

ASION

It's a pest that could severely harm horticulture across the board, but when it comes to stamping it out, few seem willing to pay up. **ASHLEY WALMSLEY** reports.



LEFT: Pollination Program chairman Gerald Martin says the problems "these little buggers will provide for the general public" are underestimated. Story, below left.

in Australia, many within the industry are surmising it is more a matter of when, not if.

Despite a *Good Fruit and Vegetables* request, DAFF would not provide the list of peak representative organisations contacted by the Asian Honeybee National Management Group.

Activities to eradicate Asian honeybees in the Cairns region are funded by the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council on behalf of their members.

According to an Ausveg spokesman, the peak vegetable body was "still considering" the request to contribute resources in consultation with its member organisations.

A Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL) spokesman reported that as HAL wasn't a "peak body", it was not approached.

"If our members were to raise the

Currently we do have an emergency pest plant response levy set at zero.

Asian honeybee issue, we would address it through the appropriate channels," the spokesman said.

A detailed response from Cherry Growers of Australia (CGA) chief executive officer Trevor Ranford stated it was a complex issue with no simple answer.

While he said CGA had not been asked for funds, the cherry industry was actively involved with bee issues and biosecurity.

"Given that the outbreak of Asian honeybee is in Queensland

and very few cherries are grown in Queensland, the industry would have to weigh up what funds, if any, it might put to an eradication program," Mr Ranford said.

"Currently we do have an emergency pest plant response levy set at zero. Again, bringing that into effect is something that the industry would have to make a decision on, if asked.

"Again, implementing that would have to be based on risk."

A spokesman for the Australian Blueberry Growers' Association said he did not recall any request for support of the Asian honeybee project; however, there was a request for involvement in a Honeybee Industry and Pollination Continuity Strategy regarding the possible introduction of the varroa mite. A response from the Australian Macadamia Society indicated it had not been approached by any government department nor AHBC for a contribution of resources for

the eradication of Asian honeybee; however, the society's funding commitments were targeted elsewhere anyway.

At the time of printing, GFV had received no response from the Australian Almond Board, the Australian Mango Industry Association, Citrus Australia, Summerfruit Australia, Apple and Pear Australia Ltd, the Australian Melon Association, nor Nursery and Garden Industry Australia, asking why they had declined to contribute to Asian honeybee eradication.

Stephen Ware, executive director, Australian Honeybee Industry Council, said the council was extremely disappointed with the response from the horticulture sector.

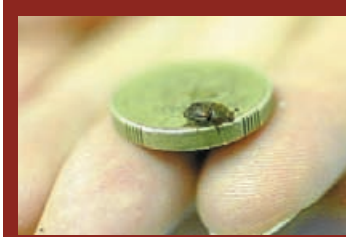
"The reasons why we are extremely disappointed are that some of the other industries and even governments are underestimating both the environmental and the potential economic cost should the Asian honeybee get away," Mr Ware said.

"If you take into account that that thing has only been there for a limited time, for a period of a couple of years, if you've got that many swarms from one queen, if left to its own devices, you can imagine how quickly that's going to spread around the country."

Released in April this year, the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation's report, entitled *Estimating the Potential Public Costs of the Asian Honeybee Incursion*, estimated the cost of a response plan to prevent the Asian honeybee from becoming endemic in Australia at more than \$11 million.

This represents approximately 14% of the gross value of production for the honeybee industry.

The same report stated management of the Asian honeybee incursion in Cairns by Biosecurity Qld had involved an investment of more than \$1 million, from initial detection in May 2007 up to the end of 2009.



Fears grow in north

By **ASHLEY WALMSLEY**

NORTH Queensland farmers could see a decline in fruit set as a range of issues bears down on the honeybee industry. Some have reported a decline in the number of bees within their crops and orchards, while beekeepers themselves have acknowledged significant challenges in the years ahead.

The spread of the small hive beetle, along with the Asian honeybee incursions in the Cairns and Tableland areas, plus the potential for an explosion of varroa mite are some of the major concerns the industry is facing.

Earlier this year, a report entitled *Pollination Aware* outlined the value of pollination services for 35 commodity groups, including fruits, vegetables and pastures, through a joint project by Horticulture Australia Limited and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

It reported that one-in-three mouthfuls of food that Australians eat comes directly or indirectly from pollination.

The report brought home the close connection the horticulture sector and the bee industry has, and the fact that a crisis in the latter could create the same in the former.

Commercial apiarist and breeder Graeme Armstrong, G and A Apiaries, Giru, said the small hive beetle presented an immediate concern with its spread in the area in the past 18 months.

"It's only been weak but now it's getting quite strong. In fact, you would expect the majority of all feral colonies to die out within the next one or two years," he said.

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