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Organic certified production with bees

Nicholas Annand

District Livestock Officer (Apiculture), Intensive Industries Development, Bathurst

Beekeeping is an agricultural industry that relies very little on the use of synthetic (man-made) chemicals. It is an industry that causes minimal environmental damage and is sustainable, producing products that require little or no modification during the stages of production. So you may think that it would be an easy transition for a beekeeping enterprise to become certified organic. This is far from reality, with certification as an organic beekeeper being more difficult to obtain than for many other agricultural industries. There are many requirements the enterprise needs to meet to gain certification. The issue of the mobility of bees being able to forage over large areas is just one aspect that adds complexity to the ability of a beekeeper to become certified organic.

Organic production

'Organic' is a term used to indicate that a product is produced in a way that cares for the environment:

- All inputs are of natural origin.
- The product is free from man-made chemical contaminants.
- The product has not been chemically altered.

Certified organic production

Organic certification is an audit and inspection process which allows enterprises to be verified 'organic' by a credible independent organisation. A producer may claim that their products are organic, but without a recognised audit and inspection process the consumer would have great difficulties in verifying such a claim. As a result, independent certifying organisations have evolved to provide this service. The Organic

Industry Export Consultative Committee (OIECC), which is made up of relevant industry stakeholders and government agencies, has the responsibility of developing and maintaining the National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce. This national standard is used as a basis for the certifying organisations to develop their standards for each agricultural commodity.

Organic certifying organisations

There are currently seven organisations accredited to provide organic certification within Australia. These organisations are regulated by the Organic and Biodynamic Program of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS). To operate as an organic certifier, the independent organisations must be accredited by AQIS.

For up-to-date details on organic certifying organisations, see the AQIS website at www.daff.gov.au/aqis/about/contact/aco. You can then access the organic standards for each of the organisations via its website, or you can contact the organisations direct.

Not all of these organisations provide certification for honey bee production.

Organic standards

'Organic standards' are sets of definitions, requirements, recommendations and restrictions regarding the practices and materials that can be used within certified organic production and processing systems. These documented standards define the requirements that a producer/processor must meet before the certifying organisation will certify the enterprise 'organic'. The organic standards from each organisation are available for public scrutiny.

The standards may vary slightly between the organisations, with the National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce providing the basis for the organic standards of all the organic

certifying organisations in Australia. This national standard can be found at: www.aqis.gov.au/organic (follow the link 'National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce—Edition 3.4 July 2009').

If you are targeting overseas markets, then the certifying body of your enterprise needs to be accredited by the governing agency of the importing country. Unfortunately other countries have differing standards, so for an enterprise to maintain its organic status, it will also need to be managed and audited to the standards of the importing country. This may result in stricter requirements for the enterprise.

Biodynamic beekeeping

The author is unaware of any certified biodynamic honey bee producers in Australia. Biodynamic honey bee production standards are based on the organic standards, with the additional requirement that hives are located on a certified biodynamic farm, or in native bush with close access to a certified property. Finding suitable sites that would meet these standards would be difficult, and the author suggests that this could only be done with very small hive numbers. As a result the costs of producing any quantity of honey under such a system would be restrictive.

Organic beekeeping

The two main reasons beekeepers consider certified organic production are for the financial gain or for ideological reasons, often in combination. When considering becoming an organic beekeeper you should first read the section 'Bee products' in the *National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce*, to see if your production system would meet or could be changed to meet the requirements.

If you think your enterprise could comply with the standards, an assessment of each certifying organisation should be carried out to find which one best suits your enterprise and markets. Issues to consider when deciding on the certifying organisation include their standards, probation period, auditing process, fees and charges, location of the organisation, potential market access that the certifying organisation enables, and the name/logo you want associated with your product. You may need to meet additional standards in order to gain access to certain overseas markets.

The processing and packing operation of products also needs to be certified. So if you are selling bulk certified organic honey, you can only market that honey as such if the packing plant is also certified organic. This limits the number of packers where you can sell your honey. If packing your own honey is part of the enterprise,

then this component of the business also needs to be certified. This applies to the processing and packing of other organic honey bee products.

Some areas of the standards that may pose the greatest difficulty in becoming certified organic include the following:

- Apiary sites must be situated more than 5 km from any:
 - flower-bearing crop treated with 'non-organic' pesticides or genetically modified/engineered organisms or their products;
 - urban or industrial activities;
 - waste sites.
- Detailed records must be kept for each apiary site, including hive numbers, location (including maps), the condition and management of colonies.
- There are restrictions on materials used in hive construction, and on the preservatives and coating used on these materials.
- Extraction and storage surfaces must be made of food-grade materials.
- Pest and disease control options and hive disinfection are restricted to a limited list of products, which does not include irradiation.
- The use of antibiotics for European Foul Brood disease (EFB) control is limited to only where hive survival is threatened. Hives must be removed from the foraging area prior to treatment. Post treatment any production from the hive shall not be certified organic for one year and all foundation wax must be replaced.
- Feeding of hives is only allowed under extreme climatic or other extenuating circumstances, and then only organic honey tested free of American Foul Brood disease or organic sugar can be used.
- Bee colonies must be provided with a continuous supply of clean water and sufficient forage throughout the season. The food source must fulfil the nutritional needs and good health of the colony. (This will require obtaining an adequate number of sites that will maintain the health of all your hives for all types of seasonal conditions.)

You should read the full national standard in order to assess your ability to become certified organic.

The pros and cons of becoming certified organic

Pros:

- increased price for product;
- increased marketability;
- satisfaction of producing a clean product with minimal environmental damage;

- product assurance for purchaser;
- complete traceback system for product, from the consumer to the hive;
- increased management awareness of the enterprise.

Cons:

- availability of suitable apiary sites for a range of seasonal conditions;
- limitation on disease management practices;
- limitation on feeding management practices;
- cost and time involved in converting an enterprise to certified organic production;
- costs associated with certification, such as joining, certification, auditing, sampling, annual membership, levies etc. (certifying organisations have varying fee structures);
- increased record keeping (if the enterprise is already Beesafe or Beequal accredited, the increase will be small);
- one year probation period prior to becoming certified;
- many importing countries pay little or no premium for organic honey;
- importing countries having differing organic requirements;
- the majority of sites suitable for organic honey produce dark strong flavoured honeys which usually have a lower market demand.

So before you rush to become a certified organic honey bee producer, your business needs to be fully assessed. First, you need to see if your enterprise has the capability to become certified organic:

- How much it will cost?
- Have you got a market for your product that will justify the expense of becoming certified?
- Will it be financially beneficial?
- Does this suit your lifestyle and your philosophy?

Becoming certified is not easy and does not instantly bring good money; however, the change *can* be made and *is* being made viably by apiarists throughout Australia.

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