



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BONNEY

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NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (3.34 pm): The Liberal National Party will be supporting the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2022, but I will be moving a simple amendment during consideration in detail to remove the arbitrary time limit proposed in the bill which will give more certainty to Queensland beekeepers. The primary objective of the bill is to deliver on the government's commitment to provide a 20-year extension permitting beekeeping in certain national parks to continue until 31 December 2044. The Nature Conservation Act of course exists to implement management principles to protect areas of ecological significance. Most activities occurring in these areas are not related to conservation—and are clearly contrary to that—which is why we need the exemption for beekeepers that is before us today.

At the outset, I thank committee members for their work on this report. They all know who they are, but I give a special shout-out to the members for Lockyer and Ipswich West, who I understand treated themselves to some honey tasting. I think they were the only two members who undertook honey tasting—all varieties! They also undertook some honey tasting in the Scenic Rim.

We also support the committee's recommendation that the Department of Environment and Science develop clear and accessible guidelines for beekeeping on sites in national parks within the next 12 months to ensure potential risks to the natural environment are appropriately managed. I welcome the minister's response with the establishment of that working group.

I will go through a bit of a history of managed honey bees in Queensland, because it gives us a good context for this debate. The European honey bee was successfully introduced to mainland Australia in 1822. It is disputed when they first came to Queensland after that, with some sources claiming it occurred just a couple of years later, alongside settlement in 1824, and others saying it took a decade or so, but by 1851 there is printed evidence that they were well established in our state.

From their first introduction it took roughly another century for them to become widespread, as beekeepers were able to travel across our state more easily. Initially they were introduced for honey and wax. While they were not primarily imported for pollination, they were seen to play a key role in providing complementary pollination services for the broader agricultural sector that we have had since European settlement.

Beekeepers are proud of what they do. As is the case for many in our agriculture sector, theirs is often a multigenerational practice. In the area of the Gold Coast that I represent we have a strong history of beekeeping. It is worth highlighting because it is emblematic of why the industry values so highly the sites we are discussing today. One Gold Coast story that I found was about the Mills family. They got into beekeeping in 1890 when their son, who was 11 at the time, chased a swarm for nearly five kilometres before the bees finally settled. With the help of someone slightly more experienced than a kid just chasing some bees, he hived the swarm and built up further hives. One hundred years later, the Mills family is still operating this family business out of Southport.

In the committee process for this bill we also saw a diary extract from Charlie Stevens, the grandfather of Jacob Stevens, who is the current Queensland Beekeepers' Association president. I acknowledge Jacob's presence in the gallery today alongside the association's secretary, Jo Martin. In 1960 Charlie wrote—

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 11/4/1960.

That was all happening around my electorate of Bonney. Biggera Creek is today in Biggera Waters, 'biggera' being a Yugambah word mean 'red ironbark tree'—they used to line that creek. It goes through to Labrador as well. For someone living in these parts of the Gold Coast, it is strange to imagine that so many beehives were in those areas and that it was such an underdeveloped and remote site—the fringe of civilisation back then. It was not the sort of place you would imagine having an apiary site today.

In the neighbouring area of Southport we also had the birth of a staple of any household pantry, Capilano Honey, with Tim and Bert Smith setting up hives on their property in Radford Street. It is incredible to think that such a huge, nationally known brand started from a residential property in the middle of what is now modern Southport. It was founded in 1953. Capilano is named after the part of Canada where Tim met his wife, Jill. They packed their honey under the house and sold it through an honour box on the front gate. To think that this is where such a massive brand started is extraordinary.

Like many places, the urbanisation of these areas over those 60 years has been exponential and activities like beekeeping have been driven out. This is one of the challenges our beekeepers have faced, particularly in the south-east of our state where they have been pushed to different locations due to urban sprawl and the associated loss of trees and therefore loss of food sources for their bees.

Many beekeepers moved their hives into state forests as they provide the perfect source of food for their bees, which cause minimal disruption to the natural environment and in those areas the bees are protected from harmful chemicals. These sites became essential apiary locations. The complication came around 20 years ago when many of these state forests were converted to national parks. The further protections for conservation brought complexity for the apiary sites that were there.

I outline this history because I think it is important to remember that beekeepers did not set up sites in existing national parks. They were operating sites that were later converted into national parks many years after they first had apiaries in them. To support the transition of state forests to national parks under the South East Queensland Forests Agreement, the Nature Conservation Act was amended at the time to allow beekeeping to continue in these areas until 31 December 2024. This transition period was put in place to minimise the disruption to the beekeeping industry and provide time for the relocation of beekeeping to other sites.

That is how we ended up here today where we have commercial beekeeping occurring in 49 national parks at just over 1,000 locations with, I believe, 649 currently permitted apiary sites. The idea was that in the 20 years from 2004 alternatives would be identified. It is unclear just how much work has been done by the state government to find those potential alternative sites, but, regardless, they have not been found. From what stakeholders in the beekeeping industry have told me, they have gone to great lengths as an industry to find new sites.

