



STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr CG Whiting MP—Chair
Mr MJ Hart MP
Mr RI Katter MP
Mr JE Madden MP
Mr JJ McDonald MP
Mr TJ Smith MP

Staff present:

Ms S Galbraith—Committee Secretary
Mr B Smith—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 21 MARCH 2022

Southport

MONDAY, 21 MARCH 2022

The committee met at 11.59 am.

CHAIR: I declare open the public hearing on the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Could you turn your mobile phones off or on to silent.

DEWAR, Mr Rob, Resources Chairman, Queensland Beekeepers' Association

STEVENS, Mr Jacob, President, Queensland Beekeepers' Association

CHAIR: Welcome. I will ask you to make a statement and after that we will have some questions for you.

Mr Stevens: My name is Jacob Stevens. I am the president of the Queensland Beekeepers' Association. Today with me I have Robert Dewar, past president and executive member of the QBA, and the QBA state secretary, Jo Martin, is in the audience here today. On behalf of the QBA I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak on the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. The QBA supports the mechanism in the bill to grant a 20-year extension to beekeepers' access to national park apiary sites to 31 December 2044.

The success of Queensland's horticultural industry is underpinned by the supply of healthy honey bee colonies for pollination, resulting in contributions of up to \$2.8 billion to the Queensland economy. The value of pollination for the Australian economy is said to be \$14.2 billion. The beekeeping industry's ability to supply these colonies is underpinned by maintaining access to Queensland's nutrient rich native forests.

Whilst honey production has long been the major focus of beekeeping businesses in Queensland, significant growth in horticultural industries has seen exponential growth in demand for paid pollination services. This amendment delivers food security for 5.2 million Queenslanders for another 20 years. Industry was given four options by the Department of Environment and Science as to the proposed changes to legislation: out in 2024 or a five-, 10- or 20-year extension. Given the options, the industry was willing to accept the 20-year extension as this was the best case scenario at the time.

Beekeeping in Queensland is characterised by small family businesses, many of which are multigenerational. The commercial beekeeping industry in Queensland is underpinned by its migratory nature. Beekeeping is conducted on a wide range of land tenures including national park, state forests, private lands, leasehold lands and other state lands. Bees are located on flora resources for short periods when there is a significant flaring event. When this event is over, the bees are shifted to a new location.

Many beekeepers have diverse portfolios of apiary sites across many different land tenures, floral resource types and geographical areas. Many commercial beekeepers have portfolios that traverse different states and are significant distances from home. It would not be uncommon for commercial beekeepers to have sites in their portfolio in excess of 1,000 kilometres from home base.

All beekeeping sites that currently exist in national parks were known as apiary sites in state forests long before they were transitioned to national parks under the South East Queensland Forests Agreement 1999. The publicly available map of national park apiary sites is on the government portal. A link has been shared in the QBA submission.

Beekeeping continues in state forests and on other state lands as it has done for over a hundred years. The protection of native vegetation in these areas is the reason these sites remain critically important. Resources of this value are scarce outside of national parks and state forests due

to a range of factors including extreme weather events, urban clearing and agricultural developments. Beekeepers also use apiary sites in state forests and national parks to provide bees a safe refuge away from urban and agricultural settings that may be harmful to the bees.

The legislation and correlating regulations aim to address the transition of different land tenures into national parks. The transition of state lands to national parks that have a history of beekeeping should be a simple process. Private lands that transition to national parks will be more complicated in that documentation to satisfy the minister of evidence of prior use will be required. This process will need to be simple and manageable for industry as there have been cases where private lands have transitioned and beekeepers have lost access.

Beekeepers have a deep connection with the environment and the lands on which they operate. In the past decade the area classified as protected area estate has increased from 8.1 million hectares to 14.3 million hectares. The Protected Area Strategy 2020 to 2030 is a 10-year plan that supports the growth of the protected area estate. Whilst the Queensland beekeeping industry respects and supports the government's agenda to protect Queensland's natural environment, it does raise some concerns as to what areas are not currently in national parks. In 20 years time, how many more beekeeping areas will be lost due to the expansion of the protected area estate? The industry holds concerns for 3.4 million hectares or state forests, which could impact an additional 2,500 sites.

