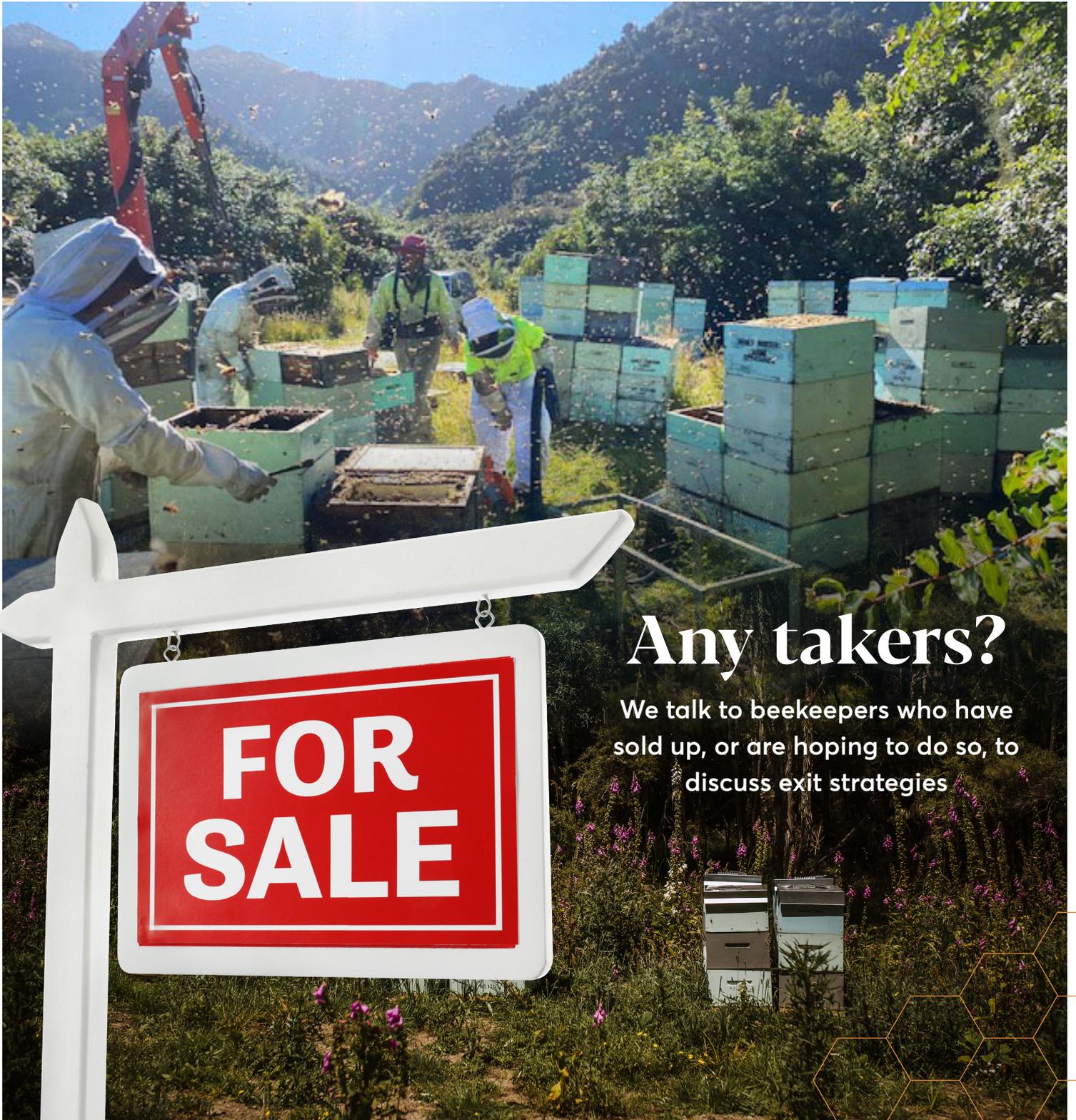


ISSUE 42, JANUARY 2023

# APIARIST'S ADVOCATE

News, Views & Promotions - for Beekeepers - by Beekeepers



## Any takers?

We talk to beekeepers who have sold up, or are hoping to do so, to discuss exit strategies

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# Exit Strategies – From Reluctant Sales to Zombie Operators



The reduction in registered commercial beekeepers has been dramatic in the past three years – on a par with the opposing surge in registrations when honey prices boomed last decade. The numbers only tell half the story though. It's discussions with those who are selling, or just abandoning hives in the face of rising costs and falling returns, that helps complete the narrative. So, we talk to beekeepers and industry stakeholders about selling up and executing a successful industry exit.

**Could you place Okarito on a map? How about Canvastown? or Lyell? Towns that were once bustling centres of activity, now home to few, or none at all. Why? Because the gold ran out.**

The New Zealand honey industry has widely been analogised to a "gold rush" since soaring mānuka honey prices in the first two decades of the 2000s allured new entrants to beekeeping. Now, following two lean years of mānuka honey returns to the producer and at least four years since a non-mānuka price collapse, some beekeepers are abandoning their hives and sites much like the forlorn prospectors of yesteryear eventually left town when the gold stopped glittering.

With modern-day beekeeping it is not quite as simple as tossing the pick, pan and canvas over the shoulder and hitting the dusty trail though. For most, an industry exit means trying to recoup some financial return through the sale of expensive business goods – vehicles, honey extraction equipment, hiveware and beehives themselves – or sale of their business as a going concern. However, in a market where the cost of producing seemingly every variety

of honey exceeds the return for its sale, few are buying. Inevitably hives are being abandoned and the disease risk to the remaining colonies is real.

## TRYING TO DO RIGHT

Cameron Bartlett is determined to make his exit from the industry on good terms, and that means settling his debts and doing what he can to ensure his remaining 500 hives are well looked after. The Northland beekeeper's business timing couldn't have been much worse. He entered a thriving industry in 2011, first working for Comvita and then Mānuka Health as a beekeeper, before getting into hive ownership in 2015 while continuing to work for large commercial beekeepers. After meeting some financial backers he took a bigger business plunge in 2017, fully striking out on his own and reaching as many as 1200 hives as honey prices began to fall. Now, with several seasons' worth of honey sitting unsold, Bartlett is seeking a way to wind up his beekeeping interest.

"Bottom line is, it's become unviable and we are having to shut it down. We've been continuing with optimism for the last three years. Now, it's got to this point where it's really disheartening putting in all that effort and not being able to sell honey," Bartlett says.

He is one of many beekeepers facing the same problem as honey packers and exporters show limited demand for New Zealand's 'high-grade' mānuka honey supply.

"One of the biggest problems is that, as a relatively new company and player in the industry, you kind of go to the bottom of the line as far as when buyers have a requirement for a certain type of honey. They will go with their more long-standing customers first. Potentially, I'm at the bottom of the line in that respect, even though all attempts have been made to make good relations with all the different buyers," Bartlett explains.

Add to that rising business costs, or, in the case of hive-placement fees, rising costs relative to any honey income, and it's a business model that can't be sustained any longer.

"When we first got into business, the industry was very much pushing high grade



*Northland beekeeper Cameron Bartlett is doing his best to keep his 500 remaining beehives in good order as he seeks a buyer, but with limited honey sales for the past two years it is a challenging and stressful exercise.*

mānuka and we started paying crazy prices to get onto these blocks. It was probably relative at the time, to the prices of honey with the activity we were producing, but that slowly changed and decreased year to year. But once you've negotiated those prices to secure the sites against competition, trying to tell the landowners to bring it back to reflect the current market is a challenging thing to negotiate," Bartlett says.

