee report presents a compelling argument for the need for a more in-depth consideration and review of pesticide impacts on bees. I note that there is significant support for the establishment of a national honey bee survey scheme to inform the debate on these issues, and I welcome the committee's recommendation that:

The Commonwealth should, as a matter of urgency, 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.

1.9 However I believe the committee could have gone further in its recommendation in relation to spraying, particularly where off-label chemicals are used.

1.10 Recommendation: 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.

1.11 I note that the Department of Agriculture advised the committee that it is currently progressing work in relation to the labelling of chemicals that may impact on bees. I also note, however, that this work commenced in 2012 and the most recent update provided to the committee related to consultation that took place nearly a year ago. In my view, this is unacceptable. I am very concerned that the committee has not made a stronger recommendation in this regard, and instead is happy to monitor the situation and 'look forward' to receiving information from the relevant agencies. I believe the committee has taken the wrong course on this: it is clear that the time for

2 Neals, Sue 'Consumers asked to keep fingers out of the honey jar', *The Australian*, 23 June 2014

waiting has passed, and that the information in this report makes it painfully obvious that action must be taken now as a matter of urgency.

1.12 Recommendation: 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.

1.13 Forest and fire management and clear fell harvesting issues also have an impact on the industry. Again, I agree with the discussion of the issues in the committee's report, but the urgency of these matters is not reflected in the committee's comments. Given that this is an unfulfilled recommendation from the 2008 *More Than Honey* report, the committee would have been justified in taking a stronger line.

1.14 Recommendation: 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.

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

1.16 The sparse allocation of state apiculture staff also emphasises the low priority given to the industry by governments at all levels. This lack of resources is putting the industry at unacceptable risk, and should not be allowed to continue.

1.17 I also endorse the comments of Dr Max Whitten of the When Bee Foundation in relation to levies and biosecurity resources:

“Who paid for that before? The states, so the states were paying through their apiary offices for the service which now this small struggling industry is being forced to pay...What we have really got, when you look at the biosecurity situation, is the struggling beekeepers are footing the bill to solve problems not of their making and producing benefits which are captured by others.”³

1.18 While I support the committee's second recommendation in principle, I am concerned that this is moving too much towards a 'cost recovery' model, where industry foots the bill for services previously provided by the government. It is my view that cost recovery is contrary to the interests of industry, particularly where that industry provides a massive net benefit to the economy, as bees do through their role in pollination. It is my view that, while expanding the capacity to charge a levy for pollination services will be useful, this should not be the sole method of supporting further research or biosecurity measures.

1.19 These concerns also apply to the committee's comments that the industry should expand its marketing activities. With respect to the committee, this is an industry that is vital to Australia but which is struggling to survive. While I am sure

3 Dr Maxwell Whitten, *Committee Hansard*, 20 May 2014, pp 20– 21.

they would benefit from expanded marketing activities, industry participants are not in a position to foot the bill and need government assistance at all levels to carry out these activities. To put the responsibility solely on the industry assumes it is in a position to carry out these activities, which it is not. This is a unique industry with unique and vital importance to Australia, and should be treated as such.

1.20 Recommendation: 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.

1.21 The committee report also outlines significant concerns in relation to biosecurity measures, particularly in relation to dealing with incursions of the Asian Honey Bee or varroa mite. While it is widely acknowledged that incursions of either type could be catastrophic for the industry, very little is being done to manage the risk or deal with it if it occurs. The Department of Agriculture's own figures indicate that 95-100 per cent of unmanaged hives in Europe and the United States were destroyed within three to four years of a varroa mite infestation.⁴ Other research suggests that almost all feral and wild bee populations in Australia would be exterminated in a varroa infestation.⁵ Despite these terrifying statistics, the Department of Agriculture revealed that varroa has not yet been categorised by Plant Health Australia and so the amount and structure of funding to fight an incursion is unknown.⁶ This is outrageous and simply unacceptable. I fully support the committee's recommendation that:

The categorisation of varroa destructor be completed as a matter of urgency to provide industry with funding certainty in case of an incursion.

1.23 A vital component of being able to combat an incursion is introducing varroa-resistant bee stock as a matter of urgency. As the committee report notes, this is possible either through the importation of bees or of bee semen, and that the *More Than Honey* report recommended that an import risk analysis for bee semen be completed by the end of 2008. This has not yet been completed, and I support the committee's recommendation in relation to this matter.

1.24 While I support the committee's recommendation in relation to the production of an annual industry report, it is important to acknowledge that such a report will have no value if there is not the will and resources available to act on the information it contains. I am concerned that both of these are absent in all levels of government.

1.25 Food labelling is an unnecessarily vexed issue. Despite multiple reviews and inquiries, there has been little action to improve labelling standards. The current system is bad for both consumers and producers, but it seems that successive

4 Department of Agriculture, *A honey bee industry and pollination continuity strategy should Varroa become established in Australia*, May 2011, p. iii.

5 Dr Doug Somerville, Committee Hansard, 15 April 2014, pp 55–56.

6 Department of Agriculture, *Answers to Question on Notice*, p. 5.

governments have been more willing to listen to major retailers and importers than Australian consumers and businesses.

1.26 As the committee report correctly identifies, labelling issues generally fall into the categories of country of origin labelling and ingredient issues. In some respects, honey has one of the more stringent ingredient labelling requirements, but again the system falls down in relation to enforcement. While I acknowledge that the ACCC has recently dealt with some mislabelled products, it is often a long and difficult process that relies on other producers or members of the public reporting problems to the regulator, rather than a more pre-emptive system.

1.27 Unfortunately, the committee report does not make any meaningful recommendations in relation to labelling improvements. Instead, the report points to previous inquiries, without acknowledging that very little has come of these. There is significant appetite from both consumers and Australian producers for labelling laws to be improved, and I hope that the current House of Representatives Committee inquiry will finally see some action on that front, together with any bills introduced into the Senate.

1.28 Ultimately, the committee report does an excellent job of exploring and, for the most part, recognising the concerns of the beekeeping and pollination industries. However, it lets the industry down by not issuing sufficiently firm recommendations, or acknowledging that previous inquiries have not been acted on. In my view, Australia needs a comprehensive, cross-portfolio approach to beekeeping and pollination. These industries are absolutely fundamental to our economy because of their role in food production. If we do not take care of these industries, the devastation will stretch far further than a honey shortage; it will severely impact on our ability to feed ourselves.

1.29 Recommendation: 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.

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