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APIARIST'S ADVOCATE



News, Views & Promotions - for Beekeepers - by Beekeepers



**Beekeepers
Heading for
the Markets**

Finding a Market



Producing honey is what most beekeepers do best, but, for some, marketing their produce is becoming a required task. Last year a honey producers' cooperative was floated as one way in which markets could be found, but, with that initiative failing to get off the ground, beekeepers have to seek fresh ideas. Three long-time beekeepers, who were among more than 170 who backed the co-op movement, share their plans and thoughts on the way forward for non-manuka honey producers.

"We have come back full circle now, to where we were when we first started," says James Corson, who since the mid-1990s has owned and run Gowanleagold's 1500 hives based out of Whitecliffs in Canterbury.

"The catch is, now we can't sell our crop."

Corson has ridden out the highs and lows of beekeeping before, during and now after the manuka honey boom. In Murchison Ricki Leahy has done the same thing with his business of more than 2000 hives, while at Te Kapu Apiaries in Hawkes Bay Keith

Pegram's father founded their honey production operation in 1950, which now includes nearly 4000 hives.

While all three long-time beekeepers saw the value in a honey producers' co-op and backed the movement, each is seeking their own path through a major market downturn.

Pegram and Corson, in the North and South Islands respectively, are seeking to establish their own brands to market their honey.

Corson can see potential markets as close as Christchurch — "There are about 200,000 households there, if each ate half a kilo of honey a week...", and as far away as his homeland in England.

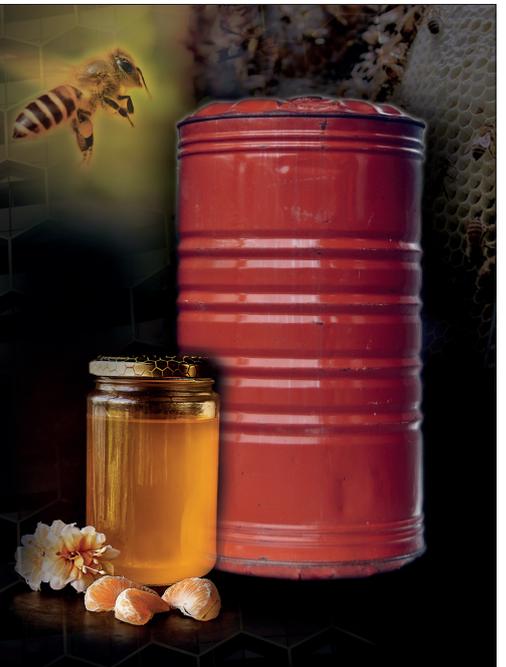
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"My family say, 'honey is expensive here, why don't you get some of your own here?'"

Pre manuka honey boom the Gowanleagold owner did sell into England under his own brand, and he is now exploring that possibility again.

"When honey prices were good it was easy to send it in a drum. Now, we have come full circle.

"I quite liked the idea of a co-op because we are trying to pack honey, label it and get it into markets overseas ourselves, but it is very expensive to do and all of a sudden everyone else is chasing those markets. There are 200 new labels out there from small-time beekeepers, like ourselves, trying to move stuff," Corson says.

One of those will likely be Te Kapu Apiaries, with Pegram employing a marketer who is exploring the option of selling internationally.

"I'd rather not pack honey, but it looks like we will have to go down that line," Pegram says.

"It is my rewarewa that I am most concerned about. I can probably sell my clover honey, but I produce a lot of rewarewa and really don't have a market."

A few years ago, Te Kapu Apiaries were selling rewarewa honey for \$13 a kilogram in the drum.

"Now we might be lucky to get \$4 a kilo and it is a better honey than that. It is a really nice honey. In my opinion it is an underrated honey and now I have to market it myself," Pegram says.

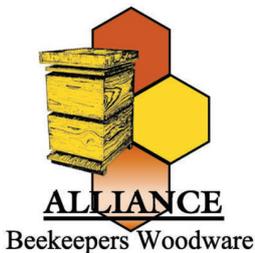
He has spent about \$20,000 already on marketing and, with his daughter entering the family business as the third generation, he hopes it is an investment which stands up.

"We have gone in for the long haul. We want to develop something which is sustainable."

