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"The Last Great Market for Mānuka" Opens Up

but it's a long road to riches in India

“The Last Great Market for Mānuka” Opens, but India is Expected to be a Slow Burn

The New Zealand-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has officially begun, and tariff rates on certain mānuka honey exports have already been cut, with more reductions to take place over the next five years. Those who have been to India recently as part of the official delegations say they expect the mānuka honey market growth in the world’s most populous nation to be a slow-burn, and that would be a good thing for the long-term prospects of “the last great market for mānuka”.

The FTA entered into force on October 20, granting all New Zealand mānuka honey with a cost, insurance and freight (CIF) value of at least US$30/kg an immediate reduction from the previous 66% tariff to 56.1%. A ‘quota’ of 200 tonnes which gains the same tariff reduction – but must be applied for and granted by the Ministry from Primary industries (MPI) – has also been established for honey with a CIF value of US$20-$30/kg (as detailed in *India Quota System Window Short, Sharp and Open Now*).

The tariff relief available relates to both bulk and retail packed monofloral and multifloral mānuka honey, as certified by MPI. Only the CIF-value – effectively the value of the product landed in India – sets the grade which will get the helping hand to market.

New Zealand is the first country in the world to gain preferential access for honey to India. That will take the form of a 75% reduction over five years, with a second cut coming within months as the rate from January 1 2027 reduces to 46.2%, then 36.3% in 2028, and 26.4% a year later, before settling at 16.5% from 2030 on.

“It’s a massive opportunity,” says Nathan Guy, New Zealand’s special agricultural trade envoy, and until recently the chairperson of Apiculture New Zealand before its transition to Honey and Bees New Zealand.

“One-point-four-billion people, a growing middle class, and a bit of a sweet tooth which is great for honey. Any small gain in such a large market has the potential to be significant for honey exports.”

Many other products from New Zealand benefit from tariff reductions, with some smaller tariffs removed completely already, while others face similar longer-term, staged reductions and quota systems as honey. Conversely, all products from India now have completely tariff-free entry into the much smaller New Zealand market.

SLOW BURN EXPECTED

New Zealand is starting from a low base, with only five to six tonnes of mānuka honey exported to India in each of the last two years, the vast majority of it retail packed.





UMF Honey Association head of strategy and partnerships Campbell Naish, left, talks mānuka honey at the World Food India event in New Delhi in September 2025, part of the Association’s due diligence on a burgeoning market.

Since news of the FTA broke there has been "huge interest" in the India market from honey exporters according to UMF Honey Association (UMFHA) head of strategy and partnerships Campbell Naish. However, that doesn't mean he believes there will be a significant rise in exports, at least in year one of the agreement.

"It is almost 20 years since the China FTA was signed," Naish reflects.

"When you look at the way that market grew for us, in the first five years trade was pretty flat. Nothing changed in a hurry as everyone laid down platforms. Then, things started to grow rapidly to where things peaked just before Covid."

So far the interest from New Zealand honey exporters has been in seeking to understand the new market better Naish says. That is a prudent approach according to Guy, who recently returned from a 10-day trip around the giant subcontinental nation.

"There's an old saying, '10 years is a short time in India'. You have to keep turning up and turning up to build those relationships and do a lot of analysis on supply chains," Guy says.

The Mānuka Collective is one such business undertaking that groundwork, with chief executive Sean Goodwin having made several trips to the emerging market in recent years, including crossing paths with Guy for a honey promotion in Mumbai in October. He believes the India market could be a 1000 tonne market for New Zealand in time (last year New Zealand exported 12,700 tonnes globally). Goodwin admits that is aspirational from a current six tonne base, but that with such a huge population, a growing middle-class, and an appreciation for natural health benefits, the recipe is there.



The Mānuka Collective chief executive Sean Goodwin, left, and New Zealand's special agricultural trade envoy Nathan Guy promote mānuka honey in a Mumbai restaurant in October. Photo: The Mānuka Collective.

"The thing that struck me going back again recently is, all these wellness trends that we are seeing elsewhere, like protein demand, longevity, and preventive wellness, it's all already there. That wasn't the case 15 years ago when we tried to sell mānuka into countries where magnesium wasn't even a known thing," Goodwin says.



MORE THAN A BILLION REASONS TO TAKE IT SLOW

Of course, the staged reduction in tariffs for mānuka honey will be the most obvious factor to limit potential market growth, but there are plenty of other reasons too, so say those who have seen the market up close.

"There are 28 states which all have their own rules, regulations and laws, so the ease of doing business requires a lot of due diligence. Finding customers will require finding the right partnerships based on values," Guy says.

Logistically India and its 1.4billion people and huge, varying, geography will also take some learning. Mānuka honey's susceptibility to reduced quality in high-temperature environments has the potential to throw challenges in both transit and storage.

"I would urge people to find the right partners," Goodwin says.

"It's going to be easy to jump at the first opportunity, but India can and will be a difficult market. They have some difficult standards in terms of getting things through their customs and food security people. You don't want to be making mistakes. It is important that, as an industry, we turn up there properly."

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise have increased their staffing in India due to the FTA, and are taking expressions of interest in attending the huge food and hospitality fair in New Delhi known as AAHAR in March 2027. UMFHA will have a presence there, and Naish recommends those considering exporting to India to join the New Zealand showing.

GET IT RIGHT

"Turing up there properly" as Goodwin puts it is not just about getting the product to the consumer in the best state possible, but also getting the right product in the first place, along with consistent marketing behind it, he says. It's a plan, unsurprisingly, shared by UMFHA as they seek to distinguish honey carrying their quality market from that of others.

"This is the last great market for mānuka to target and try to build as higher-value market as possible," Naish says.

"This is a real opportunity for New Zealand to make a planned entry into a market. The flaws in execution over the last 20 years have been everyone charging into market and competing with each other by confusing the story of what mānuka honey is."

UMFHA have been consulting with experts already within the market and the advice given is to target the very top and that those people are not worried about price.

"The message is, target the top end, the top one percent, of the market to start with. On a population of one-point-four-billion-plus, that one percent is a huge market (14million-plus people). And be very focused. Look at starting right at the premium end of the market. There is absolutely no way anyone can target *India*, but they can target a small piece of India. We don't have anyone in New Zealand with those capabilities and we don't have enough honey," Naish says.

Goodwin believes India is an opportunity for the mānuka honey industry to "reset the agenda" and "go in and do it properly".

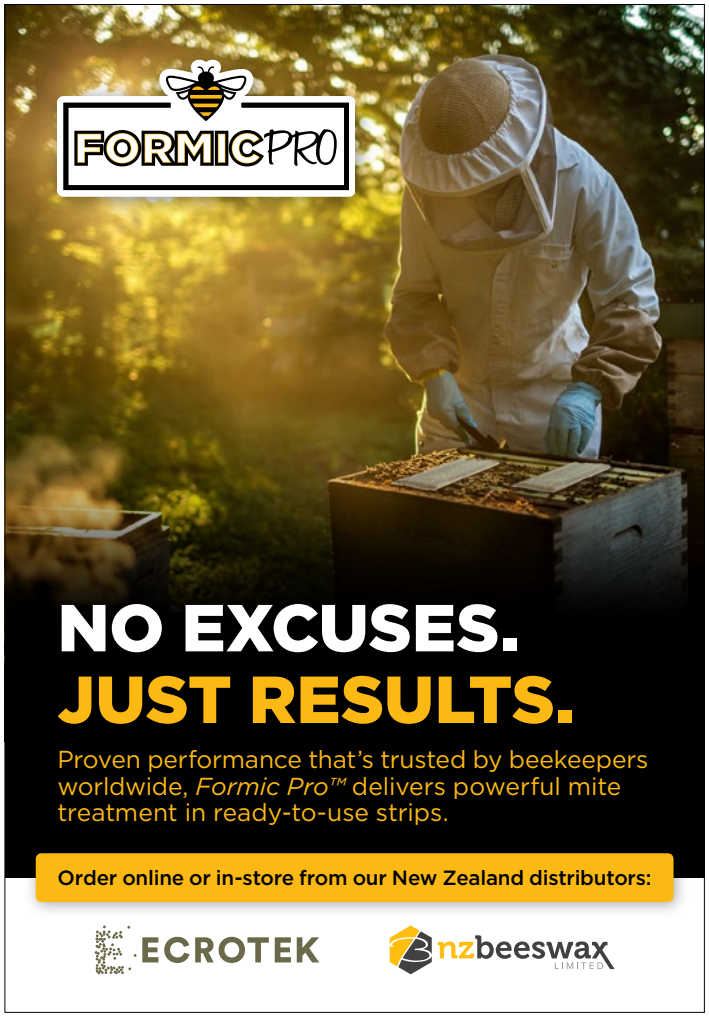
"The fact that the FTA is coming in on a relatively high grade of honey should help us as well. The story is about wellness and taking a product every day. We need to try and learn from some of the other markets where we haven't done as well as we should have," The Mānuka Collective chief executive says.

What does that look like in practice? For Goodwin it is a combination of "starting with the basics of what manuka is about, from a wellness point of view,", and combing it with the full New Zealand story and Māori connection to mānuka. Then there is getting the grade of honey right.

"I think we need to show up at a consistent level, call that UMF10+, 250MGO, or whatever level that is, but that we are not going in and flogging MGO40 and the smell of mānuka based on 'this thing is going to fix you'," he says.



A MPI delegation visited Gujarat, Kolkata, and Guwahati in August to advance cooperation in the honey and apiculture sector, with two honey Centres of Excellence to soon result.



CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

A country the size of New Zealand does not get the wins in tariff reductions they have when negotiating with the world's most populous nation and sixth largest economy, without some give to the take. Included in the giving for beekeepers and honey sellers will be knowledge-sharing with their Indian counterparts through the 'Honey Action Plan' (HAP) which will result in two 'Centres of Excellence for Honey', in Uttar Pradesh in the north and the bustling Kolkata in India's far east.

"The HAP is a collaborative effort between the New Zealand and Indian governments and industry, with strong progress being made towards its delivery," says Nick Swallow, MPI's divisional manager trade policy strategy and systems.