He's attempted to sell the business since the 2021/22 season wrapped, and almost had a buyer sign off on taking it as a going concern, but that fell through. Now, his focus is on selling, or finding an appropriate home for, his 500 hives and recovering at least enough money to make good with his business partners that helped fund their growth.

Bartlett calls the situation "mentally very stressful and challenging".

"This has been such a saga that, just trying to resolve it and be free from it all, will be so liberating, even though we've gained nothing and lost a lot.

"Friends in the industry around the place have all got the same story. And we all share and sympathize with each other about not having sold any honey. But we're all driving around with a pretty miserable face. And that's not the way we are, it's just how it is."

### THERE GOES THE ACUMEN

While the number of registered hives and commercial beekeepers drops, so too does a wealth of knowledge from the beekeeping community.

In Tauranga Jason O'Callaghan is down to approximately 50 hives, having sold off about 500 this spring after 30 years beekeeping. With 50 hives, and a contract extraction facility still operating, there is still potential to more fully re-enter the industry in the future, but that may never happen.

"My wife, my old man and I loaded up a couple of big dump sites of hives for the corporate buyer's truck to come in and collect over a few nights," O'Callaghan says.

"We watched them drive out the gate and thought 'what a lot of knowledge and experience exiting the industry'. While there might be some good key members in these companies, there are a lot with minimal experience in between. The knowledgeable people are spread over a lot of hives and a lot of teams. They will never get the results we did."

O'Callaghan's Bees a Plenty business was getting good results in the field – high levels of honey production, minimal winter losses and varroa management well in control – but he had to work hard for it he says. And, like others, the lack of a market for high-end mānuka honey meant a drastic change in management practises would have been required to keep Bees a Plenty fully in business.

While hive buyers are few and far between, large beekeeping entities Comvita and Mānuka Health have both been among those who are known to have bought hives in the past six months. Being a buyer's market, they are likely picking out the best managed hives and businesses to acquire.

"They can replace their losses by buying up good hives from me, but those hives will run out. Certainly not this year, maybe not



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next, but perhaps the year after. They will run out and there will be opportunity again for good beekeepers, not just people who have a market for their honey," O'Callaghan believes.

His advice to other beekeepers considering exiting the industry is to make the call early, while hives are still in an inviting condition.

"The guys whose businesses are collapsing and running out of options on how to manage their hives, are also running out of options on how to sell them. You should always get out before you have to get out. I think that is sound advice no matter what industry you are in."

In Whanganui, veteran beekeeper Gary Sinkinson has been able to make his own successful sale of his Gazzabees hives to Mānuka Health and his experience reinforces that of O'Callaghan's.

"We had sold 150 hives to them in a previous season, so they knew we had varroa under control and were impressed with the condition of the hives compared to many other people's bees after this winter," Sinkinson says.

The fact many of Gazzabees apiary sites were "good quality" mānuka blocks also appealed to the buyers, but the buyers are definitely selective Sinkinson observes.

"There are not many people being bought up by the big outfits. From what I have seen it is few and far between. They are hurting as well."



Gowanleagold's 1300 hives, many located at bush sites such as these, are up for sale along with the rest of the business, despite experienced owner James Corson still holding a passion for the beekeeping industry.

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While the financial realities of running a beekeeping business are making many operations undesirable, at best, and, at worst, unsustainable, there is still passion for beekeeping among many who are nonetheless seeking to sell up.

"It's just got too stressful trying to run it," laments Richelle Doerner-Corson, owner of Gowanleagold in Canterbury, who along with husband James Corson has recently bit the bullet and decided to list.

"We are forced to, really. James doesn't want to, because he is still so passionate about it."

Businesses such as theirs offer a great career opportunity to the right buyer she believes.

"You will never buy beehives cheaper. A few years ago, it was \$1000 for a hive, now we are struggling to get \$200. It is a perfect opportunity for a young, keen person. It is a young person's career too. It is a lifestyle. In the summer it is all about the bees. There is no partying, but if you are passionate about the bees and enjoy being out there in the sun in an amazing office, in the hills and the back blocks, then it is for you."

#### A RUSH FOR THE DOOR

While the circumstances of beekeepers looking to sell up undoubtedly differ depending on a range of factors, the current demand for mānuka honey, or lack thereof, is seemingly the



*Nick Taylor. The New Zealand Beeswax GM deals with a lot of beekeeping operations, large and small, and says there is definite 'layers' to the current industry slide, but cashflow is tight for all.*

primary reason many are being driven out of business. While the slowdown in demand has been coming for about two years – since a bumper honey harvest in 2020 created a supply/demand imbalance – it is only recently the majority of 'for sale' signs have gone up according to well-positioned industry observer Nick Taylor.



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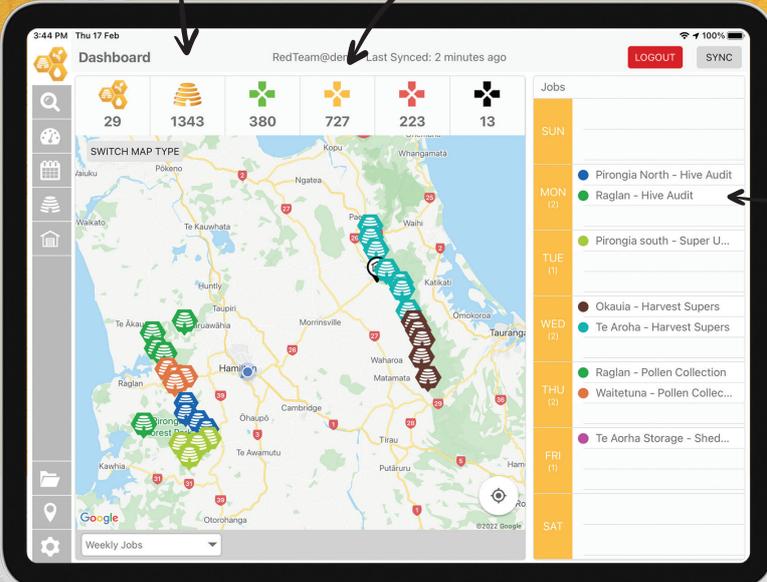
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"What surprised us was how rapid the movement was," says the general manager of beekeeping equipment supply and beeswax trade company New Zealand Beeswax.

"It felt like everyone did the same thing in the space of six to 12 months. I know they didn't coordinate, but it was so orchestrated you thought it was. Some companies we have dealt with for years and thought there is no way they will be on shaky ground, but then you ring back and they are gone. We thought they were good business models, it seemed like they were going pretty well on the scale of things. You never quite know the full story behind it."

While New Zealand Beeswax has seen a general slowdown in purchasing behaviour from beekeepers since non-mānuka honey prices slumped in 2018, the hurt to beekeepers has been somewhat limited as the lack of demand has seemingly not been for the same variety of honey for concurrent years. However, with most beekeepers building their businesses around mānuka honey production and a lack of interest from buyers for the variety entering a second season, the pinch is tightest now, Taylor explains.

"This year has been the year of beekeepers nursing cashflow and uncertainty on honey pricing, uncertainty on timing of sales and, even when a sale is made, it often comes with staggered payments," Taylor says.