Beekeepers have a deep understanding of biosecurity, whether it be bee biosecurity, farm biosecurity or biosecurity on entering national parks. The Biosecurity Act 2016 has refocused beekeepers' attention on biosecurity. As well, changes to the farm biosecurity requirements under the Livestock Production Assurance scheme mean that beekeepers have to comply with certain conditions to obtain access to private lands. These same principles are applied by beekeepers when accessing all land tenures, mitigating the threat of any biosecurity risks.

In the Department of Environment and Science's own words, there is insufficient scientific evidence to suggest the impact of managed honey bees is significant enough to warrant their complete removal from national parks. Managed honey bees are only located in an area for a short time when it is commercially viable to do so, when there is a significant abundance of floral resources.

In 2004, when the transitional period to 2024 was tabled in parliament, there was recognition of the importance of the honey bee industry as well as the importance of the bee sites impacted by the South East Queensland Forests Agreement. Concerns were also raised about the importance of finding alternative resources for the prosperity of industry. A feasibility study was conducted by the department of state development and innovation to investigate alternative honey resources off national parks to meet beekeepers' needs after 2024. This study was not released to the QBA or to the public, but the results have been verbally communicated to the industry in that there was no substantial alternative resources identified. The deputy director-general of the Department of Environment and Science echoed these findings in last week's public briefing.

The Hon. Leeanne Enoch, the former minister for the environment and science, commissioned a comprehensive independent review of scientific literature in relation to the effect of managed honey bees on native flora and fauna. The findings of this report suggested that there was insufficient evidence of ecological impacts of commercially managed honey bees to justify their complete removal from national parks. The review looked at over 200 scientific papers and concluded there was an absence of evidence of ecological effects. As we heard in last week's public briefing, a new group has been set up internal to government to work on a review of national park apiary sites. Whilst the QBA has committed to continue discussions with DES and DAF, we are yet to be involved in the latest review.

The Queensland Beekeeper's Association has also identified several other key points that are relevant to this discussion. As per the explanatory notes, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania all have dedicated frameworks and perpetual agreements in place allowing beekeeping activities to be conducted across protected areas. New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria all have mechanisms to add additional bee sites in national parks at this time.

There has been, and continues to be, significant growth in the Queensland population. This increase has seen an increased demand for food security as well as the depletion of resources due to urban sprawl. Coupled with the loss of natural resources through natural disasters and agricultural developments, there has been a significant decrease in the resources available for beekeeping in the past two decades. There has also been a natural reduction of sites in protected area estate, with initial figures suggesting that there were 1,179 apiary sites impacted by the South East Queensland Forests Agreement. That figure now stands at 1,088. This can be attributed to access issues such as the deterioration of the road network within national parks.

The value of the Queensland honey bee industry has also increased over the past two decades. This is thanks to the exponential growth in pollination dependent industries and associated demand for professional pollination services. The identification of new and emerging markets has also been a contributing factor. There has also been a substantial increase in the importation of honey. The reduction of floral resources and increased climate variability may lead to further increases. Australia has gone from being a net exporter to a net importer of honey in the last two decades.

The renewed emphasis on developing and maintaining local supply chains in an ever-changing geopolitical situation has also been evidenced in the last couple of years. The future of the horticultural industry in Queensland is directly impacted by the health and prosperity of the Queensland honey bee industry. There is \$2.8 billion at risk to the Queensland economy if the Queensland honey bee industry's access to native forests is impacted.

Ultimately, the reduction in access to public lands will lead to a lack of supply of healthy honey bee colonies for pollination in Queensland. This will increase prices for honey bee pollination services and potentially mean a shortfall will occur. Even with the 20-year extension and the knowledge that there will not be any alternative resources identified, commercial beekeeping businesses will focus their expansion interstate and potentially consider relocation of their businesses interstate.