The centres aim to support the development of India's apiculture sector through "technical collaboration, research, training and knowledge sharing".

Both apple and kiwifruit industries will be undertaking similar agreements and critics have raised concerns at the risk associated with assisting a foreign agricultural sector that could undermine New Zealand.

"I don't have any concerns about that," Guy says, days after touching down in New Zealand from India.

"It means we will be helping them lift their productivity and to understand more about bee health and bee husbandry. Improving beekeeping practices, because they are not great. Some may say, 'why on earth are we doing that?', particularly with kiwifruit and apples. Firstly, it is part of the FTA and, secondly, if we can grow the overall category, then that is a win for them domestically and us as exporters."

It's a two-way street as well, Naish hopes, with the potential for greater research into mānuka honey.

"They are world class in their pharmaceutical studies. They have scope and they have government funding, and they are interested in collaboration. We will be looking to have discussions that help expand the amount of resources available to help us carry out research," Naish says.

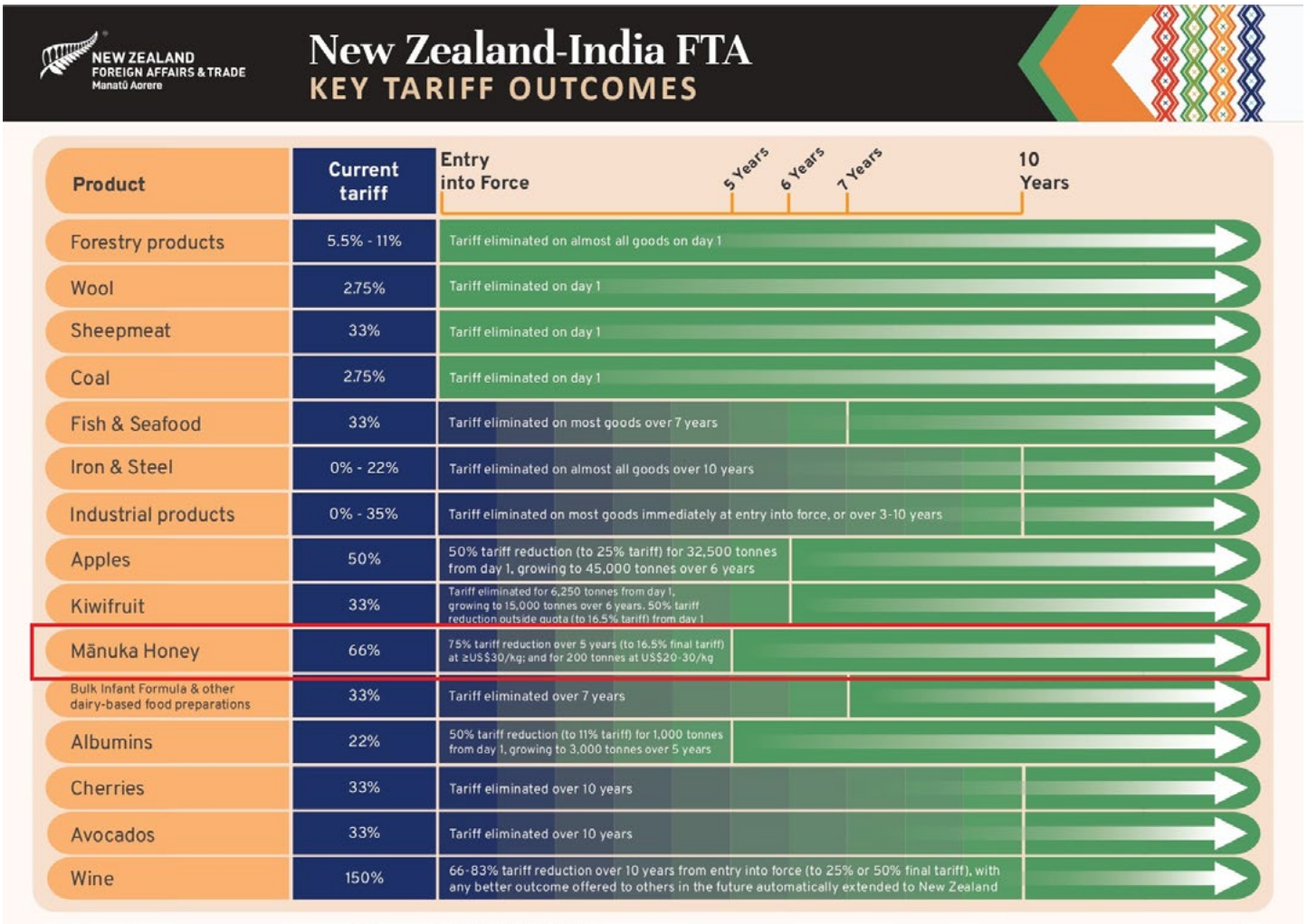
"There is opportunity for our industry to evolve through a partnership with a country like theirs, if we build up strong relationships."

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Those relationships shape to be wide and varied, from the research potential, to logistics and distribution partnerships, to marketing and education. With Australia working on adding honey tariff relief under their existing FTA with India, the time is now to build those relationships, even without the flow of honey.

"At the moment we are the only country in the world with an opportunity to export honey to India (with reduced tariffs), so this is our window to get it right," Naish says, and that was the message he took from a FTA launch in Auckland where the Minister for Trade and Investment addressed exporters.

"Todd McClay's message was, 'we have opened the door, it's up to you businesses to get it right'."



India Quota System Window Short, Sharp and Open Now

Beekeepers wanting to apply for "quota" to export mānuka honey to India in 2027 with a CIF (cost, insurance and freight) value of US$20-$US30/kg have until 5pm on November 16 to throw their hat in the ring if they want to gain reduced tariff rates.

All mānuka honey above US$30/kg in value landed into India since October 20 has benefitted from the new 56.1% rate (down from 66%) and will continue to gain relief as the rates step down through the next five years. Below that, the quota system limits the amount entering with tariff relief to 200 tonnes at the lower value.

The Ministry for Primary Industries has released details of how to apply for quota online, and will get its first test of the system in mid-November when applications close. The system devised looks to provide opportunity for both large and small exporters, with a two-pool system.

Of the 200 tonne, 180 is earmarked for those wishing to apply for at least 16 tonnes of quota in the 'main quota pool' (MQP). The remaining 20 tonnes is set to benefit small exporters, with a 'smaller exporter quota pool' (SEQP) for those wanting between 300kg and 2 tonne.

"These pools are designed to provide larger exporters with commercially meaningful quota allocations, while enabling new and small exporters to enter the India market," explains Vincent Arbuckle, deputy director-general, New Zealand Food Safety, adding that they worked closely with honey exporters and sector groups to develop the quota allocation framework.

"The MQP's 16-tonne minimum allocation reflects a commercially viable shipment size and aligns with retail packing volumes in mānuka honey trade. It's aimed at experienced exporters with demonstrated capability to service international markets," Arbuckle says.

That 180-tonne pool will reward applicants with a higher rate of export volume over the previous three years, with quota released on a percentage-of-the-combined-total-of-applicants basis. The smaller, SEQP, doesn't use the same 'historical export volumes' measure.

"Ten percent of total quota is reserved under the SEQP to ensure new and smaller exporters have the opportunity to access the India market with allocations ranging from 300kg to two tonnes. These smaller allocations are intended to help exporters test and develop the market without needing to demonstrate the export volumes required for the MQP," Arbuckle says.

While the rules as they stand don't cater to an exporter wishing to apply for between two and 16 tonnes of quota, Arbuckle advises they apply to both pools.

Winning applicants can also trade quota with other exporters, so long as no individual's quota holding is already more than, or would cause it to be more than, 20% of the total pool, SEQP or MQP.

Given current total honey export volumes to India are between five and six tonnes for 2024 and 2025 it is perhaps unlikely that all 200 tonne of quota for the US$20-30/kg honey will be allocated for 2027 but it could become a more sought-after proposition as tariff rates continue to fall through to 2030.



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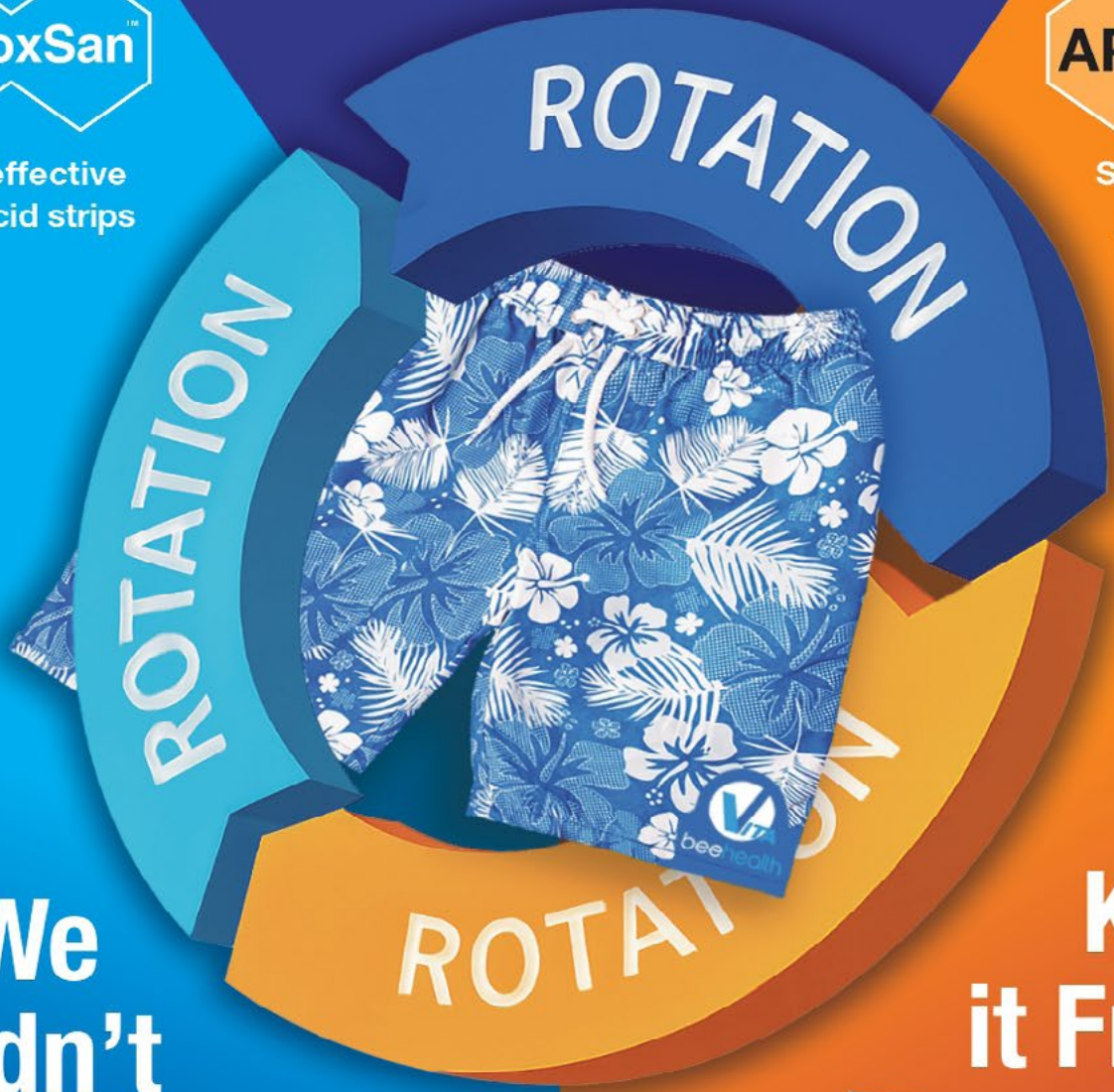
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AFB Incidence Up and Equity Down for New Trust