The AFB Management Agency is tasked with dealing with apiaries which become abandoned and one of their two national operations managers, Dwayne Hill, says beekeepers going out of business is far more noticeable in the North Island, especially Northland. He also puts this down to the struggles to gain sufficient returns for mānuka honey.

## LAYERS OF STRUGGLE

From Taylor's perspective, there are "layers" of beekeeping business in the current operating environment, with those who are buying up cheap hives having clear purposes in mind.

"At the very top are a couple of large corporates who are buying up high value operations that produce high value mānuka honey. They will be growing to some degree, but also consolidating and removing under-performing sites to reposition their operation to higher value, higher yielding sites and removing the underperforming.

"A lot of the hive buying is to protect territory and prevent anyone else coming into the area, so that they don't have neighbours and the problems they bring. The appetite for that is not bottomless though. It is very targeted and very specific."

Then there is a second layer of large operators or "mega commercials" who are reducing hive numbers, sometimes by tens of thousands.

"A lot of that is also consolidation, focusing on value, shortening their travel and just hunkering down in uncertain times."

Below that is the smaller commercial beekeepers who are going through similar methods of consolidation, albeit on a smaller scale.

Then, at the lowest layer, are what might be deemed "zombie" operations, beekeepers who maintain their hive registrations and, Risk Management Programmes (RMPs) for honey extraction but are limping along, Taylor observes.

"They are clinging in there in name only. Is it because they are waiting for a sale? Is it because they are waiting to come out the other side? The rumour is, that zombie tail is quite long. A lot of

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Second hand sales platforms such as trademe.co.nz are awash with beekeeping equipment and hives up for sale as faltering demand for mānuka honey hits beekeepers.



*Gowanleagold is up for sale in Canterbury, with the owners offering up the 1300 hives as well as assorted beekeeping equipment for \$250,000.*

businesses are not functioning properly because they just don't have the cashflow or certainty. Something is missing to mean their business model does not stack up in the current environment. They are clinging to some sort of hope, or for someone to mop them up."

Unattended, 'zombie' hives come with problems of their own for those who remain in the industry, not the least of which is the risk of spreading American foulbrood, a concern detailed in *Reducing*

*the AFB Risk of Abandoned Hives – the Responsibility of All Beekeepers* in this issue.

"You hear rumours of poorly managed or abandoned hives. We hear the anecdotes all the time and that will only accelerate as the organisations get more and more distressed. It's hard to quantify how many hives that is. What you can quantify is the dramatic reduction in registered hive numbers, that is real and happening and there is almost no exception to the rule," Taylor says, adding "it's almost universally tough out there". 🐝

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# Reducing the AFB Risk of Abandoned Hives – the Responsibility of All Beekeepers



Just like every apiarist has their own methods of keeping bees and business practices, it seems there are just as many methods for ceasing their beekeeping operations when the time comes – and that time is coming for an increasing amount. If done wrong though, their hives can pose a serious disease risk to fellow beekeepers. We check in with the American Foulbrood (AFB) Management Agency’s two ‘Authorised Person 1s’ (AP1), Dwayne Hill in the north and Marco Gonzalez in the south, to find out what they have seen in the last year and get some advice on how to best wind-up beekeeping operations.



*AFB Management Agency operations manager Dwayne Hill is asking all beekeepers to report any suspected abandoned apiaries so that the Agency can take appropriate action.*

**The increase in abandoned apiaries has been more noticeable in the last six months, say both AP1s, and they expect there to be even more beehives walked away from in the coming year. However, they needn’t all pose a disease risk, and both beekeepers going out of business and those who remain have an important role to play.**

“We need beekeepers who are still in the area to inform us, at the earliest possible moment, that they have noticed hives that have been abandoned, so that we can inspect and clear that threat of AFB,” Hill says.

“The worst thing we are seeing in the north is, people who are not even packing their gear up. Just losing interest and walking off apiaries. It is a case of other beekeepers being vigilant and making us aware that those hives are no longer being cared for.”

Of course, if those beekeepers who no longer plan to tend to their hives gave notice to the Agency first, that would be the easiest solution. Hill implores them to do so, not just for the good of those who remain, but themselves too.

“If they walk away without deregistering, then the Management Agency will charge them for the levy based on the recorded number of colonies owned as at 31 March.”

While the Agency would prefer beekeepers to notify them, in most cases it is routine apiary inspections by the Agency AP2s that uncovers abandoned apiaries, with grass high about the hives, hives all dead out, and mice and wasp infestations.

There has been more abandonment of apiaries in the North Island than the South, while the Northland region has seen by far the most beekeepers walking away from hives, the AP1s report.

Not all abandoned apiaries afford an immediate AFB risk though and Gonzalez points out that, if the beekeeper was doing a good job of managing AFB, then the risk is low initially.

However, if dead hives are not blocked up, they can easily be repopulated by swarming bees which may spread AFB.

"Sometimes a beekeeper with no AFB can go out of business and the hives die, but their neighbours have AFB. If a swarm from an AFB hive inhabits those abandoned hives, then there is a risk. So, it is very important that, whenever a beekeeper has a dead out, they block the hive to prevent any honey being robbed or swarms repopulating that dead out," Gonzalez explains.

The best way of blocking a hive is to place the hive mat on the base with the hive back together on top of that. Ideally though all hives would be removed from apiaries and then deregistered, Gonzalez points out.

"That way if there is any AFB in that gear it gets robbed from one central location, instead of spreading it across multiple locations."

While complete abandonment of hives is the most severe repercussion of beekeepers struggling financially due to lowered honey values, management practices impacted by economic woes, and used in hives that remain, can also facilitate spread of AFB.

"Perhaps a larger risk than abandoned apiaries is beekeepers who can't afford sugar and are feeding their bees honey. That can result in problems for a range of reasons," Gonzalez explains.

"For example, a beekeeper who can't afford to get his honey extracted and leaves the boxes on top of the hives would seem fine, but it makes you lazy. They can't be bothered to carry out a



*Grass or bush engulfing beehives – a sign they have been abandoned by the beekeeper. It's becoming an increasingly regular occurrence around New Zealand and with it comes a disease risk for remaining managed hives.*

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brood inspection if there are four boxes of honey on top. They don't inspect for AFB, or monitor their mites. Then you get these bombs of robbing and there is plenty of honey to rob. Therefore, one case of AFB can turn into multiple.

"Another example, are the beekeepers who can't afford extraction so they go around all their beehives and harvest one frame of capped honey per hive, with no checking for AFB, no traceability, and then in the autumn or early spring the frames are fed back to hives and you get multiple cases of AFB showing, all at the same level of infection. But the beekeeper has no traceability, no clue where it has come from."

The Agency are there to help beekeepers, even those who wish to cease their operations and exit the industry, but people should do so responsibly, Hill reinforces.

"If you are going to give up beekeeping, please pack up your gear and deregister your apiaries."

**The AFB management agency can be contacted via email [info@afb.org.nz](mailto:info@afb.org.nz) or by phoning 0800 AFB PMP (0800 232 767).** 🐝

## Marco and Dwayne's Advice to Exiting Beekeepers

- Remove dead out hives from apiaries and deregister the sites.
- If removal is not attainable, securely block all dead out hives and notify the Agency.
- All beekeepers should notify the Agency if they suspect an apiary is abandoned.
- Ensure traceability to source if you plan to use feed honey across your operation.
- Be wary of leaving large stacks of honey on hives as it restricts access to brood inspection.