In closing, beekeepers were never in national parks, but changes to government policy put us in national parks. We do recognise and respect the protection of Queensland's natural resources, but we will continue to advocate for continued access to such critical resources for the prosperity and food security of all Queenslanders.

With the indulgence of the chair, I would like to share an excerpt from my grandfather's diary from 23 March 1960. It states—

Shifted 126 hives to Southport on Biggera Creek. Tea tree not budded well, doing well on blackbutt. Just about finished. 586 hives at Southport by 11/4/60. Tea-tree budded, flower out about 17/4/60.

Biggera Creek is just the other side of Olsen Avenue from where we meet today. Almost 62 years ago to the day my grandfather shifted all of his bees here from the Southern Downs to winter on sites within a couple of kilometres of here. Obviously there is no longer an option for us to do that. This is just one example of the challenges we as an industry face in terms of access to floral resources.

Finally, I have two submissions that we have noted have not been published. I note the QBA has supplied them in electronic copy. I would like to table them for the committee now.

CHAIR: We have received them. Please table those.

Mr Stevens: Once again, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak here today and welcome any questions you may have.

CHAIR: One of the things that came through the submissions is that access to those natural areas without insecticide is crucial not only for the health of the bees but also for a healthy industry. Is that correct?

Mr Stevens: That is right. These areas of natural forest are very important for us to be able to move away from agricultural practices that are harmful to bees. We have a pretty good understanding of the impact of insecticides on bees, but we are developing and continue to develop an understanding of the impact of fungicides and other types of chemicals as well; they can have sublethal effects and cumulative effects that do impact the bees' health as well.

CHAIR: Those natural areas are very important for that. Do you get the same effect from private forestry or do they have exposure to chemicals that may not be conducive to the ongoing health of bees?

Mr Stevens: A lot of private forestries are still of significant value, but that value has been degraded over generations to a point—places that my grandfather would have worked directly before that quote. There is a property referenced in that document that we still maintain access to now. That private area is no longer of value to bees because it has been degraded to a point where it is no longer valuable to us.

CHAIR: How difficult is it to get access to some of these areas that are in private hands?

Mr Stevens: Generally speaking, the mood in the public is very supportive of the beekeeping industry. Traditionally, beekeeping has been a very gentlemanly type industry. We respect other beekeepers' access arrangements with private landholders. That is something that comes into that

portfolio of sites. We are very respectful of other beekeepers' portfolios and we do not try to encroach on those lands. To answer the question, access to new private holdings is very hard to come by because they are generally tied up by other beekeepers.

Mr McDONALD: The Queensland Beekeepers' Association submission was very professional. You have done a great job. In terms of the development of the legislation though, did the department engage with the QBA to get your views prior to the bill being prepared?

Mr Stevens: I might let Robert, as an older statesman of industry, answer that one.

Mr Dewar: There are constant meetings between the government and Beekeepers. We have always been on the side of trying to inform. It is best to inform people so they can come up with the best solution. Whether we are the best at lobbying government for our best considered outcome, perhaps not. We probably perform better at working bees in a paddock somewhere. We have been closely working with government. I have sat in front of five different ministers over this issue in my time—all very happy to help, but we are getting to the point where something needs to happen. For some reason, five years is a long time in politics, but as a person trying to work your business—employ people, expand and pay your mortgage—five years is not that long. They kept shuffling us off saying, 'We'll do something about it.' The time to do something about it is now.

Mr McDONALD: Did the QBA recommend that this be extended to 2044 or do you have an alternative position?

Mr Dewar: In my time as chairman we took to Minister Miles at the time three positions. One was a 20-year extension. One was a no end date and a 20-year buffer if any conclusive evidence of a detrimental effect from beekeeping was found on national parks. The other one was a 10-year rolling gap. When we got to 10 years, say, 2034, if nothing was found then a 10-year gap was put on to 2044, so it gave us some sort of business security.

