



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 2022

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 28 MARCH 2022

Brisbane

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The committee met at 10.53 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. My name is Chris Whiting. I am the member for Bancroft and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me today are committee members: Mr Jim McDonald, deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Hart, member for Burleigh; Mr Tom Smith, member for Bundaberg; and Mr Jim Madden, member for Ipswich West; and we will be joined by Mr Robbie Katter, member for Traeger.

This 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 or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. These proceedings are being recorded and produced live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Could you please turn your mobile phones off or on to silent mode.

BOYLAND, Mr Des, Policies and Campaigns Manager, Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland

WALSH, Ms Jessica, Founder and Project Manager, Friends of Nerang National Park, Gecko Environment Council

CHAIR: Good morning, and thank you for agreeing to appear before the committee today. I invite each of you to make an opening statement, after which we will have some questions for you.

Mr Boyland: The Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, Wildlife welcomes and appreciates the opportunity to appear at the public hearing. As the explanatory notes explain—

The primary objective of the Bill is to deliver an election commitment to provide a 20-year extension to allow beekeeping on specified national parks to continue until 31 December 2044.

Unrelated to the beekeeping amendments, several other objectives are included. Wildlife Queensland supports those other amendments unrelated to beekeeping but strongly opposes the primary purpose of the bill. The explanatory notes state that 'beekeeping is inconsistent with the cardinal principle' of management of national parks in Queensland, a guiding principle of management adhered to by all governments of all political persuasions for many years. The cardinal principle for managing national parks is to provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural conditions and the protection of the area's cultural resources and values.

It is acknowledged that, in accord with the policy of the government of the day, an agreement was reached during negotiations in achieving the 1999 South East Queensland Forests Agreement to enable beekeeping to continue temporarily, until 31 December 2024. Furthermore, there was a commitment by the industry that efforts would be made by industry to locate alternative sites prior to 31 December 2024. It is Wildlife Queensland's understanding that the terms of the agreement were acceptable to the beekeeping industry at that time. Wildlife Queensland is unaware of efforts made during that time, but it was stated in a government submission to the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in May 2007 that almost 19,000 hectares of high honey-yielding forest areas had been located on private lands which may be available as an alternative resource when access to the South-East Queensland land ceases to be available in 2024. It is noted that locating suitable alternative sites was challenging, and that is understandable knowing that today an apiary site permit for five years costs \$555 for 150 hives.

In addition, Wildlife Queensland's concerns were further enhanced about the industry making any committed effort to ever relocate when Ms Jo Martin, the secretary of the Queensland Beekeepers' Association, in an interview with *ABC Rural News* on 10 November 2020, in discussing Brisbane

a letter from Dr Steven Miles foreshadowing a 20-year extension, indicated that the industry was relieved after 20 years of uncertainty and growing anxiety. It was further indicated that, whilst this is not the end result they were after, it does give opportunity for removing the end date altogether. This statement only adds to why Wildlife Queensland is so concerned that in 2044 further extensions will be sought. National parks are not the place for feral animals. Even the Department of Environment and Science acknowledges that.

It is well established that biodiversity is in decline. National parks are the cornerstone of conservation and protection of our natural heritage. There are more than enough threats to our biodiversity with climate change, invasive plants, disease, feral animals, inappropriate developments and land use planning. The New South Wales scientific committee deemed honey bees to be a potential key threatening process to our native plants under the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995 (New South Wales). Why maintain a potential threatening process to our wildlife and its habitat, especially in our national parks, unnecessarily?

It has been established through various studies in the past that well-managed honey bees usually pose minimal threats to various regional ecosystems and the wildlife they call home. However, honey bees do compete for forage resources with native species. Honey bees can also deplete forage resources more rapidly than native species, according to some reports. It has been reported that honey bees can damage certain native flowers, preventing seed production. Also, feral honey bees—and they can escape from well-managed apiary sites—do compete for nest sites with native species.

In a recent paper by Prendergast KS et al in 2022, published in *Pacific Conservation Biology* by CSIRO, there is evidence for and against competition between the European honey bee and Australian native bees. The authors reviewed the literature concerning competition between honey bees and the Australian native bees. Data on whether honey bees compete with native bees is questionable. There are no associations with native bee abundance, species richness or productive output in most cases. However, there were more negative than positive associations. Data indicates that effects of honey bees are species specific, and more detailed investigations are required on how a different species and life history traits affect interactions with honey bees. Under these circumstances, the precautionary principle should come into play—caution in advance. Wildlife Queensland recommends against passing the amendments relating to extending the term beyond 31 December 2024.