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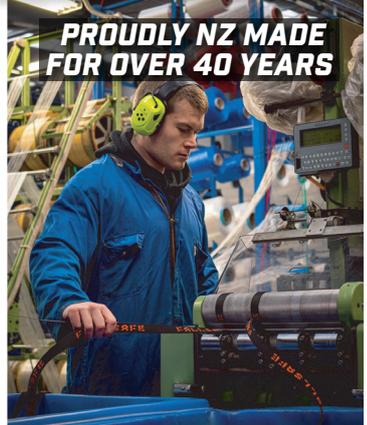
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# Liability Disagreement Leads to Mānuka Honey Appellation Resignations



The organisation which first launched, and continues to lodge appeals, regarding protection of the term 'Mānuka Honey' on behalf of New Zealand producers has been setback by resignation of its chairperson and another committee member following a disagreement over indemnity protections.

**The Mānuka Honey Appellation Society (MHAS), which has around 20 members, elected Ian Fletcher as chairperson at their AGM in June. The former chief executive of the UK Patents Office and also European Union trade negotiator brought considerable relevant experience to the organisation, but less than six months into the term has withdrawn, along with fellow committee member Jane Lorimer, who is the president of industry body New Zealand Beekeeping Incorporated (NZBI). Fletcher has acted as an advisor to NZBI for several years.**

In a message to NZBI members in December, Lorimer says the pair "separately, then collectively" decided that it was not right to remain on the committee. Lorimer has maintained her membership to MHAS, while Fletcher has withdrawn his.

The key point of contention appears to be in the lack of financial protection afforded to MHAS committee members as the Society

carries on an appeal of the UK Intellectual Property Office's (IPO) unfavourable December 2021 ruling in their bid to gain exclusive use of the term 'Mānuka Honey' for Kiwi producers. A case is also before New Zealand's IPO court for similar protections.

"At the MHAS AGM, it was agreed that MHAS would work to put its financial arrangements with UMFHA (Unique Mānuka Factor Honey Association) on a more formal footing, so as to provide appropriate enduring financial support for the MHAS and also provide suitable Directors' and Officers' insurance or equivalent indemnity for committee members," Lorimer says.

"We were given to understand at the time of the AGM that the UMFHA would work with the MHAS committee to progress these objectives. However, it later became clear that these objectives were not fully shared, and it proved impossible to settle these issues in a timely manner."

UMFHA is an incorporated society whose members include many of New Zealand's leading mānuka honey beekeepers, processors and marketers. Members can use the 'Unique Mānuka Factor' rating on their products and they claim to represent over 70% of New Zealand mānuka honey retailed. UMFHA provides the basis of industry financial backing to the legal proceedings undertaken by the Appellation Society, alongside government grants and loans.

Despite the disagreement over the indemnity of committee members, MHAS secretary John Rawcliffe says they are on strong financial footing, and the committee will continue to operate and have the required quorum of three, albeit as a smaller group.

"The membership of the UMFHA, through various partners including Mānuka Honey Association, has backed this [protection] programme since August 2015 without wavering. This year members voted to continue substantial financial support for the next five years through an increase of UMFHA levies and membership fees, providing long-term confidence to all involved, including MHAS, Te Pitau Ltd, and the Mānuka Charitable Trust," Rawcliffe says.

The Mānuka Charitable Trust, along with its legal operating arm Te Pitau Ltd., was formed in 2020 to take ultimate ownership of the 'Mānuka Honey' proprietorship bid, gain broad Māori support, and tap into government funding. However, it is this convoluted structure of associations, societies, trusts and businesses which



*With the resignation of Ian Fletcher MHAS has lost considerable relevant expertise from their committee and membership.*

seems to have played into the MHAS resignations, with Lorimer expressing concern about the lack of control the Appellation Society has over legal decisions.

"The MHAS committee (both collectively and individually) thus faces potential liability if proceedings don't go well, without control over the decision-making, or countervailing insurance or indemnity arrangements. It remains our view that MHAS's relationship with UMFHA and Te Pitau Ltd, and the position of its Officers, are issues that need to be addressed," Lorimer says.

While admitting that with the loss of Fletcher as, first, chairperson and, ultimately, a member of MHAS means a considerable loss in expertise, Rawcliffe says there will be other opportunities to tap into his knowledge through the various groups, if not in an official capacity.

"The door is open for that, in any form. No one has been turned away and no one has not been part of the programme who has wanted to be. Ian has provided a lot of good, sound advice along our journey," Rawcliffe says.

Despite the depletion of the committee, which still includes himself, Tony Wright, Rob Chemaly, Pita Tipene, Karin Kos and soon to be Nathan Guy, Chair of Apiculture New Zealand, Rawcliffe says they are striving on towards their goal of 'Mānuka Honey' protection. He recognises that honey producers are having difficulty gaining value for their mānuka honey at present, but believes the backing of UMFHA towards their programme is sound.

"When you look at overall export figures, we should have confidence there is a good baseline of export trade to ensure



NZ Beekeeping Inc president Jane Lorimer is still an interested member of MHAS proceedings, but concerns over the liability of committee members has led to her resignation from the committee.

we have the foundations to continue to improve aspects of the industry going forward. That is, a quality product from New Zealand, well protected, created through good beekeeping practices, which are sustainable. With them, we are on to a winner. So that is the focus," Rawcliffe says.

The appeal into the UK ruling is set to be heard in January, while the New Zealand case should progress in the first half of 2023. 🐝

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## ECROTEK

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# Prevention is Better Than Cure



After the last few years, you might think we're all experts on the immune system. Well maybe we are, but insect – particularly social insect – immune systems may surprise you. How do these highly social animals try to protect themselves from contagious diseases? We know it ain't easy, so resident science writer Dave Black explains how bee immunity works, and what we can learn about our own immunity.

BY DAVE BLACK

Honey bees maintain nice stable environments in their living quarters, and store plenty of food for long periods, so there are plenty of opportunities for pests and diseases to flourish. Closely related individuals live in close quarters, so pathogens could spread easily and rapidly given a chance. Beekeepers don't often think in terms of individual immunity, our emphasis is on more visible, behavioural aspects of disease prevention like grooming, hygienic behaviour, removing corpses, absconding, propolis use, a collective 'fever' response, and self-removal by unhealthy individuals. We refer to these as aspects of 'social immunity'.

However, individual bees do have immune systems that are not the same but, in many respects, not that dissimilar to ours. That is interesting because it suggests the basic mechanisms evolved a long time ago, and because they were so valuable have been conserved as species became more complex. The evidence lies in the common features of our genome that insects and vertebrates, honey bees and humans, share.

Insect immune systems are of course quite well studied, not least because humans have spent a lot of time trying to kill many of them. It's true that, compared to other insects, honey bee immunity is quite 'primitive', and that may be because it operates in a restricted (socially controlled) environment against a more limited range of threats. It appears that honey bees have not found it necessary to diversify their individual immune response the way other insects have had to<sup>1</sup>.

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## ON DEFENCE

Honey bees have several ways to defend themselves from pests and foreign chemicals. There are physical barriers that line both the inside and the outside of the animal, its exoskeleton and its antimicrobial cuticle, as well as mucus linings, friendly bacteria, and membranes in the gut. They can also employ a cellular immune system deployed by cells known as haemocytes that circulate in the haemolymph (that's the bee's 'blood'). There are several different kinds, and they can adhere to, break up, engulf, or encapsulate ('melanise') material and render it harmless.