Mr McDONALD: Did you have a preferred position of those three?

Mr Dewar: Obviously back then I preferred the no end date.

Mr McDONALD: In terms of the last 20 years that the department said they were going to find other sites, or maybe it is not 20 years—during more recent history they said they were going to find other sites and they have not found other sites. How confident is the industry of other sites being found over the next 20 years?

Mr Stevens: I think that comes back to Chris's question in that we have a portfolio of sites. Beekeepers are travelling very large distances to access these lands. If beekeepers themselves have not been able to find alternative resources, I do not know that there is a whole lot of confidence in industry that government is going to be able to find them for us.

Mr McDONALD: I certainly have an appreciation, through reading your submission and hearing your evidence here today, that apiary activities are more dynamic than I imagined them to be in terms of leaving them in locations. Is that why you need to have a portfolio of apiary sites?

Mr Stevens: Yes, absolutely. In our submission we are referring to about a six-week period of occupation. We can shift bees up to 10 times in a year if it is necessary. There are certain cases where there is floral resource a little bit longer than that and some are shorter, but we do need that type of portfolio. For our winter options here now that we will be shifting on to in the next month as a commercial industry, there might be half a dozen places in our portfolio that we will go and look at. Potentially we might have a large number of sites in each of these half a dozen locations. It is all dependent on the trees or the resources' natural flowering patterns as well as rainfall at the right times of the year. Some trees will only bud on certain rainfall events in certain months and that sort of thing. It is very important to have such a big range of sites.

Mr McDONALD: I have other questions but in light of the time I will share it around for now.

Mr MADDEN: I want to ask about the areas where you can put hives. You can put hives in state forests. That is correct, isn't it?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

Mr MADDEN: Some state forests are transitioning to national parks; is that correct?

Mr Dewar: They already have, yes.

Mr MADDEN: You will continue to have access to those sites under this agreement?

Mr Dewar: Yes.

Mr MADDEN: You have never been able to put your hives in national parks; is that right?

Mr Dewar: That is right.

Mr MADDEN: In the future you will have some national parks where you will be permitted to put your hives but you will have other national parks where you are not permitted to put your hives. Is that the case?

Mr Dewar: That will be the case, yes.

Mr MADDEN: We do not have a name for these national parks that were previously state forests.

Mr Dewar: There is no technical name for them.

CHAIR: Asterisk.

Mr MADDEN: You can put your hives just outside national parks. There is no problem there, is there?

Mr Dewar: As long as there is access, yes.

Mr MADDEN: It is an incongruous situation, really. You have some areas that traditionally were national parks that you were never able to put your hives in but new national parks where you can. It is an unusual situation, isn't it?

Mr Dewar: Well, yes, but not of our doing.

Mr MADDEN: Do you have confidence that with the traditional sites in previous state forest national parks—there are obviously traditional sites that your members have used over generations—when somebody retires and no longer wants to use that site the department will be generous in allowing another one of your members to use that site? Has that come up in your discussions with the department?

Mr Stevens: The current process is that if a site becomes available through a permit expiring or someone retiring or the permit is surrendered it will go back into an available pool of sites. That publicly available national parks map that I referenced in my address has green dots, red dots or yellow dots. The green sites are available to take a permit up on and the other sites are under permit.

Mr MADDEN: Is there a possibility that more sites may become available or, as you have said previously, you have pretty much found all of the good sites?

Mr Stevens: As an industry we would be more concerned about losing a thousand sites than having any more sites in national parks. We all understand finite resources. Certainly floral resources for bees come into that category.

Mr MADDEN: You are confident that this legislation will allow those existing sites to remain within your members' areas they can use?

Mr Stevens: Yes, until 2044.

Mr HART: Jacob, how many of the state forest sites that were converted to national parks were next door to a national park anyway?

Mr Stevens: I would probably have to take that question on notice.

Mr HART: Would you be aware whether there would be a few or a lot?

