

MEDIA RELEASE (6 June 2015)

Auction of beekeeper sites unfair & irresponsible policy, say NSW apiarists

A sudden change in direction by the Forestry Corporation of NSW in the method of allocation of state forestry sites to the state's beekeepers threatens to further destabilise an already-vulnerable industry, as well as the numerous agricultural enterprises that depend upon it.

In an abrupt change of policy, the Forestry Corporation chose to allocate beekeeping access permits to 24 currently-vacant sites near Batemans Bay via an online auction, which was held on 27th May 2015. Permits for all 24 vacant apiary sites offered were sold, with prices averaging \$1311.33 per year (for five years), and reaching a top of \$3500 per year (for five years).

Under the previous long-established allocation process, beekeepers could apply for a permit to access vacant sites for a fee of about \$90 per year (renewable yearly).

Second-generation beekeeper Mr Neil Bingley, who is an Executive Councillor of the [NSW Apiarists' Association](#), was horrified at the prospect of the auction as well as its outcome.

"It's not that we don't think we should pay to access these public resources. Of course we should pay. We want to pay a reasonable price, and negotiate a fair and equitable fee structure," he said. "The issue is that this new auction method tends to inflate the price of access to completely unsustainable levels."

Mr Bingley's concern was obvious as he explained the likely impacts for the individual beekeepers who were successful in last week's auction.

"Let's look at the beekeeper who's just paid \$17,500 (\$3,500 per year for five years) for access to one particular site. I know that country well because my family has kept bees in the area for generations. It's spotted gum country which means it is only going to flower once every 4-10 years. In a really good winter flowering year – which is never guaranteed, especially with droughts and prescribed burns and so on – the potential value of honey for that site would be approximately \$15,000 gross, at best."

"At worst, there won't be any decent flowering events at that site during the five-year permit period, and the beekeeper gets nothing for his \$17,500 investment. And that's just one of many sites a beekeeping operation needs to remain viable. This auction system just doesn't make any economic sense from the beekeepers' viewpoint. The two or three local beekeepers who were forced by the auction process to compete against each other and thereby drive prices up, have probably compromised the future of their business."

And that's bad news for an industry whose dwindling numbers means they're already struggling to provide the pollination services that the state's agricultural enterprises need to succeed. Globally, it has been estimated that one in every three mouthfuls of food relies on honeybee pollination. In Australia, around two-thirds of our agricultural output benefits from honeybee visits.

The President of the NSW Apiarists' Association, Mr Casey Cooper, outlined the scale of the pollination problems facing the state's growers.

“In July and August this year, for example, the almond industry alone is going to need three-quarters of all the hives we’ve currently got in NSW. They are 100% dependent on bee pollination to get any crop,” said Mr Cooper. “But providing these intensive pollination services knocks the bees around, and they don’t make good honey while they’re pollinating almonds or most other commercial crops.”

“That’s why we beekeepers must have more reliable access to good native floral resources, like the ones on lands managed by the Forestry Corporation of NSW, if we’re to continue to provide these essential pollination services to the agricultural sector.”

“Every year the need and demand for pollination services across NSW’s agricultural sector increases – not just almonds, but other crops such as apples, cherries and beans - but our ability to provide them seems to be constantly under attack, thanks to thoughtless changes in policy like this latest one from the Forestry Corporation,” Mr Cooper added.

“According to the Integrated Forestry Operation Approvals agreement, the Forestry Corporation is explicitly required to consult with their key stakeholders – including beekeepers – before any major policy changes,” he said. “But in this case there was no consultation at all.”

“They said that they thought an auction would be a fair and equitable system, but this is clearly not the case,” Mr Cooper concluded. “The Forestry Corporation should acknowledge that this auction process has not resulted in a fair or equitable outcome. On behalf of all its members, the NSW Apiarists’ Association requests that the Forestry Corporation make good on its commitment to consult with us. We look forward to negotiating a better process that will deliver for the Corporation, for beekeepers, for growers and for NSW as a whole.”

For further information

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The NSW Apiarists’ Association will be holding its annual conference in Sydney on 2-3 July 2015.

More information available here: <http://www.nswaa.com.au/news-and-events/annual-conference/>