Haemocytes use compounds produced by the salivary glands and the fat-body to make and store enzymes and peptides that interact with or damage the structure or chemistry of microbes and foreign elements. The suite of chemicals, referred to as antimicrobial peptides or AMPs, that circulate in the haemolymph used by the immune system, is known as the humoral response. 'Humoral' because it relates to the body's 'humors', an old-fashioned name for the fluids a body contains. Honey bees produce far fewer AMPs than most other insects. In all, compared to other insects, honey bees are thought to have about a third of all the genes we know to be associated with innate immunity.

Despite the similarity, the immune system of insects differs from vertebrates like us in a very fundamental way. Insects have an 'innate immunity'; today we might think of it as 'hard-wired'. It's inherited, co-evolved, specific and immutable (unchanging over time). By contrast, vertebrates have both innate immunity but also



The use of propolis inside the beehive as a collective device of the colony against disease is often highly evident to the beekeeper, but did you know bees also have individual immune responses, not dissimilar to humans, that are far less visible?

'adaptive' immunity that allows us to recognise a broad range of pathogens, even novel ones, remember them, and produce a response specific to each threat. Vertebrate immune systems can learn, whereas insect immune systems evolve if they can. Or so we thought.

## PERHAPS WE DON'T KNOW AS MUCH AS WE THOUGHT...

In 2003 a study published evidence of a small crustacean apparently being more resistant to a parasitic tapeworm in subsequent infections. Since then, what has become known as 'immune priming' has been offered as an explanation in cases involving mosquitos, fruit flies, a beetle, woodlouse, various worms<sup>2</sup>, and, in 2006, *Bombus terrestris*<sup>3</sup> – bumble bees. Together these

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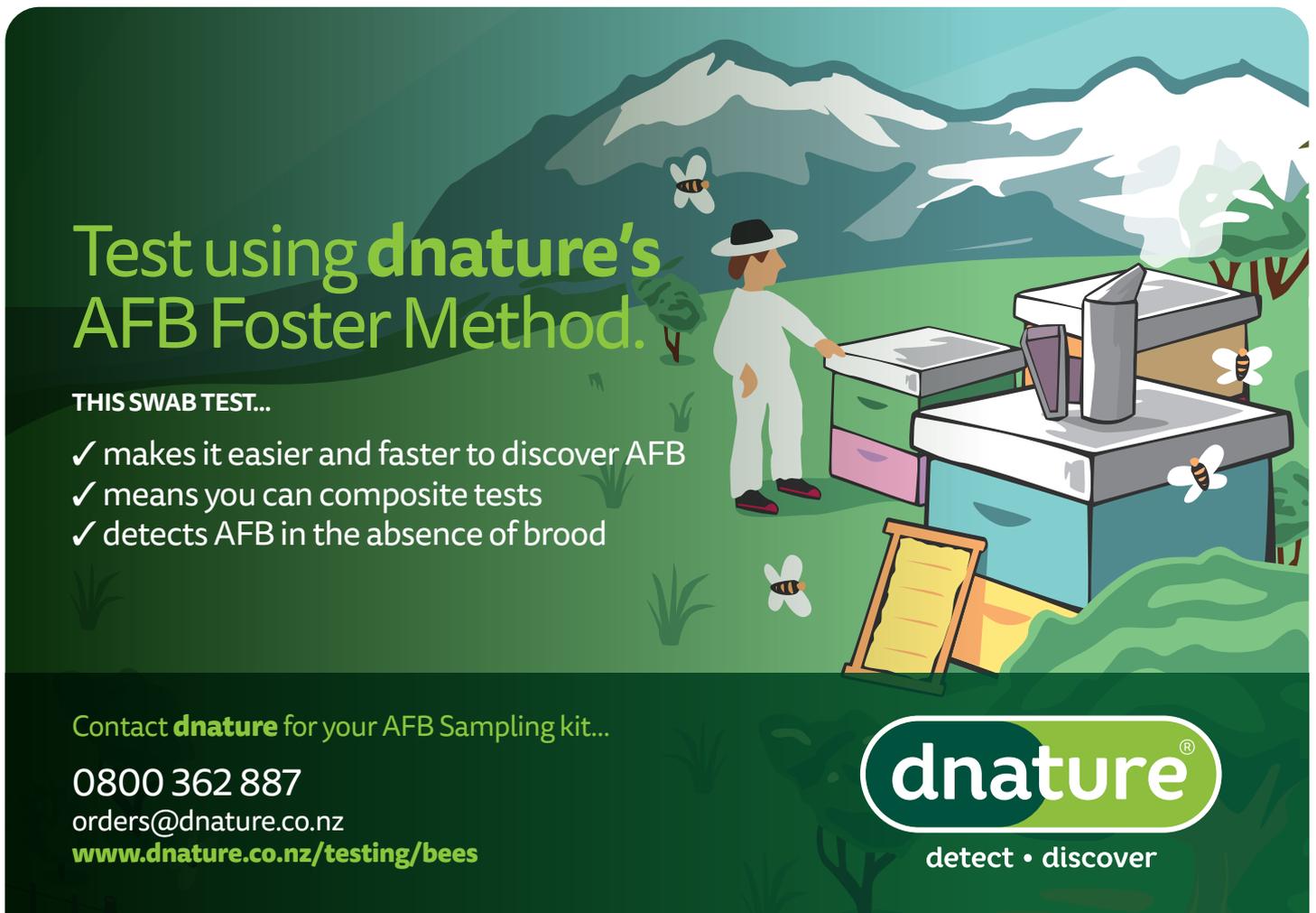
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Among honey bees' methods of disease prevention is frequent grooming of fellow members of the colony.



studies suggest there are circumstances where innate immunity gets better at mounting a response, and 'remembers' to provide a specific, effective response after a period of time, at least weeks. We don't yet know how this might work, and we don't know if this can be transferred to the animal's progeny, but there have been studies that indicate it might be.

A different form of adaptive immunity may yet be shown to exist in insects, and for all we know, other organisms. That just means, (and this is a good thing) we don't know as much about immune systems as we think we do.

*Dave Black is a Bay of Plenty based hobbyist beekeeper who now works in the kiwifruit industry. He has a degree in Environmental Science and for the past 25 years he has been reading and writing*

*about bees and beekeeping. His essays are available at [www.beyondbeebooks.substack.com/](http://www.beyondbeebooks.substack.com/)* 🐝

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# A Brief History of Formic Acid

Formic Pro varroa treatments have become common place as part of many Kiwi beekeeper's varroa management plans in recent seasons, and for good reason explains NOD Apiary Product scientist Heather Broccard-Bell.

Formic acid, or methanoic acid, is an organic compound that occurs naturally throughout the living world. This small molecule can be found taking part in and being produced by a host of life's chemical processes, in organisms ranging from microbes to plants, animals, and fungi. As a result, formic acid is present in many foods we eat, including honey.

Since it is so common, it is not surprising that formic acid's unique chemical properties have been harnessed for many purposes by many living things, including humans. Formic acid gets its name from the latin word *formica*, meaning *ant*, owing to its discovery in 1671 as the substance sprayed by ants defending their colonies from attack. Several other insects, including a group of stingless bees and a type of caterpillar, also use formic acid for defense.

One of the more intriguing uses of formic acid in nature, known as *anting*, occurs when birds intentionally provoke ants, triggering their defensive response. Scientists think the formic acid released by the ants helps the birds rid

themselves of parasites, including mites.