As beekeepers travel thousands of kilometres across our state to check on and move their various apiaries, they knock on every door they can to see if a property owner has space for hives. This is not a case of beekeepers sitting back and expecting the government to accommodate them in national parks. They actively look for other sites. They do all they can to find them in alternative locations, but it is becoming more and more difficult to find sites that match these.

Apiary sites have very specific requirements. They need to be within proximity to high-value floral resources. They are often impacted by extreme weather events. They need to be away from harmful pesticides and monocultures. National parks also have a variety of trees that often do not exist on freehold land. The beekeepers I have spoken to say that this allows for happy bees because the trees flower at the right times, providing just the right food they need. While beekeepers work closely with the agriculture and horticulture industries, some farming practices can be hazardous for bees such as when pesticides and monocultures are used.

With the limited number of alternative sites, the ability for beekeepers to continue to use national parks is critical. Beekeeping Australia has said their businesses would not be viable without the use of national parks. In fact, apiaries in national parks are fairly normal in other states. Beekeepers in New South Wales and Victoria, for example, are not limited to historical approvals. They can establish new sites.

Our sites will only become more important in Queensland with the recent outbreak of the varroa mite around Newcastle in New South Wales. This is an important biosecurity aspect that we must consider. Until now we were the last remaining major beekeeping country in the world to not have suffered the devastating impacts of this parasite. New Zealand was the second last country to be free of varroa mite, but this changed in the year 2000 and it is now found across both islands and will never be wiped out. The long-term impact of the outbreak over there is estimated to be almost \$600 million. That includes wiping out the operations of around half of their beekeepers. I have been told so far the Australian outbreak has led to the destruction of over 8,000 hives, which is roughly only half of what will need to be destroyed as part of the 10-kilometre radius from each outbreak being cleansed. New South Wales is our nation's largest beekeeping state and the movement of bees over the border is, for the moment, rightly banned. This must be stringently monitored.

A recent story in the *Weekend Australian* outlined the effect this infiltration will have on just one part of our agriculture sector. The article referenced the Almond Board of Australia which said that their Victorian growers will be around 70,000 hives short of what they will need for optimal pollination. The \$600 million Victorian almond crop will now have only around half of the required number of hives it needs to be adequately pollinated. This biosecurity situation and the stopping of bee movements over state borders, which will continue until when—hopefully not if—the varroa mite can be eradicated from New South Wales, will make our shortage of hives even more challenging. We will need every apiary site we can get to help maximise the efficiency of our agricultural practices.

We also cannot underestimate the value of beekeeping more broadly. Beekeeping supports over \$2 billion in value to the Queensland economy each year. The Australian Food and Grocery Council has said that, on a conservative estimate, two-thirds of Australia's food crops rely on the pollination services of professional apiarists and the bees under their care. As our horticultural industries grow, reliance on pollinating bees is also growing, with many beekeepers turning away requests because they simply do not have enough bees to service the crops they are being asked to help grow.

The committee report showed the dependence on honey bees for pollination. Some 18 varieties of crops are 100 per cent reliant on pollinating bees. For the almond industry in our state, which is one of the crops that is 100 per cent reliant on pollination services, 275,000 hives were required nationally in 2021 alone. Around 30,000 hives travelled to southern New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia for those crucial pollination services.

The committee also heard from the Australian Macadamia Society that macadamias are Queensland's most valuable horticultural export—currently worth \$180 million to our state's economy, with 1,500 jobs supported throughout Queensland. The macadamia industry is undergoing the fastest growth in its history with around 4,000 hectares per year being planted, predominantly in Queensland. Production is expected to double in the next decade, which could add a further \$150 million to the Queensland economy. Pollinating bees will be essential to facilitating this growth. These crops are huge for Queensland and are only two of many more that are reliant on pollination through commercial beekeeping.

We have seen a considerable number of industry bodies come out in support of beekeepers through the committee process for this bill: Beekeeping Australia, Monson's Honey & Pollination, the Crop Pollination Association of Australia, Growcom, the Australian Food and Grocery Council, Melons Australia, Cotton Australia, the National Farmers' Federation, Ausveg, the Australian Macadamia Society, the Almond Board of Australia and the Queensland Beekeepers' Association—we would expect them to be supportive. That is just some of the groups that expressed their support in submissions to the committee.

Commercial beekeeping in Queensland is also migratory. Bee hives are transported to multiple areas to meet the nutritional needs of the bees. Hives will be in an area with significant floral resources—that is, flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen for bees—for a period as short as six weeks before being relocated as part of a two- to five-year cycle.

Within this migration, beekeepers will make their way through national parks, undertaking maintenance to access paths and trails as they go. There is no evidence to show that these beekeepers are environmental vandals in these practices. They care for our national parks and, in fact, it is in their interest to assist with these management activities. They help monitor the condition of our parks. If there was any evidence that honey bees were doing damage to national parks, we would need to balance the needs of this industry and protect our national parks with incredible sensitivity. However, we are without evidence of the negative impact of honey bees despite two decades of the current system alone being in place.