The first AGM of New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity (NZBB) has seen the new Trust report bad news on several fronts – the highest incidence rate of American foulbrood (AFB) in nearly 30 years, an operating loss for the third year running, all alongside the recent news that beekeepers' per-hive levy is set to increase.

Independent chair Simon Cook led the October 30 online meeting, his first AGM in the top seat, explaining that the process of moving from the former AFB Management Agency, under Apiculture New Zealand, to the trust structure of NZBB was "less than ideal". Chief executive Niha Long then elaborated on the legal and administrative costs associated with that process, which contributed to an overall loss of $160,000 for the 2025/26 year.

The AFB incidence rate of 0.60% is up from 0.53% the year prior. It plateaued between 2017 and 2021 at around 0.3% but, in-line with the financial struggles of the mānuka honey industry, rose sharply between 2021 and 2024. One year of decline in 2025's report is now followed by the 2026 lift. (Incidence is calculated by dividing the number of confirmed AFB cases by the number of registered colonies).

Those colony numbers continued to fall, from just over half a million hives a year ago, to now 486,000, while total AFB finds rose from 2601 to 2946.

"0.6 percent incidence. Is that great? It is not," the chief executive explained.

"It is not a number that I like to see and it is not a number that you like to see either."

Six regions exceeded the national incidence rate, three of them significantly. AFB was almost twice as likely to be found in Auckland as compared to the national incidence, West Coast a similar result and Taranaki neared 1% AFB incidence.

Conversely, Southland and Otago reported the country's lowest AFB rates and beekeepers in the Southland Otago Discussion Group, as well as the Whakatipu Beekeeping Club, have asked NZBB to pursue a declaration of a controlled area under the Biosecurity Act. This is expected to be enforced in 2027 and reach into South Canterbury and much of the lower West Coast.

Nationwide less beekeepers reported, or were found to have, AFB, dropping from 589 to 545, while infected apiaries increased by 59 to 1403 nationwide.

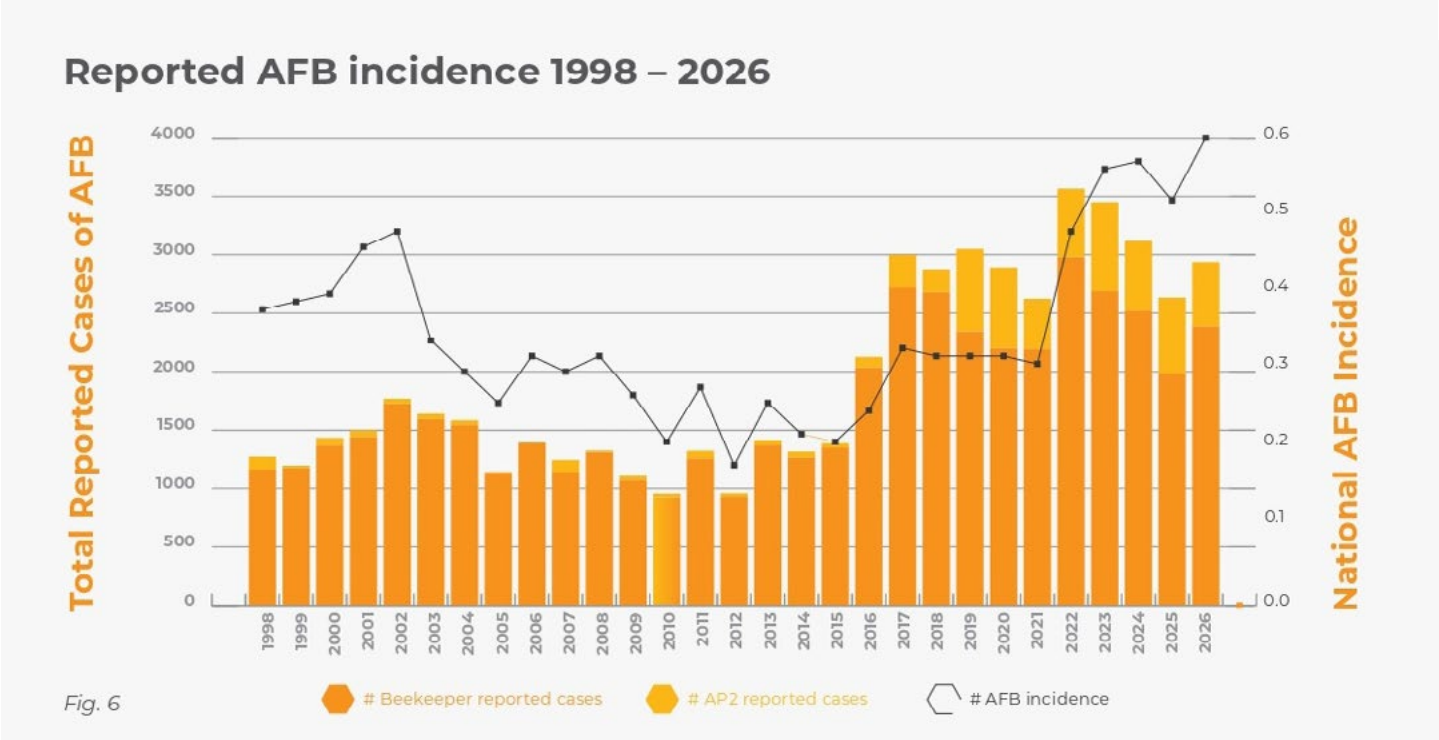


Fig. 6

"There is a misconception that all beekeepers have AFB, I am here to tell you that they do not," Long said.

SPRINGBANK HONEY – "WE HOPE WE NEVER HAVE TO FACE THAT AGAIN"

While the chief executive was careful not to name individual operators, she did point out that "due to one particular beekeeper in the South Island things got really heated, things got really public".

"I want to acknowledge all the AP2s and my team members who faced quite a significant amount of harassment and verbal abuse. I want to thank the beekeepers who reached out to us with words of support. That meant a lot to us. We know we are in the right and we know you appreciate what we do," Long said.

MPI provided a $62,000 grant to assist in training certain AP2 hive inspectors in "deescalation" and "to give us operational support in high-risk, non-complaint beekeepers".