Humans have put formic acid to work in a diverse array of applications, including in the production of silage for cattle feed, as an energy source in fuel cells, as part of the of the leather tanning process – and of course, to treat honey bee colonies infested with *Varroa destructor* mites.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DOSE

Like individual people, every species has a unique genetic make-up that makes it more or less sensitive to substances like food and medications. The ability of a particular dose of a compound to kill a certain species of organism while leaving another species unharmed is how drugs like antibiotics, which target microorganisms within our bodies, work. However, a dose of an antibiotic above this "sweet spot" can be just as toxic to us as it is to our disease-causing microbes.

Formic acid is more toxic to varroa mites than it is to honey bees. Liquid formic acid has been used by beekeepers since the 1970s to control varroa mites – and beekeepers and scientists have carefully determined the "sweet spot" at which the level of formic acid kills varroa mites while doing minimal damage to the bees.



## UNIQUE PROPERTIES

Formic acid has several unique properties that make it a great miticide. One feature that separates it from other miticides is its ability to diffuse into capped brood cells to reach varroa mites where they spend the majority of their lives. Formic acid also does not build up in wax, reducing the risk that varroa will develop a tolerance due to prolonged exposure. Despite its decades-long history of use, no resistance to formic acid has emerged in varroa, likely because it acts on multiple targets within the varroa mite.

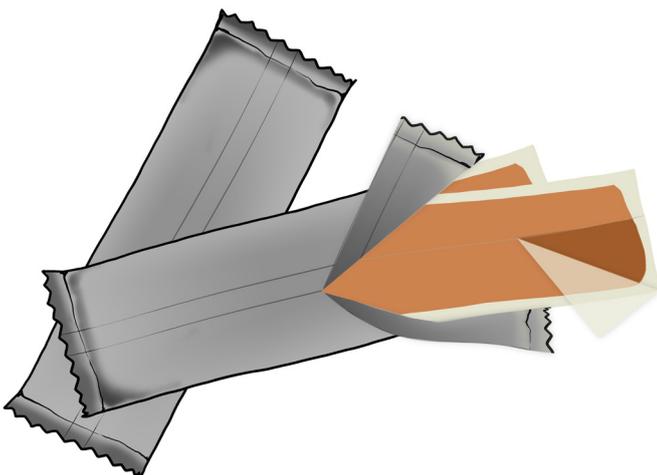
So, is formic acid a perfect varroacide? Not quite.

## LIQUID LIMITATIONS

Liquid formic acid must evaporate to be effective. The rate of evaporation of any liquid always depends on temperature. Using liquid formic acid means that, especially when temperatures fluctuate, it is not always easy to control the rate of evaporation to achieve that "sweet spot" dose. Too low, and the treatment leaves mites alive; too high, and you risk the health of your colony.

But the problems posed by using liquid formic acid are not limited to effects on bees. Mishandling the corrosive liquid can cause serious chemical burns. Accidentally inhaling formic acid vapours can be deadly.

We knew there had to be a better way.



**NOD TO THE RESCUE**

In the 1990s, a group of Canadian beekeepers, inspired by the promise of formic acid, decided to develop an application method that was safer, more convenient, and more precise. They hoped to create a product that would be both effective and environmentally responsible. But a good idea only gets you so far.

Since honey is a food product, what is put into honey bee colonies is tightly regulated. To get their product to market, the beekeepers realized they would need to create a legal entity. NOD Apiary Products Ltd. was incorporated in 1997 with the goal of providing the infrastructure necessary to successfully navigate complex regulatory processes. NOD's first product, Mite-Away, became available soon after.

By 2005, NOD had launched an updated version: Mite-Away II. Although Mite-Away and Mite-Away II were safer alternatives to liquid formic acid, they

relied on non-recyclable plastic sleeves, and required specialized equipment to apply. With the aim of convenient, sustainable mite control in mind, NOD's research team embarked on a mission to completely revolutionize the product design.

**CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT AND GLOBAL EXPANSION: MAQS AND FORMIC PRO**

Mite Away Quick Strips® (MAQS®) was registered in North America in 2011 and became available in New Zealand in 2014. MAQS features a saccharide matrix impregnated with formic acid, wrapped in Ecopaper. The matrix and Ecopaper work together to regulate the release of formic acid. MAQS strips are fully compostable and can be used during the honey flow.

As word spread about MAQS, so did global demand – but a new issue emerged: with shipping uncertainties, the one-year product shelf-life limited access to MAQS in some regions.

Thus, Formic Pro® (initially branded as MAQS+®) was created by adding stabilizers to the MAQS formulation. Formic Pro was launched in New Zealand and North America in 2017 boasting a 24-month shelf-life. Like MAQS, Formic Pro is easy to use, compostable, and can be applied during the honey flow. Studies show that Formic Pro and MAQS have similar efficacies, achieving up to 97% mortality in dispersal phase mites and up to 80% below the brood cap.

As of 2022, Formic Pro is available in 28 countries, and we are working hard to adapt Formic Pro for use in the many varied hive styles around the world.

We are extremely proud of what we have achieved so far – but we are not finished! As the NOD team grows, we are focused on the future and the expansion of our range of intuitive, sustainable honey bee health products.

\*See [online story](#) for full reference links ■

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# Christmas Promo Winner a Southland Club Good-Sort



Every Christmas *Apiarist's Advocate* and some of our leading advertisers (including sponsor of this section Hive World NZ) give away a bundle of gifts to one lucky subscriber. In December it turned out the random winner had perhaps earned some beekeeping karma to draw the \$300 in value their way. We meet Marj Baker – instrumental in both the Southland Bee Society and another beekeeping group closer to her Winton home, as well as sharing beekeeping experiences through her MBeez Honey Facebook page.



Marj Baker can not only be found at Southland markets selling honey harvested from her four beehives, but at Southland Bee Society gatherings and the Winton hobby beekeeping group she founded two years ago.

Just six seasons into her hobbyist beekeeping journey, Baker is packing plenty in. Currently the Southland Bee Society treasurer, she became involved with the club almost as soon as she got the first of her now four beehives. However, not satisfied with having to travel the half hour to Invercargill to get a beekeeping-group fix, two years ago she launched a Winton hobbyist group.

"I wanted to improve the beekeeping practices in my own area and I knew there were a whole heap of new hobbyists nearby. So I talked to Andy Booth, who has been beekeeping about 50 years, and got him on board to help," Baker explains.

The Winton group now includes 21 non-commercial beekeepers who gather regularly to talk beekeeping and share knowledge.

The now retired wool buying business owner was initially a cautious beekeeper, first being gifted beekeeping equipment by her family as she was showing interest in having a hive, but then taking four months to populate it as she increased her knowledge base.

"We had a girl that worked for us. So, between her and my husband we bought a nuc from Murray Christensen and away I went. I haven't looked back since. I love it. It's an amazing hobby, just incredible."

That passion is evident not only in Baker's efforts at club level, but through her MBeez Honey Facebook page where a wide range of beekeeping activities are demonstrated to the 100-plus

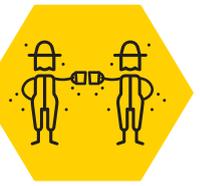
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followers and honey customers. Although the four MBeez hives can only nett so much honey, it is enough to service some regular cliental and visits to various markets in the Southland area. Primarily clover honey, it is extracted at Booth's registered facility.