There is one final point in relation to section 36A. Its scope has expanded to incorporate any land that may be dedicated as national park. The new section 36A replaces the existing section 184, which currently provides for beekeeping to continue until 2024. The new section is broader than section 184 to enable delivery of the election commitment by recognising existing beekeeping on any form of land that becomes national park in future and providing for it to continue until 31 December 2044.

Currently, section 184 only allows an apiary site to be prescribed in regulation if the area that becomes national park was formerly a forest reserve and the section prevents apiary permits being granted beyond 31 December 2024. This raises the question whether an apiary site on land other than a forest reserve that becomes national park in, for example, 2044 would only have one year left to operate in the park. That makes a mockery of section 36, which can allow such a site to continue under a previous use authority. In fact, the relationship between such an authority under section 36 and the provisions of section 36A(3)(c)(ii) are unclear when it comes to determining how long the authority under section 36 and an apiary permit under section 36A can remain in force. In the interests of transparency, this needs to be reviewed. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Ms Walsh: Thank you to the committee for having me and thank you to the suite of MPs I am talking in front of today. It is an honour to be here. I wear multiple hats in the conservation world. I do a mixture of advocacy and campaigning but I am also on the ground a lot in numerous protected areas.

Not listed under my titles is that I also work for the Quoll Society of Australia as a volunteer and when I am really lucky to get paid. I have been to several national parks in southern Queensland recently and I have noticed that there is an alarming number of hollows that are occupied by feral bees. Not all of these are located near apiary sites. Nerang National Park has a number of apiaries in it—many of which exist as a transfer of legacy from the former state forest days. Nerang National Park was gazetted between 2007 and 2009, so it still has that transfer of legacy.

I am currently involved in doing greater glider research in Nerang National Park and in several other national parks and private properties around southern Queensland. I have noticed that there has been occupancy of feral bees in hollows that would be large enough to home some of our rare and threatened species that are listed under the Nature Conservation Act. This includes the glossy Brisbane

black cockatoo; the greater glider, which has recently been listed as endangered at the end of 2021; and the powerful owl. I also acknowledge that there are many threatening processes facing our native wildlife and it is not exclusive to feral honey bee occupancy. There is land clearing, inappropriate fire regimes and the like. However, it is very alarming to see occupancy of feral honey bees in these hollows that would otherwise be occupied by some of our native species in our protected areas. This is deeply concerning for me because this is the limiting resource for greater gliders in Nerang National Park and beyond.

I have recently been in Girraween National Park doing quoll research and I have seen a large hollow-bearing tree with feral honey bees in it and there are no apiaries within a one-kilometre radius. Clearly there are some stepping stones that these colonies have taken deep into our protected areas as well and they are taking up that critical resource. It would be fantastic, from Friends of Nerang National Park's view and from Gecko Environment Council's point of view, to limit access for feral animals in our protected areas to ensure we are safeguarding those threatened species that are currently not facing a very bright future due to multiple reasons.

The committee may be aware that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, which was declared by scientists in 2015 and is currently ongoing and will only increase due to threats from climate change. In order to protect our native species from death by a thousand cuts, I am here to speak on behalf of my experience on the ground to say that feral honey bees are indeed a problem for our threatened wildlife and other wildlife in our protected areas, and we really should be doing everything we can to ensure that our wildlife in our protected areas remains protected.

CHAIR: Mr Boyland, we have your submission here. Ms Walsh has talked more about the competition for hollows. I could not quite catch what you said about some data or some studies that verify that competition for the hollows is the problem.

Mr Boyland: The most recent paper I read on that was published by CSIRO on 3 March 2022. I have made the citation available to the secretariat. They examined all of the relevant material in Australia and said that it could not really establish one way or the other whether there was actual competition. They acknowledged that there was damage to some flowers et cetera because the structure of the Australian native flower was entirely different. They honey bees rupture the flower and prevent seeding. They said that did occur. They also said that the honey bees clear up the actual food available so there would be nothing left for the native species because the honey bees were much faster, much quicker and much more efficient. They said that it was questionable and that much more research needed to be done.

While it is not relevant to Australia, studies in Denmark and the United States have indicated that, contrary to earlier views, it would appear that the honey bee is actually causing more interference with the native species than originally thought. It poses the question. When it is questionable, the precautionary principle should be triggered. The precautionary principle means: do not rush in and do the wrong thing. Sit back and wait until you have the evidence. There is enough evidence, particularly when New South Wales scientists recognise that it was a key threatening process under their legislation, to keep honey bees out of national parks from 31 December 2024.

CHAIR: We have the link for that CSIRO paper from March 2022.

Mr Boyland: Yes.

CHAIR: The New South Wales scientific committee—

Mr Boyland: That is their legislation.

CHAIR: That has been provided. Thank you for that. Ms Walsh, your evidence is anecdotal but you have witnessed that in the Nerang National Park and Girraween feral bees are colonising hollows that could potentially be used by other species. You have provided a photo of that in your submission as well.