Mr Stevens: I would suggest that some of the areas that converted to national parks bordered other national parks. I would suggest that there were a few, but I would not have exact numbers.

Mr HART: Those bees that were on state forest were going into a national park anyway.

Mr Stevens: Yes, that would be correct.

Mr HART: You mentioned two reports. One of them about alternative sites is not publicly available. Have you asked for a copy of that report?

Mr Dewar: Yes, we certainly have. We have had several. It was done back in the Peter Beattie government. Every five years from 2004 there was supposed to be a review into the decision. On the fifth year—I think it might have been 2010, but I stand to be corrected on the exact year—work had been completed by this committee that Jacob mentioned. Findings were never published to us. We were asked to help with the ground-truthing of the available land. It was dry land, spotted gum country just south of Mundubbera—one or maybe two main species in the whole supposed 19,000 hectares.

Mr HART: It was a very narrow report, you think?

Mr Dewar: Yes.

Mr HART: Chair, we might seek to obtain that report for our information.

CHAIR: How old is it?

Mr MADDEN: It was 2004. That is correct, isn't it?

Mr Dewar: I think it might have been more recent—2010 by the time the work was done.

Mr HART: But no reports have been done subsequent to that?

Mr Dewar: No.

Mr HART: That is in the 24-year period that was originally extended from 1999 to 2024. Now we are going to extend it another 20 years. The other report that you talk about is on the scientific impact of bees on the national park. That is publicly available. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Dewar: It was commissioned by Minister Enoch, so I am assuming so.

CHAIR: We can get a copy of that. The department will tell us if it is publicly available or not.

Mr HART: Jacob, you said that the conclusion from that report was that there was no impact from bees; is that correct?

Mr Stevens: Yes. There was a lack of scientific evidence to support that, yes.

Mr HART: In your association's mind, how does that line up with the explanatory notes that say that 'beekeeping is inconsistent with the cardinal principle for national parks'?

Mr Stevens: Given that is the cardinal principle for national parks, I suppose that is a little bit different to scientific evidence in that there is not the science to suggest that we have an ecological impact. Given the nature of the way in which we commercially manage honey bees, we do not believe that we have an impact.

Mr SMITH: What are some of the environmental factors that go into a successful hive? Are there particular environments that are just unsuitable? What does an environmental location look like for hives?

Mr Stevens: One of the key things is that there needs to be an abundance of floral resource. There need to be sufficient surpluses for the bees to do well. They need quite a good range of pollen as well. Pollen is a protein component of a bee's diet and nectar is the carbohydrate energy component of the bee's diet, and they need a really good balance of both of those to prosper. Some of the agricultural areas we go into have a mono culture that does not provide that balanced nutrition. Certain forests that have one species do not necessarily provide that balanced nutrition for bees to prosper.

Mr SMITH: With 2044 in mind, is the greatest challenge facing the industry purchasing private land? Is that the hardest part, trying to find new locations, being able to purchase private land to set up hives on?

Mr Stevens: We do not purchase private lands to put our hives on. It is generally more of a handshake agreement with property owners and longstanding family relationships. For the lack of a better term, we have exhausted private lands for resources for bees.

Mr SMITH: The member for Burleigh spoke about a previous time period of looking to change sites. The department, through their engagement with the industry, talk about the next 20 years and the extension. What have they mapped out or what plan have they formulated that is different to the previous length of time?

CHAIR: We might want to chase that up with the department, but feel free to answer that or not answer it.

Mr HART: Please answer.

Mr SMITH: Have the department come to you and discussed a plan that is different than previously?

Mr Stevens: To the best of my knowledge, the Department of Environment and Science, DAF and the Beekeepers have committed to a review of national park sites. As to the scope of works that it covers, we are not entirely sure, as I mentioned in my opening address.

CHAIR: I think that is a good answer.