Of course keeping four hives productive enough to keep the customers' jars full means being well on top of varroa mites, and so Baker says she plans to use the \$100 Christmas giveaway vouchers from each of Ecrotek, NZ Beeswax and Hive World NZ for buying various varroa treatments in the first instance. She plans to trial some organic treatments and you can be sure she will share her experiences with the beekeeping community. That will include the Southland Bee Society, which after a lull of activity has started to pick up again in the last six months and now has about 50 members.

"We are all there to learn together, so anything we don't know we will find out. To me that will mean better beekeeping throughout the South Island," Baker says.

In the deep south at least, Baker is doing her part to better that beekeeping and karma appears to have rewarded her, \$300 to the better. 🐝



Marj Baker has only four beehives but plenty of honey to support some supportive local buyers in Southland who lap up the MBeez clover honey.

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# Inflation and Interest Rates



BY IAN FLETCHER

Ian Fletcher explains how inflation is measured, what causes it, how it impacts us, and analyses the Reserve Bank's response to rising inflation.

Has the Reserve bank got it wrong? As we all know, after several decades of low inflation, it's back. Interest rates are rising, as the Reserve Bank (and pretty much every other central bank in the developed world, except Japan) has told us they are determined to tame inflation by raising interest rates. In New Zealand, the Reserve Bank has said this will mean causing a recession. They hope it'll be shallow. So do I.



*Reserve Bank governor Adrian Orr has said he wants New Zealand to enter a recession to try and halt inflation, but that is a step too far according to commentator Ian Fletcher.*

## WHAT'S INFLATION, AND WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT IT THAT IT'S WORTH STAGING A SLUMP TO GET IT UNDER CONTROL?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF – it's a sort of UN for reserve banks) explains that "Inflation is the rate of increase in prices over a given period of time". It's usually measured as an economy-wide figure, expressed as an annual rate. So a 7% rate means that over a year, the price of a typical range of goods and





services will be 7% higher after 12 months. Not every price will rise, or rise by the same amount.

That means inflation measurement is complex, with statisticians sampling a standardised 'basket' of goods and services over time – a basket that itself has to change as technology and consumer preferences change (out with fax machine; in with the smart phone). They also measure inflation in parts of the economy or particular goods or services. I don't know of a standardised index for beekeeping costs, but we could construct one.

Inflation means that people on fixed incomes (benefits, pensions, most salaries at any point in time) are poorer: prices up, income not up. It also means banks want to charge more for loans (otherwise inflation erodes the real value of a loan, as the money buys less over time). Investments are harder to assess, as real returns are uncertain. Economic uncertainty and political pressure is bad for any economy. And may bankers remember the destructive effects of inflation when it really gets out of control (Germany in the early 1920s; Zimbabwe in 2008). Why take the risk?

#### WHERE DOES INFLATION COME FROM?

Famously, the influential economist Milton Friedman said "inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon, in the sense that it is and can be produced only by a more rapid increase in the quantity of money than in output." So, the classical (and often correct) explanation is too much money chasing too few

goods and services. Exactly the effect you'd expect from all the pandemic stimulus here and around the world. But inflation is a bit contagious too – the higher oil prices from the Ukraine war raise costs here, for example. Skill shortages have the same effect.

What's the solution? Higher interest rates: this reduces demand for goods and services by making money more expensive, so people borrow less (it's costly) and save more (they get better rates). This reduces economic activity, increases unemployment, and generally dampens things. Housing costs (through higher mortgage rates and rents) mean ordinary people are directly affected. That dampening is what our Reserve Bank expects to happen as interest rates rise. They see it as a necessary price to pay.

#### IS THIS RIGHT?

It's important to say that interest rates in recent years were exceptionally low (part of the pandemic response, but also part of a longer-term trend). Some increase was inevitable, but should we explicitly plan to engineer a recession?

Inflation today probably mixes several causes. One is the pandemic stimulus and that needs to be unwound (in any case it has contributed to a property boom that has disadvantaged many, and it means there's nothing in the locker for the next crisis). But some inflation is the effect of the Ukraine war on energy prices. Some inflation is the result of the pandemic disruption to world shipping and commodity markets (steadily improving).



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Raising interest rates here won't affect any of that, except it'll reduce people's access to employment and income to manage the pressure.

### THE LABOUR MARKET

The most interesting area of pressure is the labour market – skill shortages. Here there's population issues (boomers starting to retire, earn less and need more health care), changes in inward and outward migration (Kiwis off to Australia, as well as people moving here), and changes in technology and skills (nursing today is unrecognisably more skilled and responsible than even a few decades ago, and that is reflected in pay expectations, for example). If wages are rising because of those pressures, that 'inflation' isn't a problem – it reflects changes in the relative value of work. That's a good thing – it means prices come to reflect scarcity, skills, and demand, and signals to people where they might want to work.

There's one other point too: the Reserve Bank here (like many others) has accepted performance targets based on low inflation, usually around 2%. This is an arbitrary number, and didn't really bite for many years while inflation was low. Now that inflation is higher, there may also be central bank ego at play, as seen in ostentatious determination to crush inflation, whatever the causes, and consequences. If 2% is OK, what's so bad about 3% or 4%?

What does all this mean? Yes, inflation is troublesome. But maybe it's not as black-and-white catastrophic as all that. The

pandemic stimulus does need to be wound back, and interest rates go up a bit. But I'm not convinced it's worth a recession. We all need to really understand what's happening in the jobs market before that case can be made. Having owned up to one mistake – rates too low for too long – the Reserve Bank risks the opposite. Too wrongs won't make it right.

*Ian Fletcher is a former head of New Zealand's security agency, the GCSB, chief executive of the UK Patents Office, free trade negotiator with the European Commission and biosecurity expert for the Queensland government. These days he is a commercial flower grower in the Wairarapa and consultant to the apiculture industry with NZ Beekeeping Inc. 🐝*



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# Editorial



BY PATRICK DAWKINS

## Reported AFB Incidence is up, but is it a bad thing?

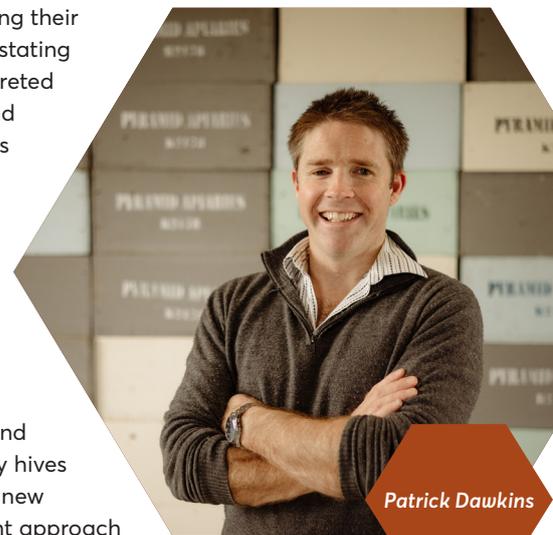
**Argh American foulbrood (AFB), that ongoing scourge for beekeepers. Once I sunk my teeth into writing this month's lead story on beekeepers exiting the industry, the topic of hive abandonment and the associated AFB risk naturally came up. Thus, the Management Agency offered some really good advice for all beekeepers (whether they are abandoning apiaries or they have the remaining neighbouring hives) in *Reducing the AFB Risk of Abandoned Hives – the Responsibility of All Beekeepers*.**

That story and the issue of abandoned hives with the potential to spread disease points to what I believe will be a very interesting year or two in our nationwide goal of reducing the incidence of AFB by 5% every year. Between the 2021 and 2022 reporting years that goal was met with dismal failure, with the latest 2021/22 Annual Report of the Agency detailing 3422 reported cases of AFB, as compared to 2526 in the 2020/21 report. That's a jump of 35%!