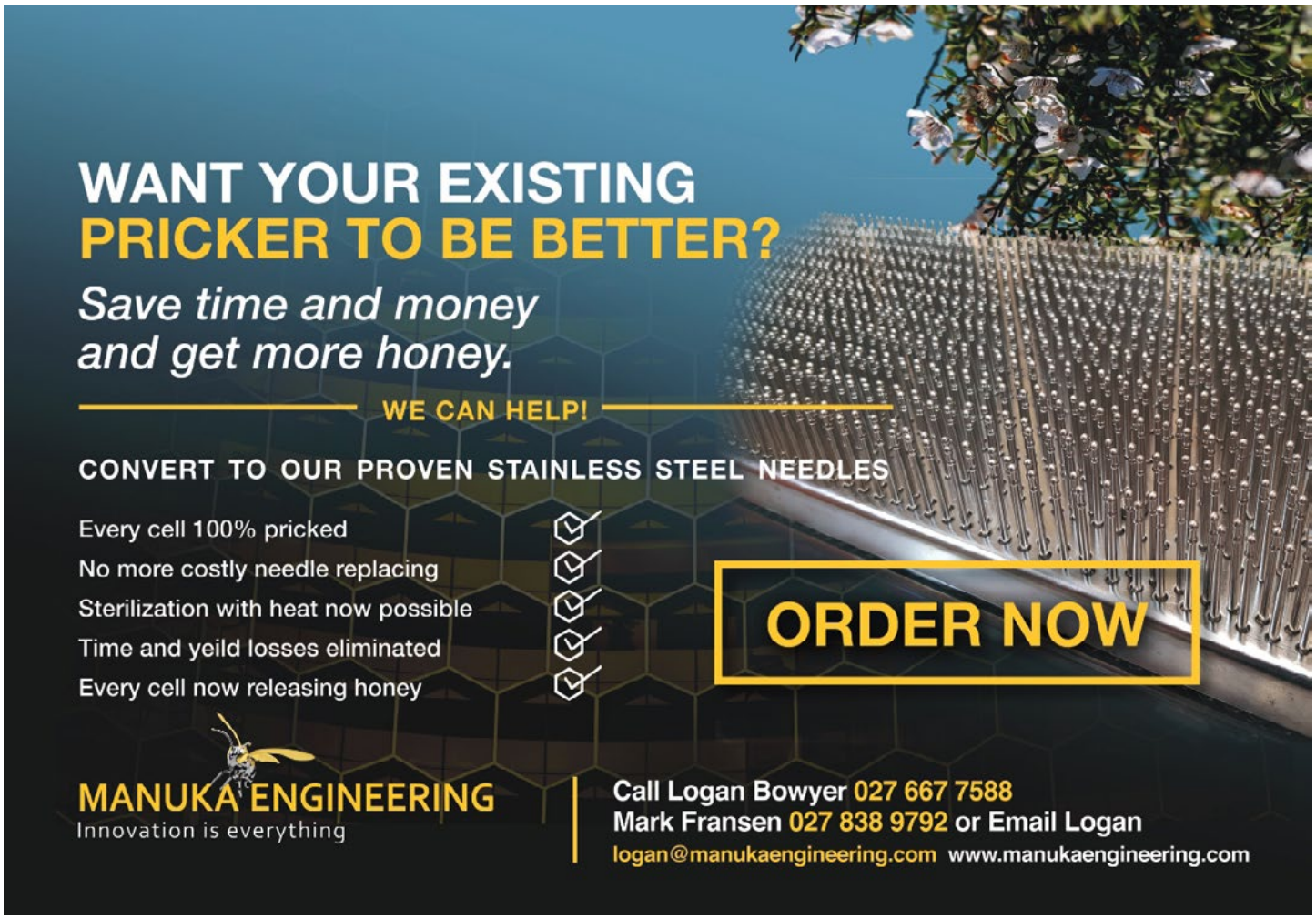
When the floor of the meeting was opened to general business, raised was the topic of Springbank Honey, who had a years-long, public dispute with the Agency and now NZBB regarding AFB levels in their Canterbury business and resulting forced destruction of hives and equipment before being liquidated this year.

"It was certainly a challenge," Long concluded.

"One that we had never faced and we hope that we don't have to face that ever again, but we are thankful of your support of us and what we do."



Fig. 12: Proposed AFB controlled area





Simon Cook delivered his first AGM as NZBB chair in October and the headline news was bad – AFB incidence up and a third straight year of financial losses.

THE SHORTFALL

That support is most tangible in the roughly $1.2million in levy funds paid to NZBB by beekeepers in an attempt to eradicate AFB from managed colonies in the recent year. It was not enough to cover expenses though, with $111,000 reported as spent on legal fees (up from $31,000 a year prior), contributing to the $160,000 loss.

"That's not a loss any chief executive or board wants to see," Long stated.

"It turns out it is not very cheap to establish a new organisation," she added.

The meeting had previously detailed the process of Apiculture New Zealand hinting at winding-up, which forced a reformation of the AFB Agency last year.

A total of $87,000 was also written off in bad debts – primarily beekeepers refusing to pay levies, or cost recovery charges.

"It does mean we have to pay it off with your levies, if you are being compliant," Long explained.

The deficit followed losses of $43,000 in 2025 and $103,000 in 2024, putting equity, which entered the 2024 year at $993,000, to now $569,627.

"It is not ideal to be sitting at this equity. When I started it was much higher, but hopefully we will be on the right track going forward," Long said.



LEVY INCREASE INCOMING

Helping to correct that slide is an increase in per-hive levy for the upcoming season, going from $1.95 ex gst in 2026/27 to $2.20 in 2027/28. At current hive levels, that would return approximately $120,000 in increased revenue. Cook explained at the top of the meeting that the board expects hive numbers to be on the increase though after seven years of decline. If that forecast is accurate, combined with the levy increase, there is a roadmap for the NZBB-bee-truck to indeed find the "right track".

Long reported that, following consultation on the levy increase, 60% of respondent beekeepers agreed with the move, but only 166 of those 6782 registered provided feedback.

"This year we tried a new initiative where trustees were asked to contact beekeepers who owned over 1000 colonies. We tend to not hear from larger commercial beekeepers a lot during these surveys. But, especially with the levy increases proposed, we thought it was important to hear their voices," Long said.

In all 18 such beekeepers were contacted and the majority supported the increase. Conversely, the majority of beekeepers owning 500-1000 colonies opposed the levy hike that is now on the way for 2027/28.

BUILDING TRUST IN THE TRUST

Cook announced that NZBB had received funding from the Honey Industry Trust to fund a part-time external contractor to work on establishing an "early warning indicator checklist and plan for managing a small hive beetle incursion".

Cook, the most recent past-chair of Kiwifruit Vine Health, explained that similar projects when initially floated in the kiwifruit industry drew concerns of "scope creep", but that "I hope if we do a good job in the work with small hive beetle then you guys can see the value that can be added by NZBB in this space and we will build enough trust with beekeepers to begin to have an open and positive conversation about the role of wider biosecurity".

That wider role would be more fitting with the title of 'New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity' which was coined when moving from an agency operating under Apiculture New Zealand, to a trust in June 2025. The move caused anger among some beekeepers, due to a lack of consultation and that trustees can appoint their successors.

"I understand this caused some concern among beekeepers and I am not comfortable with this myself as it opens up the trustees to criticism about nepotism and 'jobs for the boys'," Cook explained.

"I have already started conversations with Honey and Bees New Zealand (HBNZ) about including them in the process and being part of an independent trustee selection panel that will then provide a recommendation back to the trustees."

The chair also signalled an ongoing closer working relationship between NZBB and the new commercial beekeeper led group of HBNZ, such as he has seen reap rewards for the kiwifruit industry when groups "worked together and supported each other".

"I will be looking to ensure NZBB and HBNZ operate in a similar manner where we cooperate and work together for the good of all beekeepers."



Comvita Chair Narrowly Defeats Co-Founder's Move to Oust Her

Comvita's Annual Shareholder's Meeting has seen challenges to the position of chair Bridget Coates and two of her board as decisions made over an eventful 12 months were relitigated, including by numerous former directors of the mānuka honey giant.

Following discussions at the October 28 meeting in Pāpāmoa, and online, shareholders voted to oust directors Robert Major, who had been at the board table seven years, and Gregor Barclay, only a year after being elected.

Coates raised a defence of her position to the meeting and her decision to lead a board which in August 2025 brought forward a takeover offer from Florenz which shareholders rejected three months later. The shareholder votes on both that takeover offer and the resolution to remove her as chair a year later were near-identical – 54.27% in favour of her retainment as chair, and in November 2025 54.29% of non-Florenz shareholders voted in favour of the takeover offer (falling short of the 75% required to advance the sale).

Since then, Comvita has cut debt and recapitalised with Singapore food and beverage company Fraser and Neave taking a 19.99% ownership stake.



Comvita chair Bridget Coates has once-again defied the wishes of co-founder Alan Bougen and two other former directors of the company to narrowly retain her position following the October 28 Shareholder's Meeting. Photo: Comvita.

The challenge to Coates' leadership came from a trio of former directors of the company: co-founder Alan Bougen, and long-serving former directors Robert Tait and Neil Craig, the later having chaired the board for almost 15 years, 2005-2020. Bougen spoke to their resolution to remove Coates, riling at her decision not to consult the former directors and with long-standing shareholders "to test assumptions and explore all alternatives" ahead of the Florenz offer.

"Our deepest concern was the value shareholders were being asked to surrender to achieve the sale to Florenz," Bougen said.

"Why hock off a company based on its highly impaired net tangible assets? What the heck was going on?"

The trio of former directors also asked for Coates to resign at the annual meeting a year prior and Bougen repeated that they have been "caused to lose confidence in Ms Coates judgment and continued leadership" and were concerned what would happen if another takeover bid emerged.

"They can't allow others, including, dare I say it, investment bankers, to take control of the process," warned Bougen, who founded Comvita alongside the late Claude Stratford in the 1970s.

The chair's defence of her position described those troublesome days in 2025 when Comvita's lenders were closing in, after the company recorded losses of $77.4million in 2024 followed by $104.8m in 2025. In 2026 a return to profit was made, $7.7m.

"The Florenz takeover was in the context of an extremely difficult environment where the banks were applying daily pressure on the company. We were desperately trying to preserve the company as an ongoing entity," Coates told shareholders.

The Comvita share price sat at 79c at time of the October 28 meeting and its highwater mark since the Florenz takeover was rejected on 14 November 2025 was just 83c.

"The share price has gone nowhere in the intervening period, which underpins that it was a fair offer and that is was very, very important to put it to shareholders to make the decision," Coates said.

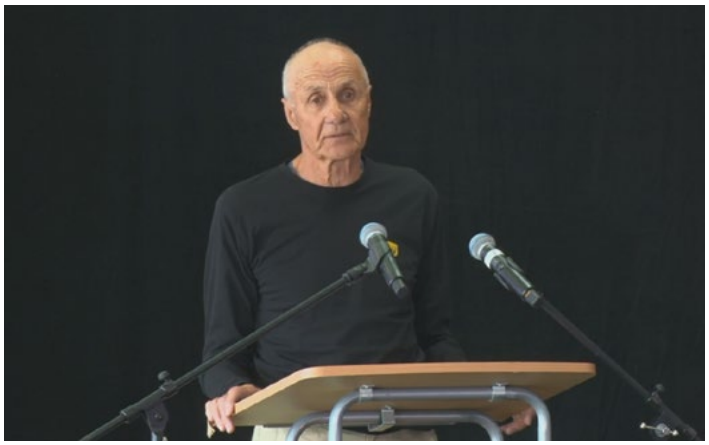
The company's troubles of recent years were set in motion much earlier Coates told shareholders, saying "there has been many fathers, and mothers, of the decline of Comvita" pointing to "mismanagement, global competitors, and all sorts of other reasons".