I was not convinced by submissions to the committee from the Gecko Environment Council and the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. They both essentially said they do not want this to happen in national parks, but are happy for it to occur elsewhere. They could not point to any evidence

about the supposed impact of this activity on Queensland's national parks. In fact, one of those submissions only cited one investigation from New South Wales which specifically excluded commercial beekeeping from its consideration.

There is a big difference between feral bees and those managed by professional beekeepers. It is also a bit of a not-my-problem approach. If these groups are genuinely concerned about the impact this will have on our environment, why are they advocating for it to occur anywhere else but in the 8.21 per cent of Queensland classified as a protected area? Surely if this impact is what they believe it to be then they should not want it to happen in any part of Queensland's environment. I note there were no submissions opposing the bill or raising any concerns from other key conservation or environmental organisations such as the National Parks Association of Queensland or the Queensland Conservation Council.

A 2020 University of Sydney study for the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service on the effects of commercial honey bees on native flora and fauna found that the exclusion of commercial beekeeping from national parks would not materially impact the density of feral bees and that the impact of commercial bees over and above the impacts of feral bees is likely to be small in most cases. Under their recommendations, they believe that 'on the balance of probabilities the presence of commercial colonies is unlikely to pose additional stresses on ecosystems beyond those caused by feral bees.' They do emphasise, however, that they base this on an absence of evidence rather than evidence of absence. Until this changes, until evidence is produced showing there is an unmanageable and detrimental impact on our national parks and the precious ecosystems they contain, we should not penalise beekeepers and our wider horticultural industries.

As I foreshadowed, the LNP will be moving an amendment to remove the time limit on the exemption to the Nature Conservation Act. As I have said, beekeeping is often a multigenerational industry. As younger generations are coming through, many questions about the long-term viability of this industry in Queensland are being asked, and many beekeepers are choosing to take other paths. Victoria and New South Wales have no time limit on their provisions for beekeeping in national parks, just as I am proposing with my amendment. This has shown clear support for their industries and it has allowed them to grow, with Queensland beekeepers even looking to expand south of the border as there is increasing certainty and freedom for their businesses.

Despite the benefits of commercial beekeeping to our economy and many other related industries, beekeepers are still feeling there is a stranglehold over their industry with these ongoing 20-year time limits. Many beekeepers will openly tell you that they are telling their kids not to go into the business, to look at other options because they do not know if there will be a future for the industry in Queensland.

We have heard this week about the Queensland Workforce Strategy—*Good people good jobs*. Beekeeping supplies good jobs but the average age of beekeepers is, as I understand it from the association, about 55 to 75 years old. Of course Jacob and Jo are well below that and are some of the youngest in their industry! We need to support the next generation coming through. We cannot lose this industry to southern states because we cannot lose the pollination services that many other sectors rely on as well.

Again, until the evidence changes, there is no reason why Queensland beekeepers should be held back. If clear evidence does become apparent, that having these activities occur in national parks is harmful, then this should be reconsidered, which any future parliament or government could do. Until such time, there is no need for an arbitrary end date such as the one being proposed in the bill. Our amendment is a minor change, but it is important because it sends a strong signal to this industry, showing our parliament's support for them and the wider parts of the agricultural sector that they, in turn, support.

The secondary objectives of the bill are, as the minister outlined, administrative in nature, being: to enhance the Department of Environment and Science's ability to prevent and respond to misconduct in areas managed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service by creating offences for impersonating or obstructing forest officers; to relocate powers of officers to seize and deal with seized things from subordinate legislation into the Nature Conservation Act; to amend the Wet Tropics World Heritage Protection and Management Act 1993 to reflect intergovernmental changes from the Australian government review of the COAG councils and ministerial forums; to remove duplicate consultation processes when amending the Wet Tropics Management Plan as a result of changes to the Wet Tropics Act; and to correct minor errors in the Nature Conservation Act and the Wet Tropics Act.

It is disturbing to hear recent examples where visitors in national parks have come across people pretending to be rangers, acting in a disreputable and threatening way, damaging the reputation of those hardworking rangers. I recently spent some time on K'gari which was incredibly valuable. I stayed for a couple of days and got a real picture of what life is like for the rangers who operate out of there.

They work tirelessly on an incredibly diverse range of tasks from using heavy machinery and managing the wildlife to the maintenance of camp sites and barbecues. I hope to visit more national parks in a similar way in the near future to get an idea of how things are at ground level. Penalising people who impersonate and denigrate the work these rangers do is something that we strongly support.

The other objectives of the bill are administrative and do not change existing policy. To wrap up, I believe Queensland has the greatest environmental assets of our nation and we will always support its conservation. We want genuine measures that will make a real difference to ensure our environment is protected for generations to come. That will come through an evidence based approach. It is about getting the balance right. Here, with an absence of evidence of damage, we can enable the beekeeping industry to continue to do what they are doing without harming our national parks.