In Murchison, Leahy also has unsold honey, but he is not sold on the idea of packing and marketing his own



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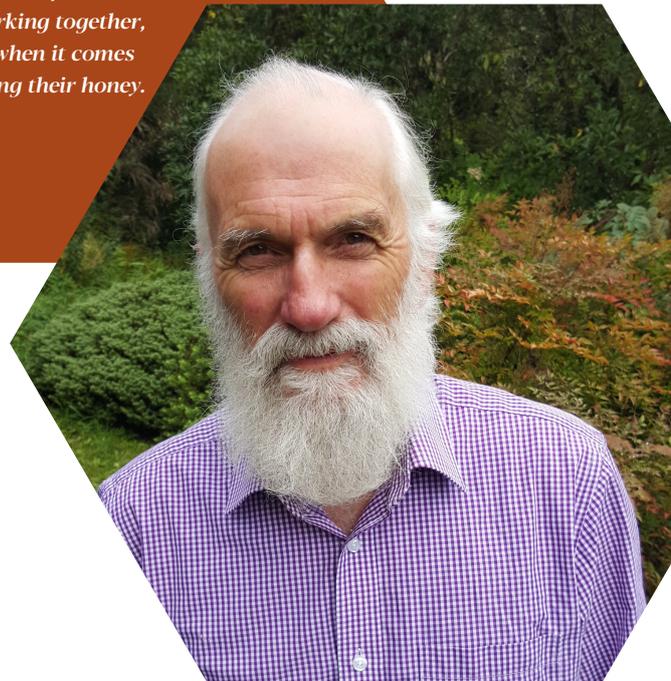
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Ricki Leahy believes it is time beekeepers started working together, especially when it comes to marketing their honey.



product and says other beekeepers should be wary of the idea too.

"As a beekeeper it is very difficult to not only run your beekeeping operation, but also pack and market honey. Even if you have the skills and energy, one can only stretch themselves so far and there is a risk of taking your eye off your core business," Leahy says.

Like Corson and Pegram, he hoped a co-op would do that work and unite beekeepers in the global marketplace, rather than have them competing against one another.

"You don't need every beekeeper with a different New Zealand honey label overseas. You just need good brands which have a continuous supply of quality honey," Leahy says.

He believes now is a good time for beekeepers to change their mind-set and get to know their neighbouring operators, learn who they are, and probably be "pleasantly surprised that they are good people".

"We, as beekeepers, need to start realising we are colleagues in the same industry and it is to our advantage to work together and not necessarily consider each other as competition. In the big picture we should consider overseas honey producers as our competition in the global marketplace.

"We need to focus on producing a New Zealand brand of honey using our unique varietal types. Maybe we need a co-op to do that, maybe we don't."

As always, Leahy is working with his regular honey buyers and hoping to get his product moved, but realises it probably won't get snapped up as soon as the honey enters the drum.

Carson too is aware of that fact, with his honey backing up in the shed for a number of seasons now, while Pegram is dealing with a growing rewarewa crop. All have solutions, but all take time or money — currencies some beekeepers are running short on. 🐝

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Sustaining the Tough Times



In a world where the term “sustainability” is now frequently used as a guiding principle for business, many New Zealand beekeepers are finding it is financial sustainability, rather than environmental, that is most pressing. In Southland Carne Clissold owns and runs Glass Brothers Honey and, like many honey producers, is in a fight for financial sustainability.

The floor of the freezing works at Maitua is seen as a right-of-passage for many in Southland, but not often do established business owners wield the knives or enter the packing rooms.

Such is the plight of the non-manuka honey industry though, that Carne Clissold has elected outside employment to free up funds to remunerate the manager, and now sole employee, of Glass Brothers' 1500 hives.

Clissold still gets out in the hives as required, but as owner there is no salary to be had.

“Some days there might be four of us out beekeeping — my manager, his boy, plus my son and I — but in theory only one is drawing a salary from the business.

“In 30-odd years it is the first time I have had to get out there and get another job. I have otherwise always been able to draw an income from beekeeping,” Clissold says.

The change in the manuka honey standard by the Ministry for Primary Industries in February 2018 and its subsequent ripple effect to non-manuka honey prices has led to a situation worse than when the honey price dropped to below a dollar a kilogram in the early 1980s Clissold says.