While the challenge to the chair was narrowly defeated, Major and Barclay were more comprehensively ousted, 70% and 66% respectively supporting the resolution to remove them proposed by the second-largest shareholder, PHC Investments Ltd. who holds 11.7% of shares.

The board now comprises six directors, Coates and the comprehensively re-elected Michael Sang; Michael Chye and newly-elected Kosit Suksingha representing Fraser and Neave; plus Peter Nathan and Julia Xu who received shareholder mandates at the meeting having previously been board-appointed in July.

COMMITTED TO CHANGE

Amidst all the board upheaval, Coates and chief executive Karl Gradon did their best to paint a picture of a company in recovery,



"Sorry to be the black hat for the day" Alan Bougen told fellow shareholders after the Comvita co-founder proposed the resolution to remove Bridget Coates as chair of the board.

with Coates pointing to reduced debt and inventory providing "a much stronger financial foundation on which to build".

"We are committed to changing the way this company does business," Coates said,

"We can see opportunities that are not in the current markets and not necessarily with the current products we have."

Gradon spoke of "broadening" demand, with the now largest mānuka honey market of North America offering "significant opportunity". Coates praised Comvita's relationship with Costco in the USA saying "the opportunity for similar investment, not the same, is very attractive to us," but that it would take "brand repositioning".

Competition is "intensifying" Gradon stated, and much of the recent volume growth in mānuka honey sales has been in the lower grades. That, along with greater price transparency and digitalisation, is leading to greater commoditisation the business's shareholders were told.

The Fraser and Neave investment is starting to provide opportunities for Comvita, Gradon said, primarily with gains in distribution and innovation.

His decision as chief executive not to release earning guidance in 2026 drew the ire of at least one shareholder, but Gradon said they are looking to do so when half year results are announced in February 2027.

No dividend has been paid by Comvita since 2024 and neither Coates or Gradon would be drawn on when they expect the company would be able to do so again.

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Bee Alliance Adopts New Name, Continues to Roll in Meeting Two

The 'Bee Alliance' of beekeeping, honey and pollination leaders has met for the second time and progress to meaningful results for those up and down the "value chain" is real according to several of the key players.

Initially titled New Zealand Honey and Bee Alliance, the second meeting on October 16 in Wellington saw the assembly agree on a rename to the 'Aotearoa Bee Sector Alliance', due to the similarity between the previous name and the recently established Honey and Bees New Zealand. Chairman of the later group, Murray Bush, says the second gathering of the alliance was "incredibly positive".

"It's a positive position to be in to have that many voices of the industry working cooperatively together. It has a lot of potential and we will be taking it forward," Bush says.

Included in the Alliance are UMF Honey Association, Mānuka Charitable Trust, New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity, New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Inc, Auckland Beekeepers Club president Ken Brown and Comvita CEO Karl Gradon. The concept has been driven by the Ministry for Primary Industries, with programme director for export growth Terry Copeland convening the meetings. A month ago he described the initial September 10 roundtable as "everything I wanted it to be", after taking around four months to turn concept to fruition.

According to the convenor, key discussion points at meeting two were the New Zealand-India free trade agreement, and the



National Bee Health Survey (which replaces the Colony Loss Survey this year). Thinking was also advanced on how work projects which might emanate from the get-togethers can benefit the entire "value chain" of the industry.

"The key point of the Alliance is we are taking individual problems from beekeeper through to supplier or exporter, or pollination – because there are things we all need to look at, in our own individual worlds," Bush says.

"What the Alliance is able to do is take a much broader, wider and bigger picture of those problems and look at them as they relate to the complete supply chain analysis."

The HBNZ chair says that at meeting three their group expects to present potential project ideas.

"The benefit that will come out of the Alliance once we get our feet under the desk and we start looking at projects in depth is looking at being able to solve problems at a much larger scale than we can do individually," Bush says.

Copeland says improving data collection across apiculture is also a key consideration.

"The Alliance will research data collection practices in other sectors to identify approaches that could be adopted to improve industry data. This includes inventory, market and consumer insights, and hive movement information to improve supply and demand understanding, and support better business planning and decision-making," Copeland explains.

The Aotearoa Bee Sector Alliance's third meeting is scheduled for November 12 in Wellington.



HBNZ chair Murray Bush says the group will be presenting potential work projects at the third meeting of the Aotearoa Bee Sector Alliance on November 12.



Beekeeping Clubs Likely to Form National Group

Greater consideration of an incorporated national group of beekeeping clubs is to be taken following a November 2 online meeting, but a final decision on whether that level of formalisation will be practical is yet to be made.

Championed by Auckland Beekeepers Club president Ken Brown, the concept has been given the working title of 'Beekeeping Clubs of New Zealand' (earlier detailed in *Move to Unite 'Beekeeping Clubs of New Zealand' Gains Momentum*) with a steering group set to explore costings and the feasibility of incorporating the collaboration.

The idea of better organising clubs, most or all of which have predominantly hobbyist beekeepers as members, into a national collective came about after Apiculture New Zealand transitioned to Honey and Bees New Zealand (HBNZ), removing voting rights for non-commercial beekeepers. Brown says the formation of Beekeeping Clubs of New Zealand would be as a means to collaborate with the new, more commercially-focused HBNZ.

The November 2 meeting saw 17 participants representing 13 beekeeping clubs attend – Auckland, Franklin, Waikato, Southland, Marlborough, Hawke's Bay, Nelson, Christchurch, Rotorua, Dunedin, Wellington, Waipu and Tararua. Following the meeting a steering group of Brown, Lee Carmichael of Christchurch, Scott Williamson in Nelson and Dara Dimitrov in Waikato, along with Jaime McRae of Tararua advising, has been tasked with further exploring formalisation of the group.

Brown floated a broad establishment cost of $10,000 - $15,000 to the meeting, covering professional advice and planning, digital infrastructure, banking, insurance, incorporation, administration, communications and outreach. Most clubs are supportive of the idea, but the cost of launching the group is the biggest factor being considered at present, Brown says.

That cost might be reduced by better teaming with HBNZ, but Brown says the fit is not perfect, and perhaps never was.

"If we were all together it would take away from what we were all trying to do," Brown says.

"We have bees in common, but they have businesses, hobbyists don't, and there would probably be resentment about resources and focus. I think we can work well together though.

"It's like a relationship and the question of, should we have been together in the first place? We can be nice for the kids – the bees – and work together, but should we ever have been together? There are such different focuses and goals. They respect the work we would do with bee health and biosecurity and educating anyone with bees, and outside of that we can work in together where we can. And, who knows, potentially move back in together further down the road."

There have been three key tenants of a potential Bee Clubs of New Zealand collaboration floated: 'supporting beekeeping clubs; education and best practice; and representation and advocacy where appropriate'.

The steering group is set to meet in the second week of November and the full collective of beekeeping clubs on December 7.



Ken Brown, Auckland Beekeepers Club president and driving force behind the proposed 'Bee Clubs of New Zealand'.

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Hornet Surveillance Still Going Strong – Beekeepers Encouraged to Stay Vigilant

It was October and November last year when yellow-legged hornet nests began to emerge en masse, but so far in spring 2026 all is quiet around the previosuly hot spot of Auckland's North Shore. That doesn't mean Biosecurity New Zealand (BNZ) is getting complacent though the New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity AGM heard on October 30, and nor should beekeepers.

In total, since October 2025, 4646 confirmed hornet specimens have been taken in Auckland from 77 queens and 133 nests, BNZ response manager Sid Wales informed the meeting. But none since April.

"It looks really positive but we need to maintain some level of surveillance to confirm that," Wales says.

"We are not taking our foot off the throat yet."

It's a continuation of the "cautiously optimistic" line which BNZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries staff have been using all winter.

The level of surveillance still being taken is based largely off 1200 traps around the North Shore area and Rongiatoto Island. These traps are checked weekly Wales says, and there is a plan to respond should a hornet(s) present.

A hornet would be caught from the trap, marked and observed as to their direction of travel. The trap is then moved gradually in that direction to determine distance from the nest, based off the time taken for the pest to return to the feeder. If that method doesn't locate the nest, radio trackers will be applied to the hornet.

"It proved to be really effective at finding and destroying hornet nests," Wales says.

It is hoped that it has been such an effective method that there will be none left to find this season. Also utilised in the search for nests have been AI cameras on feeding stations which reduces staff hours to monitor them; thermal drones for nest finding; eDNA testing of waterways; and 12,000 fipronil-laced Vespex stations deployed in late-autumn.

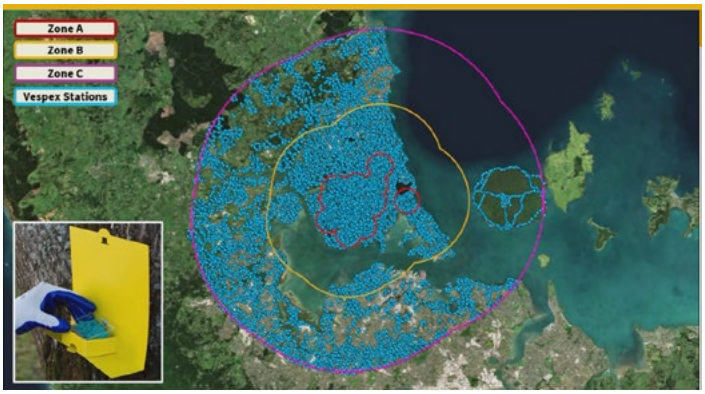
"It's going to be interesting to see what effect this has on the local wasp population. Hopefully that is a side benefit," Wales says of the extensive Vespex programme.

A Hornet Champions network continues to work with those members of the public seeking to keep awareness and knowledge of the incursion front of mind for Kiwis. A wider spring public engagement campaign is underway, including meeting with beekeeping clubs and groups.

