

17 May 2024

## **Backgrounder: AFB outbreak issue reported in the media**

Members may be aware of recent media coverage about the burning of hives in the South Island following a serious outbreak of AFB.

Following an inspection by AP2s, the AFB Pest Management Agency recently directed the beekeeper to destroy AFB contaminated gear. This decision was not made lightly by the Agency and followed the discovery of a serious AFB outbreak relating to this beekeeper last year. The Agency worked through all steps, processes and requirements outlined in the AFBPMP as part of the support that was provided to the beekeeper in managing this AFB outbreak.

Here are some key messages and questions and answers to help manage any concerns you may be receiving from customers and the public on this issue.

### **Key messages**

- AFB elimination is the collective obligation of all 8,800 beekeepers around the country and is managed through a sector-led national AFB Pest Management Plan funded by beekeepers.
- It is an individual beekeeper's responsibility under the AFB PMP to find and report AFB, and then destroy all gear associated with AFB-infected hives in a timely manner (7 days).
- This is done to minimise the risk of self-contamination and the onward spread of AFB within a beekeeper's operation, but also to stop AFB from spreading across apiaries regionally and potentially infecting other beekeepers' colonies.
- In New Zealand the only effective and approved method of control is burning all infected hives and equipment.
- The use of antibiotics to treat AFB is not permitted in New Zealand beehives. One of the key risks of antibiotic use is honey contamination and potential market access issues in key export markets. There are no vaccines or alternative treatments available at this time.
- The management liability sits solely with the beekeeper. The beekeeper will not be directed to burn any equipment if they are following good practice - managing, reporting, and destroying AFB infected hives and contaminated hiveware, including honey supers on their own accord as part of their day-to-day apiary operations.
- The AFB Agency acknowledges the traumatic experience affected beekeepers face when they are required to destroy AFB-infected beehives and associated gear and is committed to working with beekeepers through education, training, and national and regional surveillance.

### **FAQ**

#### ***What is American Foulbrood (AFB)?***

AFB is a very serious and infectious honeybee disease that is present in almost all countries where honeybees are found. It has been in New Zealand since 1877 and has been subject to legislative control since 1906.

***How does AFB affect bees?***

AFB does not affect adult bees but affects honeybee colonies when adult nurse bees inadvertently feed spores to honeybee larva. It takes as little as 10 spores to infect a single larva. If the infection is not diagnosed, the hive slowly dies, leaving a massive risk to other bees and hives in the apiary, and those on other apiary sites in proximity.

***How is AFB spread?***

One of the primary ways of spreading AFB is through poor or inexperienced beekeeping practices, for example the inadvertent movement of contaminated hive ware and hive equipment. In addition, hives weakened by the disease cannot be protected by the hives resident bees and can be subject to robbing by bees from other colonies. In such cases, those robber bees take the pollen and honey stores from the contaminated hive back to their hives, leading to the cycle beginning again. One infected hive can contaminate multiple hives and apiaries very quickly.

***How is AFB managed in New Zealand?***

The AFB PMP is a sector-led national Pest Management Plan. The AFB PMP dictates the responsibility of each beekeeper to eliminate AFB from their beehives, through a set of legal obligations each year. The PMP is funded through beekeeper levies under the Biosecurity (American Foulbrood – Beekeeper Levy) Order 2003. The funds are used solely for AFB elimination purposes which is managed by the AFB Pest Management Agency (Agency).

The Agency is accountable for keeping the beekeeping sector safe from this contagious disease and is committed to working with affected beekeepers through ongoing education, training, national and regional surveillance.

***How is AFB destroyed in New Zealand?***

In New Zealand the only effective method of control is by burning all infected hives and equipment. No beekeeper is directed to burn any equipment if they are managing, reporting, and destroying AFB as part of their apiary management and field operations.

***Are there other ways of managing AFB rather than having to burn hives?***

The use of antibiotics is not permitted in New Zealand due to honey contamination and market access issues in key export markets. There are also concerns about the effect of antibiotics on bee health, and masks what is going on in the hive. Other countries that use antibiotics are seeing resistance to this form of treatment. New Zealand has a reputation for producing high quality, premium honey and we want to maintain that reputation by avoiding the use of artificial means of preventing disease.

There are promising international developments around potential vaccines for AFB, but these are still at development stage and have not been approved. The Agency is keeping a watch on these developments.

While some countries have the ability to sterilise their hive ware through large irradiation units, New Zealand does not currently have this capability which is extremely expensive to build.

***Is compensation available to beekeepers when hives are destroyed?***

As part of the AFB Pest Management Plan, which is funded through beekeeper levies, no compensation is available to beekeepers.