Mr KATTER: I have a lot of questions. I will see how many I can get through. In hindsight, I was pretty disappointed with DAF's presentation to us. I want that on the record. I did feel there was not enough information given about the importance of this industry and how it is intrinsically linked with production in horticulture which you have captured pretty well. Your submission talks about 20 or 30 per cent productivity gains and \$2.8 billion to the Queensland economy. That should be of strong concern for us and should not just be coming from the industry itself, in my view. The department should be looking at how this fits in and making sure there is provision for growth going Southport

forward. That leads to my question. It appears to me that you have an agreement that will terminate. What does your future look like if you fail to get more sites? If there is a failure from the department to find more sites, what does that look like for you and the horticultural industry?

Mr Stevens: Speaking personally, as a younger beekeeper, I will not be 50 years old in 2044, so I have a little bit of skin in the game here. I would anticipate that I will still be keeping bees then. We will focus our attention on the expansion of our business interstate and shoring up resource access interstate. Potentially, for the horticultural industry, particularly in the member for Bundaberg's electorate, it is going to be really difficult to source bees out of New South Wales to come up and pollinate macadamias and avocados in that region. We have carted bees personally from Dubbo to Bundaberg—15 hours on the road, all night. That is going to have to be reflected in prices and, to a degree, availability of these bees. Some 40,000 beehives go into the Wide Bay region for pollination in August and September. Those bees just will not be in Queensland to find.

Mr KATTER: Presumably there will be some submissions or representations made to this committee from environmental groups who will be prosecuting the other side of the argument—the damage or the risk to national parks. I am sure you are aware of some of the things that have been raised in the past. What is your response to some of those counterarguments for you operating in national parks?

Mr Stevens: Given the comprehensive nature of that scientific review that was commissioned by Minister Enoch, it addresses a lot of the ecological terms as well as beekeepers' deep understanding of biosecurity in terms of weed transmission and other pathogens into the forest. Beekeepers are acutely aware of their responsibility. To that end, beekeepers are just as disheartened to see things get into natural areas that should not be there.

Mr KATTER: Just so it is patently clear to me, the threat to the bee industry is that you have had access to state forests and the government is saying, 'We will recognise an existing permit over a state forest as it becomes a national park, but we will not create any more.' They have not explicitly said that, but it seems to me that it would be very difficult to create any more sites within national parks or converted state forests. It would just be recognising what is there now, so that diminishes your capacity to expand in those areas.

Mr Stevens: That would be correct. There is a provision, with permission from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, to place more bee sites in state forests. As I said before, with national parks it has never been on the table. We have been worried about what we are going to lose in national parks.

Mr McDONALD: What would the loss of those resources mean to you, Jacob?

Mr Stevens: We have a fairly large portfolio. As a fourth generation commercial beekeeper, we have a portfolio of several hundred bee sites. Quite possibly 40 or 50 per cent of those are on state lands. We derive quite a bit of our portfolio from state lands and it is really important for us as a business. I think that is a very common theme across commercial beekeeping. Potentially this is not going to affect the people who have one or two beehives in their backyard which has been a really big growth sector for us. It is really targeted at the commercial beekeeping sector.

Mr HART: In your submission you implore the government to perfect the legislation by committing to negotiating ILUAs. Can you tell us what the issue is there?

Mr Dewar: An ILUA is an Indigenous land use agreement. A lot of the national parks are now being transitioned to co-ownership with the Indigenous people. We understand that there has to be a role there somewhere for the government to take us along in that transition and bring us into the discussions of these ILUAs to shore up those land tenures as well with the Indigenous people.

Mr HART: You want the government to do that rather than you doing that? Is that what you are saying?

Mr Dewar: We have approached certain Indigenous groups, but they do not want every single beekeeper knocking on their door saying, 'Hey, what about me?' We are happy to work as the QBA with government to do these things, for sure, but we want it to be in a complete ILUA across the association instead of individual ones, because there would be hundreds.

CHAIR: That is a good point. The time for this session has now expired. We do not have any questions on notice. We have questions for the department. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our secretariat and thank you to Hansard. A transcript will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.37 pm.