Ms Walsh: Yes, absolutely. I am on the ground quite a lot but I am not always looking up at hollows for certain ferals. I have provided my on-ground experience. I would also like to highlight that a study was done on the swift parrot in Victoria. I have forgotten the year. It also highlighted that up to one per cent of suitable hollows for the swift parrot, which is also conservation significant, had been occupied by feral bees in Victoria. There are dribs and drabs of research out there like that.

I would also like to highlight that often the studies that need to be done to prove a lot of these things are not funded well and they are simply not done. It is often up to this anecdotal evidence to get out there. I did my postgraduate research in Vienna, Austria. I was amazed at the extent of understanding they have there about their own backyard. All of the trees in Vienna city itself are

numbered, which is amazing, and they keep track of them as part of the city. In Australia, obviously we are a mega biodiverse country and we just do not have the resources to fund the studies that we probably need to fund in order to make these determinations.

CHAIR: Could you provide the Victorian paper about the swift parrots? If you could provide that to us, that would be great. I might chase that up.

Mr McDONALD: Thanks for being with us today. I appreciate your submissions. The committee finds itself in a situation where we are being requested to consider your position of nothing and consider the apiarists' position of responsible management. I am a practical person and I think if we close national parks an apiarist will find a private site right beside the national park and bees will travel into the national park to find the flowering trees and plants. Do you think there is a place for the actual management of these in national parks, given that context—because bees move?

Ms Walsh: Absolutely, they do move. It is thought from what I have read—and somebody can correct me on this if I am wrong—that when bees swarm and become feral they normally will not travel more than one kilometre. In protected areas without the feral bee populations, it would be okay to have, dare I say, apiaries on adjacent land. We cannot control what happens on adjacent land. Indeed, I live next to Nerang National Park and my neighbours put in apiaries. We liaised with them. They wanted manuka honey so we planted manuka flowers, and that is great when you have that collaborative effort between neighbours and that sort of thing. That is something I definitely acknowledge that the beekeepers would also have to do, especially given the importance of bees for the agricultural industry as pollinators. My angle on that is: we cannot control what happens outside of our protected areas but we can control what happens within them. Knowing that ferals will not normally swarm more than a kilometre, that still leaves a great portion of our protected areas unoccupied by feral bees.

Mr McDONALD: It is interesting you say that, because that was going to be my next question. In terms of the health benefits to the broader population and managing the growing population and access to sufficient honey, do you have any alternative approaches other than just closing up?

Ms Walsh: Absolutely. I have seen a real rise in community gardens around the place, and I have seen a big interest in the rewilding movement on the ground. Michael Hart may have noticed that on the Gold Coast there is a big interest in 'friends of' groups booming on the Gold Coast and surrounds. A lot of community gardens are popping up, and they also realise the importance of obviously pollinators and bees and that honey is a cherished resource. I am sure we all enjoy it from time to time in our coffees and the like.

I would definitely encourage more community participation where appropriate but also agricultural participation. For example, when you travel out towards Ipswich you see a lot of cleared agricultural areas and there are not a lot of plantings in between. We could plant little corridors between these paddocks and things like that which would have that resource that we need. They could be native, they could be eucalypts that flower or they could be non-native plants—I want to say 'invasive' because I get rid of weeds all the time—that also have that resource we need. That can help boost the food that is available for honey bees and it would also greatly benefit the environment. If we put in these stepping stones in our agricultural areas we are also improving the movement of animals which is currently quite disjointed.

I see that as being a really holistic win. It is something that the conservationists would absolutely endorse, given that we are planting natives. It would be something that I would love to help advocate for. Indeed I do that with my work for the Quoll Society of Australia. We are working out toward Girraween. We are GPS collaring quolls, which are also endangered. We are trying to work with the landholders to get those stepping stones across the landscape that benefit pollinators but also benefit quolls and gliders that will not traverse those large cleared areas. It can also improve agricultural productivity if we have these. It has not been shown to have a detrimental effect. Dr David Lindenmayer from the ANU has done a lot of research on this, and I see that as being an alternative that is very timely and benefits everyone that we can push at this stage.

Mr Boyland: The other alternative is that national parks are the prime component of the protected area estate. I cannot speak on behalf of all conservation organisations, but Wildlife Queensland would not necessarily be opposed to beekeeping on other less conservation areas that are included in the protected area estate. For example, with a nature refuge, which is privately owned land managed for conservation parks, there could be an income for those people. We only have something like 5.8 per cent of Queensland set in national parks. That is the only area that is set aside for our biodiversity and that is the area we want protected. We cannot see why we would allow feral

animals into that area with the threatening risks they present. By all means, we would have no objections to apiary sites on nature refuges and other types of protected areas but not in national parks.

