



SABIO

South African Bee Industry Organisation

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AFB Feedback 30 June 2009

1. ROLE OF JOC

The Joint Operations Centre (JOC), comprising one representative each from DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries), ARC and SABIO, was established on 09 May 2009 to oversee the operational aspects of the AFB inspection process and to advise the Strategic Steering Committee on steps to be taken as results became available. It would also act as a communication centre to and from beekeepers, to give feedback about the agreed processes and conclusive findings when available.

2. STRATEGY

The dual intention of the AFB inspection process was to have a comprehensive survey completed as soon as possible, to establish how widespread AFB is amongst honeybee colonies throughout South Africa, as well as to minimize the risk of spreading the infection from the western-most part of the Western Cape where clinical symptoms of the disease had been confirmed by the end of February 2009 to the rest of the country. This was to be achieved by new regulations compelling a temporary standstill of beekeeping activities in the Capensis area, and controlling the movement of beehive components and products from this area, as well as compulsory destruction of clinically infected hives, as these posed an unacceptable risk of accelerating the levels of infection. The process would end with a *Quo Vadis* meeting between all parties involved to assess the situation and recommend a way forward, at the end of July or early in August 2009, before the main pollination season in the Western Cape starts.

3. PROCESS

The process started after a strategizing meeting on 14 May 2009 in Pretoria. The week or two following the meeting was taken up by planning the process, the writing of new control measures (regulations), developing increased analytical facilities, sourcing inspectors, getting their supplies and protocols ready, and training them for the task. On Friday 22 May 2009 the first inspectors went out from Stellenbosch --- 11 teams comprising 2 persons each. The following two weeks saw them going out to the whole of the Western Cape and western part of the Eastern Cape. Simultaneously, samples were also taken from honey packers' operations and hives nearby these facilities in the Scutellata Area to the north. All samples are sent to the ARC Lab in Pretoria within a week of being collected. Most of the first hives with clinical symptoms were also sterilized by irradiation by the beekeeper, and this procedure is currently under investigation to determine the specifications for it to be effective.

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4. INSPECTIONS

Even without a compulsory standstill we can report very good co-operation from beekeepers in general, though two beekeepers seem not to find the time to allow for an inspection. The procedure followed was to telephonically make appointments with as many beekeepers from as wide an area as possible. With the visit he/she is then interviewed for a general background on the beekeeping operation after which they then go to take a composite honey sample from up to 6 hives randomly selected from 5-10 apiary sites which are regarded as high risk. Colonies are also carefully inspected for signs of clinical infection. When clinical symptoms are found, a brood sample of such hive is also taken. To date more than 135 beekeepers and more than 450 sites (representing more than 35000 managed colonies) have been visited and more than 450 samples taken.

5. RESULTS

Apart from the original 5 beekeepers with colonies with clinical symptoms of AFB, additional beekeepers with clinical symptoms have been found in Maitland, Stellenbosch, Paarl and Bonnievale. All of these are still to be confirmed by lab analysis. The lab analysis is presently an unfortunate and frustrating bottle neck in the process, with only approximately 45 results from the more than 450 samples collected thus far available. The necessary interventions have taken place, however, with the lab capacity now significantly enhanced, and there is every confidence that all collected samples will be completed before 15 July 2009. Nonetheless, the limited number of results received thus far are highly instructive as regards the nature of the AFB infection, as more than 80% of the results are positive for AFB spores. As in normal practice in any such investigation, the process is being verified by analyzing some samples at a second laboratory, and it is this validation process that is delaying the release of the results to the beekeepers concerned. It is crucial that there is 100% confidence in the process and results before they are released, although this is obviously frustrating to the beekeeping community and the process in general. These first relatively few AFB spore positive samples seem to indicate a spread over the whole of the Western Cape, but this must still be confirmed.

6. REGULATIONS

New regulations have not yet been promulgated --- mostly because of the good co-operation from beekeepers, the relatively quick availability of results and the issue of compensation not being as straightforward as envisaged. And as we are approaching a major decision-making milestone in the near future, we thought it better to rather wait a while longer to allow us to make more informed long term decisions. Noteworthy in this regard is that the ongoing high level of liaison between SABIO and DAFF in this regard promises to result in the SA Bee Industry being better understood, recognised and supported in the near future.

7. RECOMMENDATION

At the moment and until we have a clearer picture regarding AFB in SA, which will hopefully be very soon, we advise and request beekeepers to keep reporting any AFB symptoms (see contact numbers below), and that those beekeepers that have yet to be inspected make their colonies available for inspection. We further request of all beekeepers with clinically infected colonies that these beekeepers co-operate with JOC and DAFF to eliminate these colonies as soon as possible, as they remain a potential cause of accelerated infection.

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