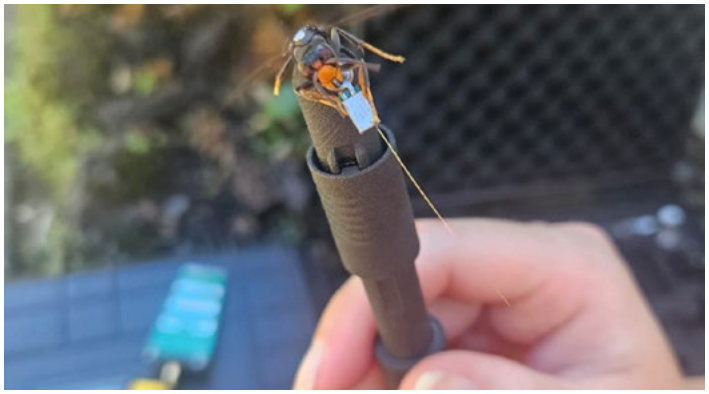
The message to beekeepers is clear: remain vigilant, put out traps, and tell BNZ about where they are, and continue to be on the lookout for unusual activity in your apiaries.

"Eradication is the ultimate goal and we are in a really good position to achieve that," Wales says.

Confirmed eradication will take two years of no sightings of the yellow-legged-hornet.



The location of nearly 12, 000 Vespex stations deployed in the incursion response to yellow-legged hornet.



Radio tracking tech has helped track hornets back to their nests.

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Thank you to everyone that responded to our new "BEE UP FRONT" Honey Buying Price Guide. Feedback has been very positive, so we are looking forward to this being a regular feature in the *Apiarist's Advocate*. Please note that there was a typo in last month's copy. Robin Jay's email is robin.jay@nzmanukagroup.com and not co.nz as previously advertised, our apologies to anyone who may not have had a response to emails sent. We look forward to working with you all as the industry heads into the exciting new era.

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NEW ZEALAND MĀNUKA GROUP™

New AFB Plan Leaves Door Ajar to Detector Dogs, But Doesn't Welcome Them Through

When the American foulbrood (AFB) National Pest Management Plan was revised recently it made an allowance for potential, future use of detection dogs. However, nothing has changed in practice as New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity (NZBB) continue to state more research is needed while no clear pathway towards field trials exists. Those closest to the most recent AFB detector dog project believe nothing will move forward unless someone steps up to champion the idea.

BY ELOISE MARTYN

The revised plan has ministerial and Cabinet approval, but the current plan stays in place while drafting and a final Cabinet decision are completed. The new plan refers to the potential use of dogs "should the scientific community confirm that detector dogs are effective".

An MPI spokesperson referred questions to NZBB, but noted the Biosecurity Act 1993 already provides a power to use dogs (section 115), which the review proposal adds to the powers NZBB can access.

"Whether, and how, dogs are used is up to NZBB, so long as they are shown to be effective and any animal welfare is taken into account," the MPI spokesperson said.

Beekeepers may already use detector dogs, though not to replace mandated visual inspections.

"While the use of detector dogs is promising, NZBB requires further research to confirm the sensitivity and specificity of the dogs for detecting AFB cases," NZBB chief executive Niha Long explains.

EARLY TRIALS

Dogs weren't new to AFB when dog trainer Pete Gifford and Manawatu beekeeper Jason Prior began their research into using detector dogs. As *Apiarist's Advocate* reported in 2022 (*Passing the Sniff Test*) and 2023 (*AFB Dogs Research Debate Goes Around in Circles*), beekeepers had used them for some time with little published research behind them – including a South Island trial with detection dogs, unconnected to their project.



A trained AFB detection dog puts their nose to work in the trial of Thomson et al 2022 in which dogs were proven to be able to recognise Paenibacillus odour in a clinical environment.

"There were guys down south who did a similar test and the dogs were very unreliable," Prior says.

"It was a big factor when trying to get funding. This perception that dogs were unreliable at detecting AFB was an issue. We did the initial project to answer whether dogs could reliably detect AFB and the answer was 'yes'."

Gifford believes these dogs not connected to their trial gave incorrect positive indications, possibly because AFB wasn't presented in a sterile odour in training.

HOW THE TRIAL WORKED

Gifford and Prior's project was led by Neroli Thomson of Massey University, with the research published in the *Animals* journal in December 2022. It received backing from a range of organisations and individuals, with MPI's Sustainable Food and Fibres Future fund contributing $50,000. Alongside that was $44,000 of co-investment funding, primarily from the Honey Industry Trust, but with Massey University paying for spore production, and the Southern North Island Beekeeping Group, and Gifford's business, K9 Search Detection Dogs also contributing. Prior also sponsored the project through his beekeeping company, Downunder Honey, and provided practical assistance and support.

Gifford sparked the plan to culture the spore, which is a complicated process, and he led and drove the dog training, bringing around 45 years' experience in military scent detection, explosives detection, land search, police work and early cancer detection by dogs. He had no beekeeping background when he took on the question of whether dogs could detect AFB.

"It seemed logical to try to find the contamination at the pre-clinical stage," Gifford says.

"The first stage was to produce sterile target odours so I contacted my friend, a pathologist lecturer vet from Massey University and then a scientist bee expert at Plant and Food Research, to culture the spores."

He trained the dogs by pairing the odour with a toy or ball as reward, using their natural drive to sniff and play. His aim was to

imprint the spores rather than the smell of rotting pupae, which signals advanced, visible disease.

The MPI spokesperson describes the work as a preliminary piece of research, which found dogs "can reliably detect the presence of AFB spores at varying concentrations inside a sterile lab environment with the presence of beehive components".

WHY IT STOPPED

"I only did stage one of three stages, the spore stage which is the most difficult, but the most useful, with the aim to come up with a tool to find pre-clinical sings of AFB – to identify the spore at a level before you can actually see or smell it." Gifford says.

"The honey industry hit a slump and everything went dead. When the licence ran out to hold the spore, instead of destroying it, MPI stored them in case there will be future use." Gifford says.

The next step – developing an operating model and testing it in the field – needed more support and resources.

Gifford expects the next two proof-of-concept stages would cost about $125,000 each.

"The next step is to continue with a proof-of-concept trial on the AFB bacteria and pupa decomposition detection, two separate trials with different dogs that can be run concurrently. With field trials when ready. I would be very keen to work alongside John Mackay at dnature in using his qPCR swabs for confirmation of positive indications. We have spoken at length," Gifford says.

For Prior, however, the frustration is around what happened after the initial research ended.



Manawatu beekeeper Jason Prior has long advocated for more research into AFB detector dogs and was instrumental in getting a 2022 study off the ground.

"I'm disappointed in the outcome. We were told by the former AFB programme manager that we need to prove dogs could work as the programme had no ability to use levy funds for this type of work," Prior says.

"So, we were asked to prove that AFB could be reliably detected by dogs, and I believe we did that. And then we asked the programme to help or support us to get an operating model to field test. MPI said they would fund it, but the programme wouldn't come to the party. Considering we pay levies, it's completely inadequate."

While the project is stood down, the tools – trained dogs and stored spores – remain available if the work is picked up again.

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WHY IT MATTERS

With less than five percent of New Zealand's approximately 480,000 registered beehives inspected by NZBB personnel each year, Prior sees dogs as having the potential to close that gap.

"What dogs give you is the ability to pull all your honey supers out of the shed in winter, just a day's labour, and have the dog come in for one day and it can find AFB while its sub-clinical.

"I don't believe we can eradicate using the tools we have. It spreads too fast, and we have a sink of spores in most operations that continue to reinfect."

Gifford also sees opportunities for dogs with AFB detection, particularly around "dump sites" – areas where large amounts of hives are placed during times of transit, particularly around pollination. He also insists on proof though.

"If you are going to burn your hives based on a dog, you need proof the dog is qualified. Proof of concept."

WHAT A TRIAL NEEDS

"What's needed is a 12-month field trial which could help establish how detector dogs might best be used as an AFB tool, exploring how and when you would use them – would it be all year round or just over winter?" Prior explains.

He says the trial could involve four or five large beekeepers, with dogs inspecting hives before selected hives are tested using qPCR swabs.

NZBB wants data only a trial can provide, but Prior says they need NZBB to engage – a stalemate now lasting years.



Massey University scientist Neroli Thomson led the 2022 study that proved canine could detect AFB spores in lab conditions.

"We don't expect them to come up with money, just some time, and to demonstrate they want this to happen and engage. I think people would rally around this," Prior says.

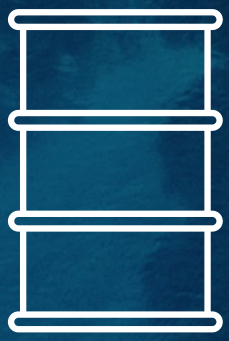
So, while the incoming Pest Management Plan might keep the door to AFB detector dogs ajar, at present they can't fit through, and industry sentiment around their use is varied.

"We may find that dogs aren't great, and that there's a whole lot of issues. I suspect not, but it's worth exploring," Prior says, while Gifford adds, "I'm a bit disappointed at some people's responses who say, 'get a tool that works and come back to me' – people need to be pro-active rather than reactive."

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Kōpani Covers – The Truly Sustainable Alternative to Plastic Wrapping

For an industry intertwined with nature, New Zealand made Kōpani Covers offer beekeepers a reusable, plant-based alternative to plastic. Designed to reduce reliance on plastic wrap, which carries environmental costs in both its production and disposal, the durable covers provide beekeepers with a practical, sustainable option for protecting honey during harvest, storage and transportation.

Developed by Stuart Fraser, Kōpani Covers grew from his 12 years working in apiculture travelling throughout New Zealand, listening to beekeepers and engaging with organic farmers. Spending time observing people, animals and the weather has shaped his understanding of the industry and the opportunities to do things better.

"I was intrigued with the waste in the industry, especially for an industry that works so closely with nature" Fraser says.

"The plastic is just waste, cut it and throw it in the bin or burn it at night while no one is looking – we don't need the plastic, we can find a better way of doing things."

YEARS IN DEVELOPMENT

Fraser spent years developing the reusable, hemp-based covers, working with beekeepers to understand their needs and how existing materials were used in the field.

The first version featured PVC buckles and clasps, but the design did not work as intended. After several attempts, he rethought the design and worked to source suitable cloth.