Mr MADDEN: You have raised some issues that have not been raised before, particularly with regard to feral bees occupying potential sites for our native animals. I will run through this as quickly as possible because I have millions of questions but I have to limit it to a reasonable amount of time. Firstly, Mr Boyland, I would be very grateful if you could table a copy of the literature review on the effect of native bees on national parks. Could you give us the reference?

Mr Boyland: I have given it to the secretariat already. They should be able to download it from the website.

Mr MADDEN: I want to inform you of something. We have used the term 'national park' consistently, and in your testimony you used the term 'national park' consistently. I want to reassure you both that this bill only allows the continuation of bee sites on former forestry land that is going to be absorbed into national parks. As Nerang National Park is a national park now, there will not be beehives in Nerang National Park. I just wanted to reassure you of that. That opens up the issue of coexistence of commercial enterprises in national parks. On Moreton Island we already have Tangalooma resort; on Fraser Island we have Kingfisher Bay. We have commercial operations already—

Mr Boyland: Kingfisher Bay is not on national park. It is in a World Heritage area but is not in national park.

Mr MADDEN: Well, we have commercial operations coexisting on areas that are protected—whether we call them national parks or World Heritage areas. This use of hives in those areas is an example of commercial operations that are already operating. The hives are already on the forestry land. All we are doing is extending the period of the operation of existing laws.

Do you appreciate the importance of our apiarists with regard to horticultural crops and agricultural crops and the need for them to have alternative feed sources? When their hives are not out with sunflowers or with the almond crops down south, they only need to have access to these sites for a very short period of time. The amount of honey that is actually produced on national parks is very limited. That is why when you go into shops you will see sunflower and ironbark et cetera, because primarily these hives are not in national parks. Do you appreciate the importance of these industries for the benefit of all of us in Australia to make sure that when we go to buy almonds we have almonds available that absolutely need bees to pollinate them? That includes avocados as well in horticultural crops. Have you taken that into account?

I must say: I am a bit unclear about your view, because we already have the hives in forestry lands. Those forestry lands are going to be absorbed into national parks, so we are not putting hives in current national parks. Have you considered the importance of our bee industry?

Mr Boyland: I acknowledge that the bee industry is a legitimate enterprise and is essential. I also appreciate that a lot of the times the apiary sites are moved into national parks it is to recover after their exhaustive feasting. What I am saying is that there are other areas where those bees can go that is not national park. As I indicated, I am not opposed to them being in conservation parks, for example. It is just the fact that the national parks are set aside. They are the cornerstone of the protection of our biodiversity and our biodiversity is under extreme pressure. Unfortunately, governments of all persuasions have not had national parks as their highest priority. There was one exception, and that was Goss and Comben. They actually doubled the national parks between 1989 and 1992. Since then, the growth and expansion of national parks has been very minimal.

Mr MADDEN: Maybe I will clarify my question to you. Do you oppose the continued use of forestry land for beekeeping?

Mr Boyland: No, provided it is not national park.

Mr MADDEN: Well, eventually it will become national park if it has not already. Are you opposed to those limited forestry lands continuing to have bees on them, as opposed to traditional national parks like Nerang National Park? Are you opposed to that?

Mr Boyland: I am not opposed to bees being on forestry land at all, but not in national parks. National parks were set aside for a different purpose—to protect our native wildlife.

Mr MADDEN: Those are my questions. Again, thanks very much for coming in today.

Mr HART: A lot of our state forestry—and it sounds like there could be more—is changing name from ‘state forestry’ to ‘national park’. I am sure some of these nature refuges you talked about before will also change to be national park. When and if that happens, does that mean your opinion is that honey bees should not be in there because the name changed?

Mr Boyland: The whole purpose of a national park is for the protection and conservation of our native species. Personally, I think a lot of state forest land should not become national park.

Mr HART: We agree there.

Mr Boyland: Believe it or not, I had great arguments with Craig Emerson when he was director-general about certain areas coming into national parks because they did not meet national park standards. All they were doing was downgrading the status and the quality of national parks. That is what we are opposed to. We are opposed to downgrading.

In relation to the current government’s policy of allowing commercial development in national parks, we are totally opposed to that and it should not happen. It is against the cardinal principle of management. The Palaszczuk government at one stage promised that they would reinstate the cardinal principle of management of national parks. They made some minor tweaks to when Newman took a wrecking ball to all environmental legislation, but they did not reinstate the cardinal principle of management of national parks. I used to be a public servant, and I know that public servants just have to deliver the policy of the government of the day, regardless. That is why I actually convinced them to buy my contract out in 2000. I was totally opposed to a range of things that as a senior bureaucrat I was forced to do.

