

## Beekeepers on the brink as agency chaos threatens industry

NSW's beekeepers are being shut out from sites they have used for generations to maintain healthy hives, due to recent changes in policy, internal confusion caused by departmental restructures, and lack of coordination on the part of NSW's multiple land management agencies.

Mr Trevor Monson has kept bees, produced honey and provided commercial pollination services to the agricultural sector for 40 years. His father was involved in beekeeping, as is his son. He is well-respected by the industry and is an active member of the NSW Apiarists' Association (NSWAA). This week he received a letter from NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) informing him that 30 km of Murrumbidgee river frontage - which he has been using as apiary sites for 30 years - will no longer be available for any beekeeping activities.

"We had a long-standing arrangement with the previous owner, while it was private property," explained Mr Monson. "Now NPWS is saying that because it was private land, they can't renew our beekeeping licence for the area, even though beekeeping is permitted in some national parks." (Under the *National Parks & Wildlife Act 1974*, beekeeping licenses can be renewed in some national parks where activities were occurring before the land was reserved, as long as certain conditions are satisfied. Unfortunately, privately-held lands are not mentioned in the conditions.)

The tree species that grow there are floodplain redgum and blackbox, which produce some of Australia's highest-quality, most-highly sought-after table honey. "So if we can't get access to those sites, we're looking at a total loss of honey production from that area," said Mr Monson.

But it's not just honey production that's at stake.

"Because these tree species flower in summer and have high-quality pollen, we can use them to make sure our hives are healthy and strong through into autumn and winter," explained Mr Monson. "So by the time spring comes along, the bees can do a good job pollinating almonds and other crops. If I can't get access to river redgum and blackbox any more, I'll have significant extra expenses because I'll have to feed the hives supplementary protein over winter, to keep them in good enough condition to provide pollination services."

This government-inflicted instability isn't good for a family business that otherwise could be carried on by a third generation of Monsons.

Unfortunately, Mr Monson's experience is not an isolated example. Beekeepers are suffering increasing uncertainty and losing access to apiary sites on public lands all over the state, at the hands of middle-managers from a number of land management agencies such as NPWS, Forestry Corporation of NSW, Local Land Services, and Roads & Maritime Services. At the same time, the agricultural sector's demand for pollination services has increased dramatically, and climate extremes such as droughts mean that each beekeeper needs access to a greater diversity of sites to remain viable each year.

NSW Transport and Infrastructure Minister Andrew Constance, who opened the NSWAA annual conference in Sydney yesterday, noted that the success of the NSW beekeeping industry had always relied on access to large tracts of native flowering vegetation, much of which is on public lands.

“The government recognises how important it is for the industry to have access to public lands,” he said. “We also acknowledge concerns that current governance and administrative arrangements – which differ across a range of different land management agencies in NSW – are unfair and inequitable for beekeepers.”

“I am committed to working hard with my ministerial colleagues towards developing a whole-of-government, coordinated, consistent policy for public lands access for NSW’s beekeepers,” he concluded. “And I hope that the NSWAA will continue to negotiate and advocate on behalf of this industry, which is a very important one for our state.”

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*Journalists are welcome to attend the NSWAA Conference on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015, which is being held at the Penrith Panthers Rugby League Club. The conference program is available online at <http://www.nswaa.com.au/news-and-events/annual-conference/>*