He says hemp was a natural choice for its strength and versatility, with the plant-based fibre having a long history of use in rope, boat sails, textiles, clothing and other products. The name Kōpani reflects the product's purpose, meaning to cover with a lid, shut or close something in te reo Māori.

The covers were initially designed to replace plastic used in the field when harvesting, but beekeepers have since found additional uses when storing and moving loads.

Fraser says the product is deliberately simple, with durability a key consideration. The covers are designed to fit a pallet carrying honey supers, with four supers arranged in a square and stacked five high. They are also made bespoke, to suit the varying sizes and methods used when stacking honey boxes.

He estimates the covers will last more than five years, with rips and tears repairable to extend their life. While the upfront cost is higher than disposable plastic, he says their durability makes them a worthwhile investment, particularly for small and medium-sized beekeepers.

"The guys that are using them have thought a little bit about why and how," Fraser says.



Strong, simple to use and more sustainable than plastic alternatives, Kōpani Covers make honey harvest, transport and storage safe and easy while eliminating 'robbing'.

A DIFFERENCE MAKER

Mark Ebert of Bees for Life in Te Puke, Tauranga, began beekeeping at five when his father bought him a hive. Now a sole trader managing 400 hives, he has been using five Kōpani Covers for the past three years.

Previously, Ebert used division boards and shelter-belt netting due to his dislike of throw away plastic and shrink wrap, making the reusable hemp covers an appealing alternative.

After three years, he says the covers still look brand new. He occasionally soaks, rinses and washes them, and believes they will last at least another five years, if not longer.

Ebert says the Kōpani Covers have made a significant difference when harvesting.

"I did a mānuka site by myself in a single day, collecting 3.5 tonnes, this wouldn't have been possible without the covers, due to robbing,"

He notes that bees lose interest in the honey stacks once the Kōpani Covers are on, suspecting the hemp covers make the boxes less visible and harder for bees to locate.

PROTECTING LOADS WHILE REDUCING WASTE

Steven Wootton, based in Wānaka as apiary manager at Taylor Pass Honey Company, has 27 years' experience in beekeeping and is currently utilising six Kōpani Covers.

Wootton values their practicality and sustainability, using them instead of hive mats and cover boards that he says previously broke regularly. He also trialled plastic covers supplied with pallets ,but found the reusable Kōpani Covers effective for protecting loads while reducing waste.

"A great concept, with great sustainability and great at protecting the load," he says.

Wootton says the initial investment to purchase covers may seem high, but the reusable covers are a practical option and ideal for operators managing 400 to 500 hives.

"While there is a cost challenge, with an upfront cost, their durability and reusability can make them a worthwhile long-term investment by reducing the need to regularly replace damaged hive mats and cover boards, and they remove using so much plastic." Wootton says.

He also sees the covers as a good fit with Taylor Pass Honey Company's B Corp certification and its commitment to sustainability and environmentally responsible practices.

A CONSCIOUS CHOICE

Fraser says disposable plastic is convenient, but believes there are better ways to approach everyday tasks in the apiary.

For him, Kōpani Covers are about more than replacing one product with another. They offer beekeepers an opportunity to reconsider the materials they use and the waste they generate.

The covers are available through direct contact with Fraser, who prefers to speak with prospective customers about their requirements and how the product could work for their operations. His aim is to connect with beekeepers who want to make more sustainable choices while investing in a simple, durable product designed to be used season after season. ■

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A Balinese Bee Adventure

On holiday recently in Bali, Indonesia, beekeeper Ken Brown sought out the locals – bees and beekeepers that is. From unique native bees, to hungry hornets in action, and a captivating array of local honeys sampled, the Auckland Beekeepers Club president reports on his adventures and returning home with much more than the usual suntan-and-Bintang hangover.

BY KEN BROWN

My idea of a holiday is to make the most of a new place that I've never visited before, usually by exploring the history, food and culture. Now that I am a beekeeper rather than a chef, I have swapped dining out for bees and hornets. However, I have tempered my youthful excesses – the plan for our holiday was to connect with close family, somewhere between Scotland and Aotearoa.

Seasonal beekeeping activities and classes limit when I can be away. It would have been the rainy season in Thailand, so we chose Bali. The villa in Ubud was a tropical paradise for us all; although occasionally referred to as a "mosquito infested hellhole" – after the mozzies had tasted delicate Scottish flesh. It made a change from midges for them though, and they do say a change is as good as a holiday…

I stayed on New Zealand time, four hours ahead, so I had early nights and early mornings. These were great for exploring around the fringes of nearby rice fields and jungle. Insects were most active at this time of day, and I was able to photograph and collect samples of several species of bees and even a very large, yellow-vented hornet. The local security guards and farmers got used to the eccentric, grey-bearded tourist with his camera and bright green, kiddy's butterfly net.

The yellow Carpenter bee looked like a black bumblebee with a bright yellow buttercup petal on its back, even the wings were black. One of my favourites was the Sunda blue-banded digger bee, a small bee that had blue-green metallic stripes. This bee is known for its unusual pollination technique – it holds a flower and vibrates the wing muscles, dislodging pollen which then clings to its body via static electricity. Locals seemed to be as unaware of their exciting micro-fauna as the average kiwi townie of their own insect life.

WORRYING VIEWING: HORNETS IN ACTION

I did manage to swap a couple of relaxing poolside rest days for excursions around the island. I travelled two hours north to visit a beekeeper near Plago, who keeps Asian honey bees (*Apis cerana*). There were 10 hives in his apiary, sited in a clearing in the bush.

Yellow-legged hornets were preying on every hive. These hornets were crawling around the hive looking for other entrances and were on the ground scavenging for dying bees. Most commonly though, hornets were hawking in front of the hive i.e. hovering about 25 cm in front of the entrance waiting to catch returning bees that had been foraging. These small bees (half the size of our honey bee) carpeted the front of their hive and, shimmered in waves, this deterred the hornets from approaching the entrance.



Ken Brown made sure to fit in some beekeeping education, including getting to know these Asian honey bees, during a recent holiday to Bali.



Up close with the Asian honey bee, Apis cerana. Photo: Ken Brown.

The bee's next defensive mechanism was to approach or depart very quickly - almost too fast to see. I captured extensive GoPro footage of the activity at one of their hives, including the interplay between the bees and yellow-legged hornets.

The honey from the hive was fresh and sweet, with a slightly tropical fruit aroma and subtle tartness. I found the bees so gentle that we didn't need a smoker, gloves or veil.

BALI'S NATIVE STINGLESS BEES

A few days later I went to the west of the island to the foothills of the Mt Batur volcano. We inspected more Asian honey bee hives and it was interesting to see the hives of the madu kele-kele or native stingless bees. These bees were very small – larger than a fruit fly, but smaller than a juvenile house fly.

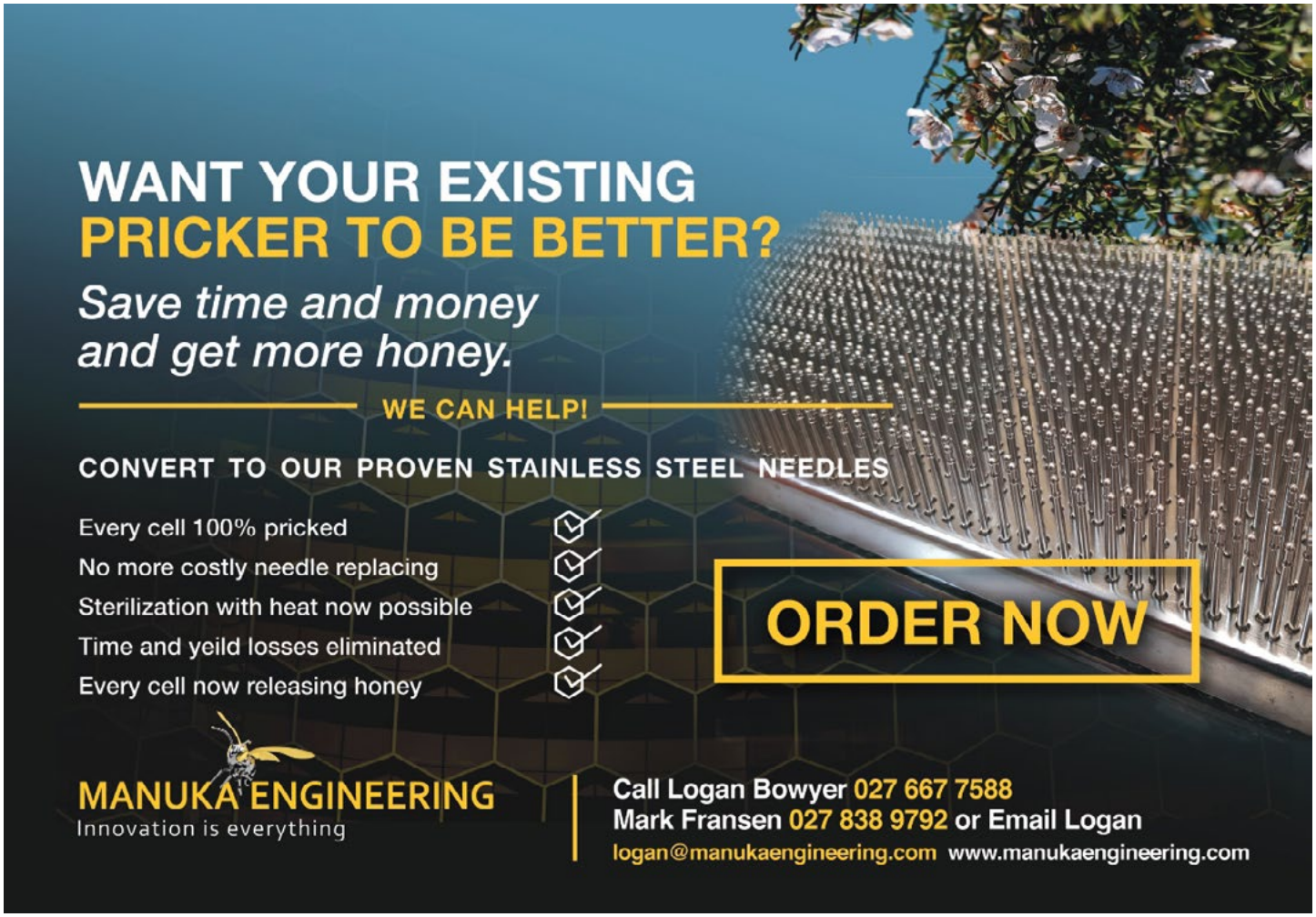
I jumped on the back of a motorcycle, and we sped down a jungle path to see the beekeeper's swarm traps, where he'd placed empty boxes to be populated by a swarm of these tiny bees.