Mr HART: I probably should have asked the bee people this, but could somebody explain to me the difference between a honey bee and a native bee?

Ms Walsh: Do you mean other than the country of origin? The European honey bee is more of a generalist bee. A lot of our native Australian bees and indeed wasps will pollinate certain species. For example, wasps are really good at pollinating certain orchids and things like that, and the same goes for our bees. However, the European honey bee is more of a generalist, so it usually will not discern between what flowers it prefers. It will usually go for the dominant species. For example, in the case of manuka honey, you would want to plant a lot of manuka plants to get the manuka honey. This also poses a problem when it comes to the transfer and the success of invasive plant species. The European honey bee will pollinate species like lantana and cat’s claw creeper and things like that and ultimately lead to the success of reproduction of many invasive species that our native bees will not pollinate. Hopefully, that answers your question.

Mr KATTER: Some questions you have already fielded you have given good answers to, and that is appreciated. I was a bit unclear about a couple of them. Ms Walsh, you were saying, ‘So that’s my solution to the alternative,’ in answer to a question asked by the member for Lockyer. I was a bit unclear on that. It was in the context of if we are displacing this effort in the national parks—and I remember you saying there are blocks of land in between and there is planting, which would be a long process. I was unclear on what was the second solution, apart from what I just mentioned.

Ms Walsh: Do you mean the second solution to where bees could be kept as an alternative to national parks?

Mr KATTER: Yes.

Ms Walsh: Absolutely. I definitely acknowledge that planting takes some time, but there are also some plants that grow quite rapidly. Dare I say, if we begin soon, with the rain that we have been having lately it is going to be much more of an accelerated process. I would definitely encourage that landscape scale approach. I acknowledge that people who are in apiaries are not necessarily liaising with a lot of the landholders. It is definitely something that can be encouraged, and rewilding absolutely needs to be encouraged right now.

Mr KATTER: Mr Boyland, you made a point—and I may have misinterpreted it, but it sounded like there was a study done that said it does not impact on farming productivity. There was a comment made—and I may have misinterpreted it—but you were making reference to a study that said it does not have the impact on productivity.

Mr Boyland: There is a range of studies that indicate there is minimal impact, but then the same people who have done the review—being scientists—indicated that the evidence is not clear and decisive and further studies need to be done.

Mr KATTER: That certainly contradicts a lot of—that will be interesting to look at.

Mr Boyland: Normally honey bees in certain areas are really managed. Rarely do they fly more than about two kilometres. It is usually less than that. Honey bees like to be within a short distance of their feed source. They do not fly out; if there is a food source next door, they do not go looking for miles. However, every now and again they do go feral and they can fly up to seven kilometres.

Mr KATTER: I am almost of the alternate view that with national parks—I have no problem with biodiversity, but we have a lot of national park area in my part of the world that is not managed very well at all. That is a different argument.

Mr Boyland: Perhaps if you can give them more money.

Mr KATTER: I do not disagree with you there, but that is probably a separate argument to bring in. The thing is that it leaves an impression in my mind of vast tracts of land. That is not to say there is no impact; there is obviously an impact if you put the bees in there. I was almost of the other view. I think there are a thousand registered sites. This is about the impact of the bees being allowed in there once the state forest is converted—once it is renamed and repurposed, as was the point you made. Your point would be that that is still a significant area. To build on that, you just said they only travel two kilometres, so I am thinking of these tiny little footprints within some of the national parks which cover some pretty big areas. Would I be right in saying that your point is that you either call it a national park or you do not and you want to exclude that sort of activity from it altogether?

Mr Boyland: I must confess that back in the 1990s at the behest of Trevor Weatherhead, when he threatened to surround Parliament House with a hundred trucks loaded with beehives, I created a 'Swiss cheese' national park with little areas for beekeeping sites to fulfil the wishes of the government of the day.

Mr KATTER: You created areas for them?

Mr Boyland: Yes.

Mr HART: Was that when you were in the department?

Mr Boyland: Yes. I was a senior bureaucrat in the department.

Mr KATTER: You are saying that bees can colonise, that apiarists take their bees out but the bees spread. Are you saying there is evidence of that?

Mr Boyland: They do swarm. There is no question about that. Otherwise, we would not find feral honey bees in national parks. Jessica has just indicated that she has visually seen those. I have certainly seen them in many parks.

Mr KATTER: I was just trying to make sense of that. Is that likely from an apiarist? I am trying to get a handle on how that happens.

Mr Boyland: If the apiary sites are not managed appropriately, the bees breed up—sweet honey and all that jazz, so they breed up. There are then too many bees for the hives so they swarm and, boom, off they go. It happens infrequently—I would be the first to admit that—but it does occur.

