

Switching from eradication to management of *Varroa destructor*

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Since *Varroa destructor* was detected in NSW in June 2022, 15 pollination dependent industries, the honey bee industry and the Commonwealth and state and territory governments have worked together to attempt to eradicate this pest from Australia.

During the course of the response, industry successfully engaged with Commonwealth and state governments to highlight the significance of *Varroa* to the wider community, not just the affected horticultural industries. This resulted in the cost-sharing of the response shifting from a 50:50 split to 80% government funding and 20% funding from the affected industry parties.

Unfortunately, the response teams were unable to keep ahead of the spread of *Varroa*. As a consequence, on 19 September this year the National Management Group, comprising all affected industry and government parties, reluctantly came to the unanimous decision that it was no longer technically feasible to eradicate *Varroa*.

The response is now shifting from an eradication program to a transition to management approach. At the time of writing, the details of the transition to management program are still being negotiated with industry and government input. The aim of the transition to management program will be to increase resilience and capacity within the Australian honeybee industry to manage *Varroa* mite, minimising its ongoing impacts on the industry and pollination-dependent horticulture sectors. This will involve slowing the spread of the pest while building industry resilience, providing management options, and ensuring pollination security.

Several changes occurred immediately as a consequence of the decision to transition to management, including changes to the emergency zoning. The previous Surveillance Emergency (Purple) Zones and smaller regional outlier Eradication Emergency (Red) Zones (including Coffs Harbour and Nana Glen) have merged with the previous General Emergency (Blue) Zone to form the **Suppression Zone**. This makes up the majority of NSW. Movement is permitted within and out of the Suppression Zone once a Hive Movement Declaration form has been completed.

The former Eradication Emergency (Red) Zones in Kempsey, Hunter, and Central Coast regions where *Varroa* is present in higher numbers have become **Management Zones**.

- Movement of bees, hives and permitted bee feeders out of the Management Zone to the Suppression Zone is not permitted
- Movement between Management Zones is allowed under secure conditions
- Movement of apiary equipment out of the Management Zone is permitted once cleaned and free of any bee material and live bees
- Hive movement declarations must be submitted for all hive movements



Varroa mite emergency zone map.

Photo credit: NSW DPI www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/emergencies/biosecurity/current-situation/varroa-mite-emergency-response

All beekeepers in NSW are required to complete hive testing every 16 weeks (alcohol washing, soapy water wash, sugar shake or miticide strip and sticky mat) and report results to DPI within 7 days. Where results indicate a mite infestation DPI will supply miticide strips to be installed in infested hives. Miticide treatments must also be reported to DPI.

At this stage there is no clear indication of the cost of the transition to management program, although it is unlikely to exceed the already agreed response plan budget. Transition to management will almost certainly include restrictions on interstate hive movements, at least within the short term, to slow the spread of Varroa.

In countries such as New Zealand, where Varroa has become established, there has been increased competition for managed hives for pollination services resulting in increased costs. In addition, there is concern for pollination dependant industries that the potential loss of feral European honey bees and the ‘free’ pollination they provide, which is largely unmeasured, will increase the demand for managed hives.

Efforts are underway by Berries Australia to develop a pollination pilot program in the Coffs Harbour region. The program will include producing a handbook outlining pollination best practice and developing a Code of Practice for pollination in collaboration with the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council.

This initiative will also aim to reduce reliance on managed hives through alternative pollination methods and varietal management, aligning with research already being conducted by the University of New England.

The resources created will be available to berry growers across Australia, with support provided through the Berries Australia extension network.

For more information go to:

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/emergencies/biosecurity/current-situation/varroa-mite-emergency-response