

Top bar hives: what's the problem?

By Frans Laas, Chairman, AFB NPMS

Over the past few years there has been a resurgence in the number of beekeepers.

However, this increase has been almost entirely in the hobby sector, where the largest category of hive owners (there are 2100 beekeepers who own five or fewer hives) contributes to only about one percent of the total hive pool in New Zealand.

Some sectors of the hobby community have moved towards using moveable comb technology instead of the more common moveable frame systems. This has raised a considerable number of eyebrows and a flurry of communications from concerned beekeepers through the country.

As a consequence the NBA asked the AFB NPMS Management Agency (MA) to clarify the legal status of hives such as top bar and Warré. The MA sought a legal opinion on the interpretation of the definition of a moveable frame as listed in the Strategy rules.

The legal opinion did affirm the definition of a moveable frame. Quite clearly the word "in" is the critical factor. Top bar hives have their combs hanging "on". The opinion also stated that there would have to be a good reason for a judge to accept an argument from the MA that a prosecution under Section 154q of the Biosecurity Act could be justified.

Why, then, was this rule instigated in the first place?

At present the hobby beekeepers in this country live in a very benign AFB environment. Many new entrants to the community are probably completely unaware as to the reason, and most will never see the disease in their hives. We need to look back into the past to understand why the current situation exists.

History of AFB in NZ

Around 120 years ago AFB first became apparent in this country and very quickly

spread throughout the land. By the early part of the 20th century AFB was becoming a problem that seemed intractable. Then along came a gentleman by the name of Isaac Hopkins, our first Apiary Officer appointed by the government of the day, and an Apiaries Act was created around that time as well.

Looking at what was written at the time by Hopkins and his contemporaries, it was clear that they would have a difficult road ahead of them. In many areas hives either displayed clinical symptoms of AFB or were soon to do so. In some localised areas every hive was destroyed by burning because infection was so severe. In many instances beekeepers shook-swarmed, cut out infected brood and applied chemicals such as "isol" and other pretty nasty substances, all to no avail. In one paper I looked at, Hopkins declared he had a clinical infection rate of only 5% and he thought he was the cat's pyjamas. In today's world the MA would be coming to visit him, revoke or significantly amend his DECA and may have also ensured that his hives were inspected by an independent person. How the world has changed.

"... the MA is currently seeking a way forward to resolve the issue..."

It was also becoming apparent to Hopkins that the root cause of the seemingly intractable problem of AFB was the use of hives that did not have moveable frames in them. At the time anything went as far as hive construction was concerned. There were log hives, box hives, skeps, kerosene tins and top bar hives and other rather interesting contraptions, all of which were an impediment to the rapid diagnosis of diseases in hives. By today's standards it was a complete mess.

Time progressed and things really did not improve a lot. After World War II the situation was getting bad and extensive shook-swarmed was required to maintain some semblance of control. The Apiaries Act of 1948 came into being and it allowed for the

first time a strong mechanism to deal with AFB. Among the major tenets to this Act were the compulsory destruction by burning of hives displaying clinical symptoms and later the banning of the use of antibiotics (the best thing we ever did), as well as reinforcing the requirement to use moveable comb frames in the hives to allow for the rapid and unimpeded examination of hives.

The implementation of this Act quickly brought down the rate of clinical infection to comparatively low levels throughout the country. In 1993 the Biosecurity Act was enacted, and by 1998 the AFB NPMS was signed into existence and the beekeeping industry was responsible for funding and enforcing the Strategy on its own. The rate of reported infection continues to decline.

We want to hear from you!

The current success of the Strategy is based on a few very sound principles, one being the use of moveable frames. A deviation from that principle could be seen as a retrograde step.

At the last MA meeting the legal opinion was discussed at length. Quite clearly the two sides of the discussion are quite emotional and somewhat forceful in their views about this point. However, the MA is currently seeking a way forward to resolve the issue without causing too much grief. The MA needs to do a bit more investigation on the subject. As stated earlier, we need to find ways to allow the use of alternative technologies that clearly do not violate the principles of the Strategy and undermine its effectiveness.

In the April issue the MA asked for top bar beekeeping groups to come forward so we can discuss the problem face to face and create solutions. This response has been somewhat disappointing, so we reiterate that we need some constructive engagement from the proponents of top bar hives.

Email AFB NPMS Manager Rex Baynes on rbaynes@ihug.co.nz if you wish to provide feedback.