“A few years ago, we were getting close to \$12 a kilo for pastoral honey. Now, we are struggling to get \$3.50, \$4. It costs you about \$7.50 or \$8 to produce it. So you are selling your product for half of cost really. That is a huge kick in the guts. It was a huge financial loss last year and you just can't sustain it.”

UNBREAKABLE GLASS?

Glass Brothers is well established in the lower half of the South Island, having operated since 1944 and been in the hands of the Clissold family since 1974 when Carne's father bought the business. That has led to a near lifelong connection to beekeeping for Clissold, who, along with wife Jane, is a foundation shareholder of Betta Bees Research and the current chairman, as well as part owner of Mosgiel-based honey packer and marketing company Honey Products New Zealand.

Previously, Glass Brothers had operated as many as 3000 hives, but a couple of years ago Clissold decided to sell down and reduced numbers to 1500. It means less honey coming in, but not necessarily a halving of the honey crop, with each hive now more productive, he says.

The reduction in hives has allowed a reduction in costs and this season there is zero capital expenditure in the budget, Clissold says.

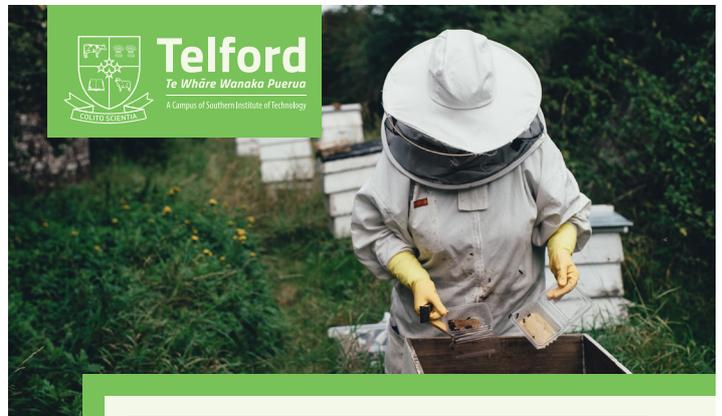
“We have always kept things pretty well maintained, so we can go on like this a while. We used to do a lot of frame replacement

in brood nest and we have done so much you can cut back for a couple of years, but you can't do that for a long time.”

And while beekeepers used to be able to “throw out the cheque book” in lean years, Clissold says that is no longer the case as there are so many fixed costs, such as increased compliance, nowadays.

Manuka honey would help cover those costs, but Clissold says that is not a reality for Glass Brothers.

“We don't produce manuka down here. I have actually moved hives away from manuka areas because we do not have a big enough area. The manuka ruins the clover and the clover ruins the manuka.”



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That leads to a honey which is tough to sell and just because he is part-owner in a packing and marketing company, it does not take the pressure off.

"People think, just because we pack and sell our own honey we are making more, but we are just as vulnerable as anyone else really. There is no guarantee we are going to be able to sell honey."

OFF TO THE NIGHTSHIFT

"I went in with my CV and they said, 'your role should be middle and senior management, why do you want to do this?'" Clissold says of his introduction to the freezing works.

But he also has a business to run, and, in his "early-50s", Clissold says it is refreshing to go to a job where he gets told what to do and which keeps him fit for beekeeping. Most nights he loads about 30-tonne of meat, in 15 to 27kg cartons, by hand on to pallets.

"Some nights I might get four hours sleep and then go out beekeeping, but I don't drive. We might be driving an hour away. So, I will sleep on the way, then do hive work. Common sense prevails. You can't burn the candle at both ends and I am quite conscious of that."

The system works because he trusts in his beekeeping manager, something which Clissold says is essential.

"Beekeeping is not like other forms of farming where you can get up and see the stock and if they have been shifted. If they have said they have fed the hives and haven't, or re-queened or put the strips in, by the time you found out it would be too late."



*Glass Brothers
Honey hives,
Southland.*

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

"We have hit rock bottom and there is only one way to go," Clissold says.

The second-generation beekeeper has faith in their product and so believes the bounce-back in honey price will come.

"Honey is something we can be proud of. It has no additives, preservatives, and is a natural product which is good for you. There is not a lot like that around."

There are a lot of beekeeping businesses though, all seeking to replicate one key quality of the honey they produce — sustainability. 🐝



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Not too long ago beekeeping businesses were scrambling to find staff to manage hives but, as the landscape of the New Zealand honey industry has changed over the last few seasons, some beekeepers have lost their jobs. Every company is different though, and discussions with some of the largest apiculture employers shows, while changes have been made, all are not equally affected.