Ms Walsh: I have photos in my original submission of swarming and then hollow occupancy in Nerang National Park of, I assume, bees from the apiaries in Nerang National Park that have turned feral. It definitely does happen and I have seen it. I just wanted to clarify that. I also wish to go back to the honourable Jim Madden's question about acknowledging the importance of bees for agricultural land. To that I say definitely, of course.

On one other point, a lot of the former state forests, as you have said, will eventually be turned to national parks and a lot of them will share the same story as Nerang National Park. A lot of them have threatened species or perhaps what will become threatened species in the future that are dependent on these hollows in the former state forests that could be turned into national parks, so this story is still applicable to those areas. There is also a high occupancy of feral honey bees in artificial hollows that are being installed such as nest boxes, especially the wooden ones, which are the traditional kind. You have probably seen them at the men's shed being made and installed. They are increasing in protected areas and also in backyards and things like that. That is just another element to be considered when it comes to conservation efforts and supplementing the loss of large hollow-bearing trees or large hollows. Feral honey bees are also going for the structures that we are supplementing with, which is also of concern.

CHAIR: The time allocated for this session has now expired. We do not have any questions on notice. All those studies we talked about have been sent to us. Thank you very much for assisting us with our inquiry today. You will be sent a copy of this transcript in due course.

McKEE, Dr Ben, Chief Operating Officer, Hive & Wellness

CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for appearing before the committee. I invite you to make an opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Dr McKee: Thank you for the opportunity. Hive & Wellness is our recent change of name. The company was privatised, but it is probably better known as Capilano in terms of our history and marketed under the Capilano brand. I will make some opening points, which are the key points in our submission.

Queensland national parks provide irreplaceable nutritional resources for our Queensland beekeepers. Queensland can be a hard place to be a beekeeper. It can be pollen deficient at times and the national parks play a critical role, especially when we consider our greater role in agriculture and the support of other agricultural industries. We just heard how those bees at times need to refresh, rebreed and, most importantly, get much needed pollen and nectar resources.

We are a proud Queensland company. We have our head office here in Queensland. We have our major production plant here in Queensland. We produce 80 per cent of the volume that we pack in Queensland. At last count we export to over 32 countries, if not more. We are an established business fundamentally based on a healthy Queensland beekeeping industry. Our sales are a bit seasonal but can be as high as \$140 million or \$150 million. We are a notable employer. Having a healthy Queensland bee industry is based on having good, healthy beekeepers with good, healthy hives. If there was not a great industry here, it would be hard to understand why we would be based here.

In terms of the biodiversity and science, we have been looking at this over a long time ourselves—myself with a scientific background—but it is pretty clear about the science in that it is inconclusive as to the impact of bees on the environment. It is pretty clear that we have an endemic feral population of bees. The idea that we can remove apiarists from national parks and the bees are going to go away is just not rational.

In a past life I worked in a department in Victoria. When we were concerned about a varroa mite incursion, we found 19 hives of bees in the botanical gardens, so they are quite an endemic species now. We have done our own work on Stradbroke Island and I am hoping that we will be able to deliver that report to you, if we have not already, with regard to the impact of bees and the competition of bees with native species. We have used modern digital cameras to track flowering and the impact of bees. The European honey bees had one of the lesser impacts.

We think beekeepers are harmonious and discreet users of national parks and have been doing so for over a hundred years. I will make a point that in a lot of other states around Australia—and we are a national organisation; we draw honey from every state in Australia. We have operations in Perth and in Victoria. We do not have the same type of impact on our beekeepers that is trying to be imposed here in terms of access to national parks. In fact, we were quite involved in helping what happened in Victoria, where they have a totally different policy and approach to the apiary industry whereby they encourage the industry and they are trying to support it. In talking to our beekeepers there, they say that, if they find a spot in a national park or a state Crown resource where they want to have a bee site, the idea is that they get that bee site unless there is a relevant legitimate reason not to. The industry is going quite well in Victoria.

We worry about the 20-year extension. We worry about the fact that we will be back here again. We worry about the fact that we are trying to support and nurture generations of beekeepers. It is a hard job. It takes time. They are multigenerational families of beekeepers. Having this looming again 20 years down the track is a concern. In the past it has definitely slowed investment in this industry here in Queensland. That brings anxiety to our beekeepers and the next generation.

The final thing I will say is that we have talked about the importance of honey bees—and you guys will know more than anything from the information in front of you—and their impact on pollination and supporting other agricultural industries. There is one thing we do not have here in Australia and that is the varroa mite. Its absence means our honey tastes better than anywhere else in the world. We do not have to use the chemical treatments that they have to use elsewhere in the world. We are the only continent in the world without it. When varroa mite gets here, the feral colonies will pretty much die and the managed colonies will become significantly more important. There is plenty of evidence in the world of where that has happened. It is important now more than ever that we encourage our domestic honey bee industry.