The Agency is putting their spin on the numbers, stating "This should be interpreted as a positive result and the reporting of AFB is to be encouraged if the industry is serious about making real progress toward the elimination of AFB". The report also points to the industry dynamics meaning ownership and management of many hives in changing and with new owners a more vigilant approach to identifying and reporting AFB may be taking place. Let's hope that is the case!

Guiding the Agency's thinking is the knowledge that of the 10 DECA holders experiencing the largest increase of reported AFB, eight had "new ownership, management, or staff in 2021/22, and the new personnel were detecting high levels of AFB in beehives that were not reported by their predecessors".

Another contributing factor identified by the Agency is the requirement (as of March 2022) that honey exported to China be



Patrick Dawkins

### DETAILED DISEASE MANAGEMENT STATISTICS

Table 8. Ten DECA holders reporting the largest increase in AFB in 2021/22

Bk	#Colonies	AFB 20/21	AFB 21/22	Comment
A	1,001+	13	165	New management cleaning up AFB
B	11-50	0	150	New management cleaning up AFB
C	1,001+	21	118	New management cleaning up AFB
D	1,001+	3	73	Beekeeper spread AFB
E	1,001+	36	99	Owner cleaning up AFB in purchased beehives
F	1,001+	6	61	New management cleaning up AFB
G	251-500	0	50	Beekeeper spread AFB
H	1,001+	12	60	New staff cleaning up AFB in one area
I	11-50	0	35	New owner cleaning up AFB
J	1,001+	6	37	New management cleaning up AFB
<b>Total</b>		<b>97</b>	<b>848</b>	

The increase in AFB incidence for eight out of 10 of these beekeepers is a consequence of additional effort by new owners, managers and/or staff to identify and destroy pre-existing AFB cases. The increased efforts of these eight DECA holders and others like them is critical for the elimination of AFB.

*From the AFB Management Agency's Annual Report – details pertaining to the 10 DECA holders with the largest increase in reported AFB.*

  
Neville Marr

Chartered Accountant

An accountant who understands  
your business!

I'm a Blenheim-based chartered accountant, hobbyist beekeeper, and business partner with all of my clients. What's important to me is understanding my clients' business and bringing that personal touch. Please contact me confidentially and without obligation if you'd like to discuss how I can assist you and your business this year.

  
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free from AFB spores. This appears to have contributed to some increased vigilance and reporting.

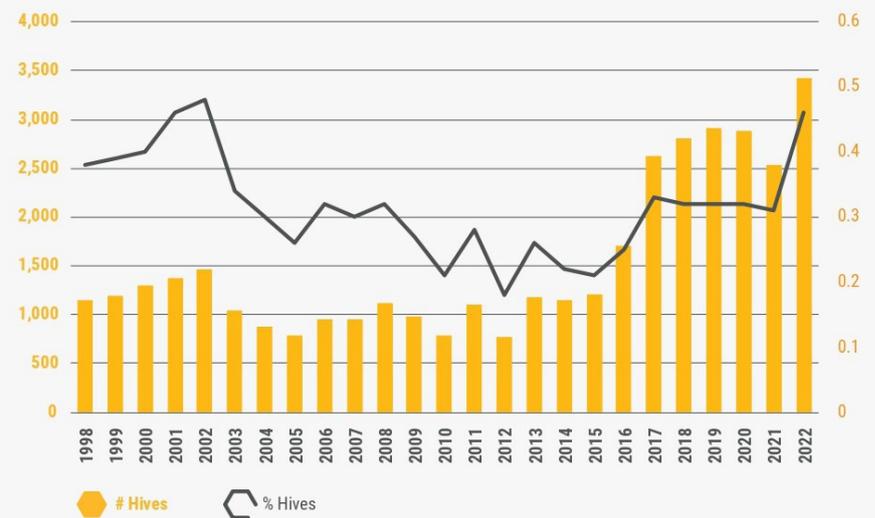
The AFB certainly appears to be there, but the verdict is out on whether we are simply getting better at identifying and reporting it, or the incidence is increasing ... or both.

Any way you want to view it, with the likelihood of more abandoned apiaries ahead of us, the potential for the hive disease to spread further and wider is there. Therefore, I recommend you read our aforementioned story because it will truly take an effort from the entire industry if we are to prevent the spread – beekeepers going out of business need to do so with consideration for those who remain, the remaining beekeepers must not only be vigilant in their own AFB management practices but also in informing the Agency of abandoned apiaries, and the Agency itself appears to have its work cut out for it.

The numbers in the next annual report will tell us how we've done... 

Figure 3.

## REPORTED INCIDENCE OF AFB, 1998 - 2022



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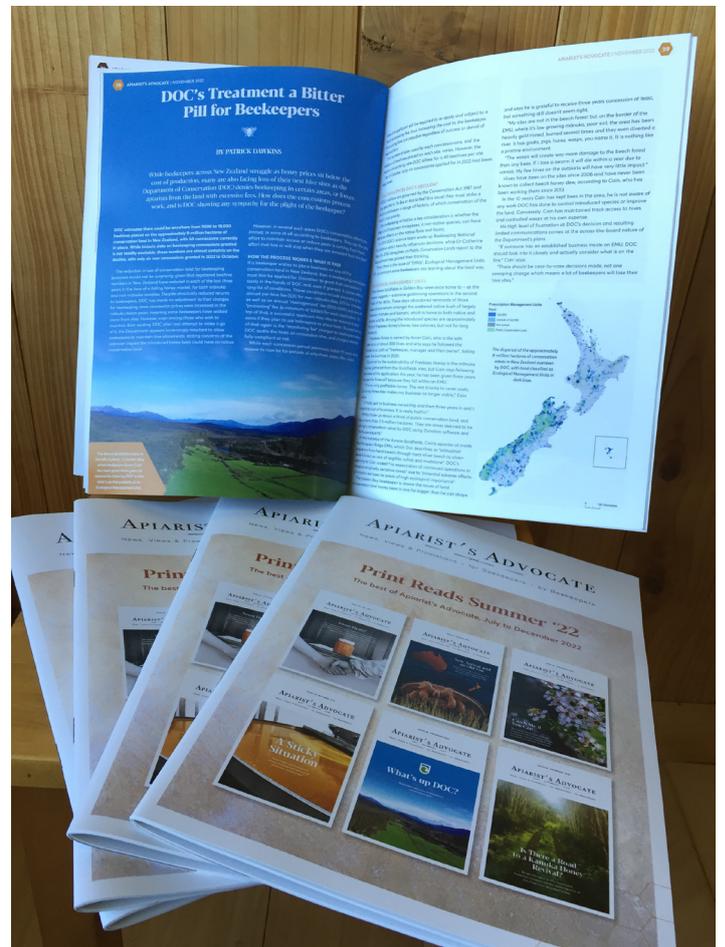


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**Editor:** Patrick Dawkins

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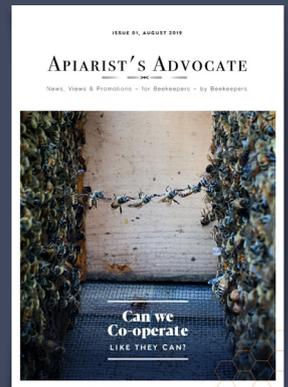
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