

Backyard beekeeping boom prompts varroa mite warning from honey industry

ABC Rural / By Elly Bradfield, Georgie Hewson, and Jennifer Nichols

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Bees swarming on an exposed rack from a beehive. (Supplied: Natural Beekeeping Tasmania)

Backyard beekeeping is booming, but with the world's worst bee parasite on our doorstep, could well-meaning enthusiasts bring down Queensland's honey industry?

Varroa mite, a parasite that spreads viruses crippling bees' ability to fly, gather food, or emerge from their cell to be born, was [detected in New South Wales in June](#), and since then thousands of [hives have been destroyed as authorities race to try to eradicate it](#).

It has caused enormous challenges for the

Key points:

- The commercial honey industry is worried about varroa mite spreading through backyard beehives
- Recreational beekeepers are urged to register their hives with Biosecurity Queensland

commercial beekeeping industry, which is critical for the [pollination of crops across Australia](#), as apiarists faced movement restrictions and the loss of income and hives in the response.

- A Toowoomba lavender farm has started a bee sponsorship program where hives are kept on farm, reducing the threat

But while the number of commercial beekeepers in Queensland has been static, hobby beekeeper numbers have surged.

With that comes varying levels of skill, understanding and compliance with regulations designed to protect the broader industry from pests and diseases.



A varroa mite feeds on a honey bee. (Supplied: Alex Wild, University of Texas at Austin)

Are you registered?

Queensland Beekeepers' Association state secretary Jo Martin hoped the popularity of backyard beekeeping did not backfire on the industry.

"The rate and increase in recreational beekeepers across urban areas and regional areas has been something that we never anticipated," Ms Martin said.



Queensland's Agriculture Minister Mark Furner with Queensland Beekeepers' Association secretary Jo Martin. *(Supplied: Queensland Beekeepers' Association)*

Of more than 9,000 beekeepers registered in Queensland, only 300 are commercial.

Ms Martin said it was critical that urban and recreational beekeepers registered with Biosecurity Queensland so that in the event of an outbreak, they could be contacted, advised and involved in the response.

"The varroa mite carries a lot of the really devastating diseases that can cause catastrophic deaths in honey bee colonies and collectively those diseases will be very difficult to manage," Ms Martin said.

"Maybe we all [need to] make a bit of a pledge at the moment to make ourselves all accountable.

"We need all beekeepers to be registered and conducting their surveillance checks, doing the alcohol washes and reporting their findings so that we're as prepared as possible to handle any mite incursions here in Queensland."



All hives need to be registered and regularly checked for biosecurity purposes. (ABC Hobart: Joel Rheinberger)

Check your hives

The Queensland government is directing beekeepers to check their hives and familiarise themselves with how to identify varroa mite.

It has developed the new Bee 123 form, which can be downloaded through the Survey 123 app and used to report findings.

"We're also calling on everyone if they're buying a bucket of honey from their neighbour next door, or maybe it's at the local farmers market, do your part for protecting the welfare of honey bees in the state and ask that person if they're a registered beekeeper," Ms Martin said.

"Protecting biosecurity across the livestock and our horticultural industries is absolutely paramount to our freedoms as Australians to access beautiful, healthy produce and also that world class honey that we so proudly produced within Queensland."

Sponsorship an alternative



Lavender farmer Alicia Volhand is offering a bee sponsorship program. (*ABC Southern Qld: Georgie Hewson*)

On her lavender and bee farm west of Toowoomba, Alicia Volhand has created a bee sponsorship program where locals and businesses can pay for their own beehive, which is taken care of and kept on her property.

Ms Volhand said it cut out risks associated with backyard beekeeping.

"I have found that a lot of people who want to keep bees go out and buy the bees and buy the [hive], but then don't actually know how to look after them," she said.



Alicia Volhand says sponsors can choose the colour of their hive and have their names stencilled on. (*ABC Southern Qld: Georgie Hewson*)

"I've run beekeeping workshops just to teach people how to look after them if they want to keep them but also if they're not in a position to do so, then having someone who knows a bit about how to look after them is an easy way for them to support the environment.

"The sponsor pays to set up the hive — so hardware, boxes, frames — and buy the bees and in return they get to choose the colour of the hive and have their name stencilled on it."

Of 15 hives on her farm, nine are sponsored.



Dead small hive beetles and honey larvae in a bee hive. (ABC Rural: Kim Honan)

Small hive beetle threat

Small hive beetle is another pest that amateur beekeepers need to be aware of.

The Queensland Beekeepers' Association warns it has become a major problem in sodden wet conditions this year.

"As a result of the recent wet weather sequences that we've experienced in Queensland, a lot of apiarists have reported losses of 10 per cent and 15 per cent of hives to small hive beetle," Ms Martin said.

"We're actually expecting this small hive beetle to be in plague-like conditions in some regions in Queensland.

"We definitely recommend that beekeepers connect themselves up to the BeeAware website because that's a really great learning and education tool on how to actually manage a lot of pests within your apiaries."

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