Every beehive falls under its own unique influences, affected by internal and external forces. The companies that own large amounts of hives also fall under similarly diverse influences and, like hives, each are responding in their own way.

For the beekeepers in the field this has meant job losses for some, redefinition of roles for others, while for many their work carries on unaffected, despite a downturn in the value of many New Zealand honey varieties.

In the North Island, for many dealing in manuka honey it is business as usual, while in the South redundancies have been common as business owners cut costs and reduce hive numbers.

"Like all South Island businesses, we have been fairly heavily impacted and it has been challenging," Taylor Pass Honey Company field operations manager Rex Butt says of the drop in honey prices.

The Marlborough-based company runs about 9000 hives across the South Island, employing 23 beekeepers, although that number was closer to 30 a few years ago.

Some staff left and were not replaced, while the financial situation also forced the company into redundancies.

"We have reduced hive numbers and are focusing on higher value areas and we have reduced staff as well. When you are trying to grow a business you have to employ a lot more staff than you usually would," Butt explains.

In Wanaka, Alpine Honey are taking a similar approach.

"It is pretty much business as usual, but we have to be a bit more targeted in terms of staff and where we have hives," owner Peter Ward says.

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"We would normally have about 18 staff but this year we have dropped back to 15, reduced staffing level by 15% and dropped our hive numbers by a similar percent. We are targeting more valued honeys and have kept away from the lower value stuff."

For Midlands Apiaries in Ashburton, pollination of the Midlands Seeds' crops is an essential task and thus their staff have been less affected.

"The price of honey has impacted our bottom line, but at the end of the day our main purpose is to provide bees for pollination and we still have to do that, so it hasn't impacting our staffing," field operations manager Matt McCully says.

"We don't want to skimp on the beehives. We still need good quality hives, no matter the price of honey. So we haven't altered our staffing since the drop of the honey price.

"If we were in a position where we were wholly focused on honey I think it would have changed, but we were lucky enough to escape."

In a sign of the times, both Butt and McCully say, when required, finding staff for their South Island operations is much easier now than in the recent past.

"Three or four years ago you had to employ basically anyone who wanted to be a beekeeper. Now, if you are looking to employ, beekeepers are coming in with a bit of experience under their

belts. That, in conjunction with the Apiculture New Zealand Apprenticeship, means the skillset of the average beekeeper is head and shoulders above where it was three or four years ago," Butt says.

Across the strait, Manuka Health, one of the North Island's largest beekeeping employers with nearly 70 field staff, are seeing a few more beekeepers coming to them looking for work. However, overall there are still some challenges when it comes to finding beekeepers, human resource manager Samantha Denz says.

"This year we have maintained our number of hives and it is still reasonably competitive and quite challenging when it comes to employing staff.

"We haven't seen a downturn, probably slightly the opposite really. As a business we are growing, and therefore we are probably increasing rather than decreasing staff," Denz says.

It is much the same for Kintail Honey, which has hives in many areas of the North Island, and owner James Ward says they take a longer term approach to staffing levels to help ride out market changes.

"It doesn't matter if it is good, bad or in between, we don't change our staffing regime," Ward says, adding "everyone has to feel a bit of pain, but we don't want that pain to go on to our employees, because without them you can't do it." 



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Colony Loss Surveys Miss the Mark



Mid Canterbury beekeeper **Roger Bray** on the value of colony loss surveys, what we can learn from the USA's evaluation of colony deaths, and how our evaluations should consider economic influences.

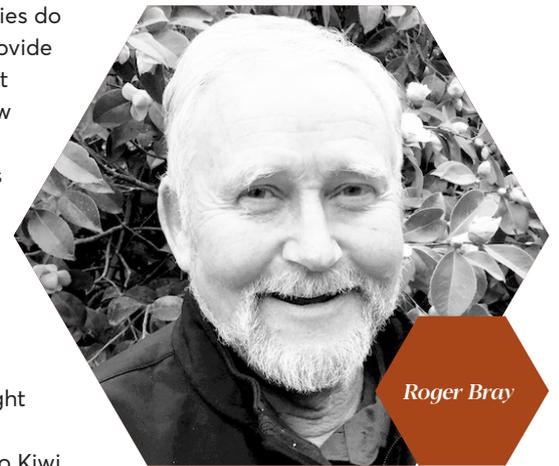
Scientists, politicians and other industry commentators appear obsessed with bee demise and colony loss surveys. Perhaps there is a need to get things in perspective.

