WAFarmers Comment on the Biosecurity Advice 2015/16 - Importation of honey bee semen - Draft policy review

Prepared For

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources

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Introduction:

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc.) (WAFarmers) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Policy Review – Biosecurity Advice 2015/16 Importation of Honey Bee Semen.

As background, WAFarmers is the state's largest and most influential rural advocacy and service organisation. WAFarmers represents around 3,000 Western Australian farmers from primary industries, including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. WAFarmers represents the majority of the Commercial Sector of the beekeeping industry in the State, both in number of hives it represents and volume of honey.

Following the release of the Draft Policy Review – Biosecurity Advice 2015/16 Importation of Honey Bee Semen, WAFarmers would like to express our concerns regarding the changes.

Comments:

WAFarmers Beekeepers Section is concerned that the importation of honey bee semen could have significant impact of Western Australia apiary industry. Western Australian honey is considered to be world class, both in the quality and environment of production.

WAFarmers would like to propose that instead of looking at importing international genetics through honey bee semen, thorough genetic profiling of existing bee populations within Australia is conducted.

The genetic profiling would have separate analysis of Western Australia and eastern states bee populations. The genetic profiles for bees throughout Australia should then be compared to the genetics proposed to be imported, to determine if the risks posed with importation will introduce genetic material that is not currently present within bee populations, particularly since Queen Bee imports being allowed since 2012.

Once the genetic profiles are established, drone semen could then be imported based on the genetic diversity it offers Australian bee populations, in conjunction with the disease risk and profile.

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WAFarmers Beekeepers section recommends that the genetic profiling of Australian bee colonies be completed prior to allowing imports of foreign honey bee semen. Australia and particularly Western Australia is free for a number of diseases and pests, and therefore all steps should be taken to ensure that AUS and WA don't open our borders to the disease we are aiming to protect ourselves against.

The risk assessment acknowledged that a number of diseases and viruses not currently in Australia can be transmitted through semen. However it suggested that this risk is minimised as varroa mite, a vector of the diseases is not currently within Australia.

WAFarmers would like to express concern that despite varroa mite currently not being within Australia, it is highly likely that introduction will occur in the future. Therefore, WAFarmers don't consider the absence of a vector to be an adequate biosecurity control measure to prevent a disease or virus from becoming established within Australian bee colonies.

While it is likely that these pathogens will be introduced into Australia in the future, the process will be exponentially increased if semen that contains the pathogens is introduced into honey bee populations. There is also a risk that the pathogens within the semen may be different strains to those already within Australia, which would introduce genetic diversity of viruses and diseases to honey bee populations.

WAFarmers is concerned that the risk assessment looks at the Australian apiary industry as a whole, as opposed to considering differences in environments, particularly differences in the disease levels and issues with Eastern Australia compared to Western Australia. WA has a considerably lower disease and pest burden when compared to Eastern Australia.

Western Australian apiarists have already got highly productive bees and strong hive health, and therefore work needs to be completed to ensure the genetic diversity of them is adequate enough already, or if imported semen is required.

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Conclusion:

Thorough genetic profiling of Australian honey bee populations needs to be completed.

Drone semen should only be imported on the basis that it will introduce genetic diversity to a population that has limited diversity.

Drone semen has a high risk of introducing pathogens and pests that currently aren't found in Australian, and particularly Western Australian production environment, or that may be a different pathotype to strains currently within Australia.

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