Mr HART: What is varroa mite?

Dr McKee: Varroa mite is a little mite that gets on the back of bees and interrupts their breeding cycles or kills young bees. It brings on a lot of other complicated disease and it is usually terminal for the hive within three to four years.

Mr MADDEN: As I said to the previous witnesses, there are a million questions I could ask you so I have to narrow it down to the ones that are most important. You are a seller of honey. Is the importation of honey increasing because we do not have enough domestic honey? Does that importation bring risks with it? You just talked about varroa mite.

Dr McKee: I will answer the second one first because that is pretty easy. Varroa mite needs a hive of bees for it to survive. That is why the ports are an issue. We are at risk here in Queensland because of our closeness to overseas. Up north there is varroa mite, for instance in Papua New Guinea, which is not very far away.

In response to the question on the importation of honey, we are producing less honey here in Australia than we have in the past. It is really clear that beekeepers are having to work harder to produce honey here in Australia. It is because of a change in the environment more than anything. I am not going to play a climate change thing—there is a differing change. We are seeing increased droughts and those types of things which are occurring on increased cycles, which really has an effect. We recently had to import honey—obviously not for our Capilano brand but in order to sustain honey on supermarket shelves through the recent drought. In fact, there were plenty of supermarkets that had no honey. We would have all seen pictures of that. It is really important that we keep fostering our own beekeeping industry. Honey prices in Australia in the past have been some of the highest in the world. Our product is quality product. It is doing well in export markets and it has a great future.

Mr MADDEN: I presume you are looking over the horizon to where we are going to be with the production of honey in the future. Outside here we maintain two native bee hives. They are very prominent. If you want to have a look at them, they are under the trees out the front.

Dr McKee: I like the European one.

Mr MADDEN: This may be outside of your area of expertise because you deal with the sale of European bee honey, but is the industry looking towards selling native bee honey in the future?

Dr McKee: The reality is that native bees do not produce commercial qualities of honey like a European honey bee does. I think it stems from the fact that the European honey bee is used to long, cold winters where they have to store honey. When there is honey available, they store it. It is in their nature to store a lot more. Some of the native bees produce only one or two kilograms a year.

Mr MADDEN: You mentioned that Victoria and other states are more accepting of beehives in national parks. Beyond this bill, is that the thing that would most support our bee industry: they could have a friendly relationship with governments where there are suitable sites in existing national parks—not future national parks? When we are talking about fewer beekeepers and less honey being produced, could that assist them?

Dr McKee: Yes. In my experience we do have a friendly relationship with government. We work closely together on a whole range of issues. This is the primary one that is working against us but, yes, that is exactly how we see the industry going forward. We all know the importance of bees. It is a famous thing around the world at the moment; there is a lot of literature on it. What is happening here in Queensland seems out of whack with what is happening elsewhere.

Mr MADDEN: Those are my questions and again, I very much appreciate you coming in today.

Mr McDONALD: Thanks, Dr Ben, for being here and giving us your evidence. I was very interested to hear you say that the relationship in Victoria is different. Can you expand on that to see what learnings we could have from your interstate experiences?

Dr McKee: In Victoria the government engaged with industry pretty closely to come up with the idea of what would work best for our Victorian beekeepers. This essentially was unparalleled access, within the restraints of keeping bee sites three or six kilometres apart and so on. Together, industry and government came up with a policy that both were very happy with. Then that policy was put in place. It is very descriptive. It is easy to interpret out there in the parks where the rangers are and so on. It has worked very well for that industry. It is a very content honey bee industry in Victoria.

Mr McDONALD: How long has that been in place for? Have you had that experience in other states?

Dr McKee: South Australia is different because there are not a lot of state parks. A lot of it is done on agricultural land in South Australia. In Victoria it might have been in place for 10 years. It may not be that long but it is five to 10 years. It is not something that just happened.

Mr McDONALD: Does it have an end date?

Dr McKee: No.

Mr McDONALD: It is in perpetuity?

Dr McKee: Yes.

Mr McDONALD: Is there a similar permit system down there?

Dr McKee: Yes. What we are talking about here in Queensland is capping the number of sites, whereas down there if you have an opportunity to put a site in an appropriate area then they will support you to do it.

Mr McDONALD: In relation to new and emerging trends—even Capilano has changed its name to reflect what you provide—can you talk to us about that and the need to access state lands?

Dr McKee: For us, northern New South Wales and South-East Queensland are the biggest producers of manuka in Australia. Some of the best high-active manuka honey is produced here in Queensland. A lot of people do not know that. That, as an emerging trend, is just growing and growing. We have been in a trademark dispute with New Zealand over the naming of manuka which is rather ridiculous, because their manuka actually came from here. We are seeing a growing trend for these natural products, health products, and we are trying to ride that trend, absolutely. That is why—I guess you are right—we changed our name to be a bit more representative of the wider area we are working in. Obviously, high-value products are the way to go.