Livestock deaths occur wherever there is animal management. It is just a part of the cycle of life. Untimely death of livestock can be devastating, especially in animals that have a lengthy reproduction cycle. However, when we consider bees can have several generations of offspring in one season, the ability to recover from large amounts of bee deaths is a lot easier than recovering from deaths of larger breeding stock.

The other aspect of bee deaths is that while the queen and her colony of bees may perish, they leave behind their house, which can be occupied by the next generations. Beekeepers that

do loose colonies do not need to provide new equipment that would slow recovery.

The USA has been ground zero for bee deaths in recent years and the happenings "Stateside" might provide some useful insight to Kiwi beekeepers.



Roger Bray

Catastrophes become a topic of the media and in the USA in recent years reports of bee deaths and the term Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) have conjured up all sorts of predictions about how long mankind might live if bees were wiped from the face of earth. The greater problem in the beekeeping industry was a longer time coming — that of profitable beekeeping.

In USA beekeepers traditionally sold honey for their income. As the Americans developed corn as a farmed crop, processing corn for animal and human food led to the development of a sugar product, High Fructose Corn Syrup. Food manufacturers then had access to a man-made sweetener that could be produced cheaper than beekeepers could utilise bees to turn nectar into honey. That, combined with the added competition of cheap honey imported from China, saw the American beekeeper lose confidence that they would receive adequate financial returns for their beekeeping efforts.

Beekeeping businesses rationalised as they were forced to produce honey for a price that in many cases was less than the true cost of production. Some beekeeper closed their business and investment in beekeeping was greatly reduced. The industry entered a run-down phase, mostly without any publicity at all.

In an effort to remain profitable, beekeepers cut corners to save costs and tried volume-production to overcome increasing costs. Large scale experimentation with alternative varroa control products placed survival of colonies on luck. Luck ran out for some bees with beekeepers reporting their bees just "disappeared" without any apparent causes.

Then publicity came as the media, along with industry commentators, publicised the losses and beekeepers stories until CCD became a catchword that was referred to by scientists, researchers, environmentalists and anyone that was seeking some funding or publicity boosting.

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The lack of sufficient profit in the American beekeeping system to maintain hive numbers was overlooked as a cause of diminishing hive numbers, as commentators became obsessed in 'saving bees'. Saving beekeepers should have been a focus.

New Zealand was not immune to people wanting to solve beekeepers problems, even during a period of exceptional growth in the NZ beekeeping industry.

In the last 10 years numbers of beekeepers and beehives have substantially increased. Yet our scientists, politicians and industry commentators jumped onto an international bandwagon to comment about the demise of bees. Sure there were losses of colonies, caused through a multitude of factors, but in New Zealand there was sufficient money entering the industry for people to have confidence in growing beehive and beekeeper numbers.

One of the issues of the NZ colony loss survey is that it is poorly designed to identify areas of concern. Beekeeping takes knowledge, skill and a fair measure of luck. Colonies thrive, colonies perish and each case has its reasons.

The survey does not identify the variation of colony losses among different beekeepers.

Some of the larger beekeepers, including the corporates, have significant deaths, sometimes exceeding 30-40% of hives. Others 'lose' 100% of their colonies, while some beekeepers with different management techniques seem to be able to maintain and increase numbers without problem.

The survey lumps all the data and produces an average, generally a guesstimate, of the beekeepers that respond.

Do the beekeepers really know the cause of the deaths? If so, why did they not fix the problem before it terminated in the colony death? The survey does not provide any information why there is a variation between beekeepers regarding their individual losses.

In recent times Kiwi beekeepers have increased their honey production but it now appears the market has not been able to absorb the extra production at prices that maintain sufficient profit for the beekeeper. It is to be expected that both beekeeper and beehive numbers will reduce in order that honey production more closely matches consumption.

So how will the colony loss surveys of the future record any reduction of hives/beekeepers because of economic reasons? If the survey is to record negative growth then why did it not quantify why there was an increase in beehives and beekeepers? Perhaps the answer is obvious.