We returned to his family home and inspected his stingless bees. These boxes (smaller than a shoebox) were divided into two interconnected compartments, one for brood and one for food. The former looked like a pile of Rice Krispies; not made of wax, but a resinous propolis with supporting strands. The queen was relatively large compared to the workers – almost the size of a small honeybee. The other compartment was the larder, with piles of honey pots; larger roundish resinous cells filled with honey.

Extraction for the Balinese stingless beekeeper is slower and more tedious than Kiwi beekeepers are used to. Honey from



It's fair to say Ken Brown used a bit more PPE during his work on the hornet response in Auckland last summer than during this hornet catching expedition, but the kiddy's butterfly net and some persistence meant he returned home with – preserved – samples of eight insect species.



each cell must be syringed or vacuumed out, or the cells must be destroyed by pressing the honey out. These resinous cells impart an earthy flavour to the honey.

Yellow-legged hornets also prey on these tiny insects but, over millions of years, they have adapted to live with these apex predators. Being unable to sting, these bees will use their strong mandibles en masse to attack vulnerable parts of the hornet. More effectively, they will dab propolis on the hornet's wings and eyes, immobilizing them and, within minutes, mummifying them. Hives in the wild have another defence; long thin entrance tubes made of propolis, making them more easily defendable.

SKIP THE BEACHES AND BINTANG – COME FOR THE HONEY!

A highlight for me was to taste the Balinese bee's honey. The first thing that stood out from all of these Balinese honeys was their viscosity – they all seemed thinner or waterier than honey from home. I believe this is caused by the higher humidity. I tasted multi-floral honey from bees like ours (*A. mellifera*), which I'd purchased in the supermarket. The honey was from flowering trees in the bush. It had a floral taste with a fruitiness. I also tasted honey from three other species of native bee - stingless bee, Asian honeybee and the giant honeybee.

The giant honeybee (*Apis dorsata*) produced honey that tasted most like ours – sweet but with a melony flavour; the aroma was slightly acidic and earthy. It was light and fresh. The Asian bee (*Apis cerana*) had foraged on Kaliandra, a medium-sized tree from the legume or pea family. The flowers look like a red bottle brush. The honey is opaque with a golden yellow colour. The aroma is of citrus tropical fruit. The taste is mild, slightly acidic, warm banana-like, reminiscent of dilute Perky Nana.

The stingless bee (*Tetragonula laeviceps*) also loves Kaliandra, their honey looks very thin and liquid. It has about 20% to 35% water content – in contrast New Zealand honey usually has less than 18% water content. At first taste, it doesn't taste like honey at all. It is such a surprise, it is very tart almost vinegary. It undergoes a natural fermentation. On second taste it is citrusy with tropical fruits, you can also taste the propolis; it gives a subtle humus, resiny lingering aftertaste. It is worth coming to Indonesia just for a taste of these unusual honeys.

It looks like my future holiday itineraries will be tracking bees and honeys from around the world. Maybe Sainfoin Mountain honey from Kyrgyzstan, Himalayan "mad" honey from Nepal, or while visiting the in-laws with their Scottish heather honey.

In my travels, I did however collect and preserve eight different species of common Balinese insects: three species of hornet, four of bees, and one species of ant. The ant was larger than the stingless bee but was striped like a bee.

Under the Biosecurity Act, it's permissible to bring invertebrates into New Zealand if preserved in ethanol or resin. I must admit there was some excitement at the biosecurity hall at 6am on a Wednesday morning. Our first contact was with a biosecurity officer who had been on New Zealand's yellow-legged hornet response. She waved us through to the inspection area. The insects weren't the issue though, but my jandals, t-shirt and shorts that I'd used when beekeeping were. We did end up with several biosecurity staff looking at, and taking photos of, my insect collection while listening to my stories of hornet hunting in jandals with my wee Warehouse butterfly net.

By the end of the holiday we were all looking out for the occasional hornet flying around our swimming pool. Stepson Jack's girlfriend, Caitlyn admitted that she'd never expected to learn so much about bees while on holiday. One convert at a time…



The madu kele-kele, Bali's native bee. Photo: Ken Brown.



The small, two-compartment, madu kele-kele hive.



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The Things We Aren't Talking About

What are the big issues being overlooked that the incoming government needs to get right to have any chance at improving New Zealand's lot? From superannuation, to local government, science to health, Ian Fletcher highlights the topics limiting progress and not talked about enough.

BY IAN FLETCHER

By the time you read this, the election will probably be upon us. I don't propose to add to the commentary. Instead, I want to consider some of the things we haven't talked about enough. These are issues which will shape our lives well beyond the next Parliamentary term. They are also issues where avoiding a decision is itself a decision, and usually an expensive one.

Start with superannuation. I wrote about this a few months ago (*Time to Talk About Super*), and the subject briefly attracted wider attention. It has since slipped back into the political cupboard, where difficult questions are kept until somebody else has to answer them.



The longer New Zealand waits to have the serious conversation about the rising pressure on superannuation, the harder a fair transition becomes, warns Ian Fletcher.

The basic problem hasn't changed. We have an ageing population, and a pension paid from current taxation. As the number receiving it grows relative to the population paying for it, the pressure increases. Treasury's long-term projections show the cost rising substantially as a share of the economy. That means less room for other spending, higher taxes, more debt, or some combination of all three.

There is a strong case for raising the age of entitlement, with plenty of notice. Or those with substantial other incomes should get less. Neither approach is painless. These are reasons to design changes carefully. They are a poor excuse for refusing to discuss them. The longer we wait, the harder a fair transition becomes.

LOCAL BILLS

Then there is local government finance. What a dreadful mess. Ratepayers are understandably angry at steeply rising bills, plus water charges that look like robbery in many places. Meanwhile councils are trapped: they face large infrastructure bills (often the result of decades of neglect), with limited ability to borrow – so the ratepayers get the bill. And successive central governments find it convenient to blame local politicians for costs it would rather somebody else carried.

The debate some years ago about the former Three Waters went adrift on the infamous co-governance idea; the fact remains that only the Crown has the balance sheet to finance all these repairs and new investment. Again, avoidance makes it all worse.

There is certainly waste and poor management in local government. But even a council composed entirely of actual saints would have to pay for roads, pipes, waste disposal and flood protection. Much of that infrastructure serves people over decades. Some serves national economic purposes, although the bill lands locally. Rural districts know this problem particularly well.

We need a proper settlement about responsibilities and revenue. What should councils do? What should central government pay for? A rates cap, by itself, answers none of these questions. A pipe does not become cheaper to replace because a Minister has announced what its owner may charge.

PUBLIC SERVICE – DOING THE WORK

I wrote recently about the public service (*Fixing the Public Service*), so I won't repeat the argument here. But it belongs in this discussion because every serious proposal depends on somebody being able to carry it out. Ministers need competent advice, officials need clear responsibilities, and senior managers must be accountable for results. Announcing a policy is the beginning of the job. Wellington sometimes behaves as though it were the end.

GOOD SCIENCE

Science is another omission. We talk endlessly about exports and adding value. Yet we seem reluctant to sustain the research capability which makes those ambitions possible.

For beekeepers, the case for science funding should be obvious. Bee health, biosecurity, pollination and the credibility of product claims all depend on scientific knowledge. Some research can be funded by individual businesses. Other work benefits an industry, or the whole country, without offering any single investor a sufficient return. That is a straightforward reason for public investment.

Good science also takes time, and is risky. Laboratories, collections and experienced teams cannot be switched off and

switched back on when a Minister discovers an exciting new priority. People leave. Skills disappear. Experiments show results we didn't expect. Rebuilding is slow and expensive. We should demand rigorous assessment of research spending, while giving worthwhile work enough stability to succeed. Reorganising institutions is no substitute for funding the work inside them.

HEALTH – IT'S NOT ABOUT MORE MONEY

Health does receive political attention, of course. But too much of the argument concerns how much more money somebody promises to spend. Money matters. But spending is an input. What patients need is timely, effective care.

That requires good management. Somebody has to organise appointments, roster staff, maintain equipment, coordinate tests, arrange discharges and further care, and ensure that information follows the patient. When those things go wrong, clinical time is wasted and patients suffer. Asking doctors and nurses to 'work harder' cannot repair every failure of organisation.

We should expect health leaders to understand their own system, identify bottlenecks and spread practices that work. They should have the authority to make improvements and be held responsible for doing so. Better access to primary care and support outside hospital also deserve sustained attention. A hospital bed is an expensive answer to a problem that could have been dealt with earlier.

None of this means that every difficulty can be managed away, or that another round of indiscriminate cuts will somehow produce better services. It means we should be able to distinguish a shortage of resources from a failure to use them properly. Otherwise, we risk merely financing the continuation of existing problems.

These subjects belong together. Superannuation affects what we can afford. Local infrastructure supports daily life and economic activity. Science helps create future income. Health and the public service determine how effectively we turn public money into things people actually need.

The common requirement is a willingness to make choices. That is less attractive than a promise of lower taxes and better everything. It is also what governing involves. We should expect political leaders to prepare the country for decisions that will become necessary beyond their own term of office. We should expect them to tell us where the money will come from and who will be responsible. These are reasonable expectations of government. Sadly, our willingness to accept less is a big part of the problem.

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 CE for the Queensland government. These days he is a commercial flower grower in the Wairarapa and consultant to the apiculture industry with Honey and Bees New Zealand.









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