Mr SMITH: I refer to the 2024 deadline that started back in 1999. Why has transitioning out of national parks over the last 25 years been unachievable?

Dr McKee: I think it is purely because of the reliance on the opportunities at certain times that national parks present. It is not as though beekeepers are in national parks all the time. A beekeeper may go into a national park to pursue a certain flowering once every three to four years. I should make a point: national parks have good, strong, healthy trees. They produce a lot when they flower. Eucalypts are prolific yielders. Some of them only flower on rotating cycles of years, and droughts can make an impact. We are not in national parks all the time, but there may be a particular flowering event that provides a really good pollen and nectar opportunity. With beekeeping getting harder, there are not the alternatives that there were. My grandfather was a beekeeper—admittedly this was in Victoria. You used to decide where you were going to put your bees and you would have a pick of two or three different locations, whereas now it seems like beekeeping is: 'I have to put my bees there. It is the only spot I have.'

Mr SMITH: Obviously the bill is proposing an extension of 20 years. From the industry side of things, what has the department done in terms of coming to you and saying, 'This next 20 years will be different. This is how we will be able to exist. This is how it will go from being a plan to an execution of the act'? What conversations has the department had with the industry around achieving this goal?

Dr McKee: In my experience there have been limited interactions, but I am not working at the coalface like the Queensland Beekeepers' Association. I did like the way the department did a scientific, independent review. I thought it illustrated the science in the way that we see the science. In terms of working on a process to find alternative locations, I think the outcome was that there were not a lot of alternative locations, for the reasons that I have spoken about. From my point of view, I have not had a detailed involvement with those discussions, apart from coming to some meetings and so on over time to push that this is not practical for trying to make our industry and our business successful.

Mr SMITH: Was the Victorian model led by their department of environment or by another department?

Dr McKee: It was led by the department of environment.

Mr HART: We have heard that bees escape from beehives and become feral. Is it likely that they go the other way as well—from feral bees into honey hives?

Dr McKee: Yes. There are plenty of young beekeepers in urban areas—I know of one here in Brisbane—who go and collect swarms and then have built up a commercial bee enterprise on the back of that. Yes, it does go the other way.

Mr KATTER: Do you have much consideration for agricultural production? I realise that it is nothing to do with your core business but you are linked at the core in terms of the interests of apiarist activities. How does that work?

Dr McKee: What is great about the pollination industries realising the importance of bees is that they have engaged with us a lot more. They are funding research to support our industry a lot more. The almond guys are fantastic. From that point of view I think that has been fantastic for the honey bee industry. We have more research and more going on now than ever before. We have a CRC for honey bee products that has come out of the support of a lot of horticultural industries. I find that great. Obviously down in Victoria and southern areas, where almond is flowering it is quite cold so bees are not usually producing honey. We work pretty closely with some of those big almond producers and communicate with them and share information in support of the industry. It is not so great when bees from Queensland go to Victoria: they can usually produce honey up here in August so we try to discourage that.

Mr KATTER: What about disease? There was one that was reported in Mount Isa as a big problem. I keep forgetting the name of it.

Dr McKee: American foulbrood disease?

Mr KATTER: Yes. What impact is that having on the industry?

Dr McKee: Disease is probably the one big problem for our industry. When bees get American foulbrood they are destroyed, so it is a notifiable disease. It is not as infectious as people say so you can get control of it quite well, but it is hard work for beekeepers.

Mr KATTER: Is domestic and non-commercial activity a disrupter in terms of trying to manage that space?

Dr McKee: Do you mean like feral colonies?

Mr KATTER: Yes.

Dr McKee: Feral colonies can harbour the disease. A commercial quantity could go into that hive, grab some of that honey and then get infected. As I said, it is not overly infectious—there is no guarantee you are going to get it—but it is the biggest problem cost-wise and for our beekeepers.

Mr KATTER: Earlier you made a comment about how you used to have a choice of three and now you have one. What is going on is not necessarily diminishing the number of sites that can be used, but certainly you can cross out any room for expansion in the industry in the short to medium term. Long term, it would appear that there is a handbrake on the industry as it is. Would you share that view?

Dr McKee: Yes, which is unfortunate. My understanding is that the industry is happy with the arrangements with the sites that we have. They are always going to want more sites, but it is not the limiting factor.

Mr KATTER: I just make the observation. It is not as though there are people racing to get into agricultural pursuits these days.

Dr McKee: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Dr McKee. The time allocated for this public hearing has now expired. We do not have any questions on notice for you. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our secretariat and to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.01 pm.