The industry growth was as a result of people's expectation of healthy profits from their involvement in beekeeping. With a realisation, in the current state of the industry, that hard work for low returns are likely to prevail for some time, those in for a quick buck will exit and seek better returns in other ventures.

The size of the industry, and beekeepers ability to maintain the bee colonies will depend on the profitability of beekeeping, not on some random results of a survey on winter colony losses.

Should the resources being poured into bee demise and bee loss surveys be used to promote consumers to pay a fair price for authentic food that provides an adequate living for the producers, and all others, in the delivery chain? Should the scientists promote the marketing of honey that leaves sufficient profit in the system to overcome unexpected losses that do happen from time to time?

Perhaps the real issue is not a science consideration but an economic consideration after all. 🐝

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Making Wood Work



A changing honey industry has forced many beekeepers to reassess their businesses, and the same can be said for supplier Tunncliffe Timber Solutions. The Bay of Plenty timber manufacturers have surveyed the beekeeping industry and adapted, going from producing large runs of standardised beekeeping equipment to variations to meet individual's needs.

"When times were good, if a beekeeper came in and said, 'I need this small change made to my product', I would have to say, 'I have 10,000 of these to produce and then 10,000 of that and I can't tell them to wait,'" says Mark Andrew, managing director of Tunncliffe Timber Solutions in Edgumbe.

Now, with the honey market slowdown, the machines are not as busy and there is more time to work in with individuals, something beekeepers are enjoying, Andrew says.

The Tunncliffe's Timber ownership group welcome Jacinda Ardern during a visit from the prime minister last year. L to R, Hilary McCabe, Scott McCabe, Ardern, Liz Andrew and Mark Andrew.



"We realised pretty quickly that we needed to help beekeepers. To help, we thought, how can we make beekeeping more efficient? The timber aspect anyway and make their lives easier.

"We are timber experts, not beekeeping experts, so the natural progression was to talk to beekeepers and find out what they wish could be changed about timber and beekeeping and what they wish was possible. Everyone has their own little quirks and preferences. Some like to nail, some staple, screw, glue and screw. There are so many variations that creating product lines to satisfy each and every one is impossible."

Adding custom production has set Tunncliffe's apart from other suppliers, and, now they are not as pushed with orders, the cost of customising is much less.

Tunncliffe's produce boxes, bases, mats, feeders, rims for excluders, pallets and lids. Those beekeeping supplies can contribute up to 50 percent of their business in a year, so keeping their hand in the game is important even in the slower times, Andrew says.

"It is going to take a little while to come out the other side of it, but we don't want to sit on our hands and wait. We have another side to our business in building supplies, so we can lean towards that, but what we have also been able to do is position ourselves to be useful and in a strong position to help out the beekeeping industry when it comes back to its former glory." 

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Editorial

Cooperation or Individualisation, but Let's Avoid Duplication



In our lead story, Finding a Market, we hear from three beekeepers who backed an idea to form a honey producers cooperative. Now that concept has all but gone by the wayside, we hear how two are undertaking their own efforts to pack and market their honey, but, as beekeepers, we should be wary of duplicating our efforts.

It seems some beekeepers have gone from the lofty ideal of a large co-op to simply shouldering all the burden of packing and marketing honey themselves. Like with many things, the surest path may lie somewhere in the middle.

In an ideal world the companies that specialise in packing and marketing honey would limit the desire for the formation of a honey producers' co-op or individual marketing undertakings, and that is what happened for so many years when prices were good.

Beekeepers no longer trust the packers to undertake this task and provide an adequate return though, hence the desire to take control of the process themselves. It comes down to a matter of being able to control the marketing efforts, and more specifically put emphasis on non-manuka honeys, which most packers have not done in a long time.

That is why lone marketing efforts appeal, like management of hives, it allows the beekeeper to do it their way.

Much could be gained by relinquishing some control and coming together with fellow beekeepers to avoid duplication of time, effort and resources in the marketing drive. I have heard rumours of potential "collectives" of honey producers doing just that, but, like our lead story shows, there are plenty willing to invest in individual efforts.

Time will tell whether the established packers can right the market themselves, whether "collectives" can work together for gain, or if the go-it-alone types can make headway, but either way we should be wary of duplicating our efforts. 

We welcome your feedback. Address a letter to editor@apiadvocate.co.nz and share your opinion, or offer a news tip if you think there is something which should be covered.



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