Final Update from the National Varroa T2M Pollination Coordinator

Rebecca Sloan, National Pollination Industry Coordinator, National Varroa Mite Management Program

Varroa mite (*Varroa destructor*) is the most serious pest of European honeybees. It was detected for the first time in Australia at the Port of Newcastle (NSW) in June 2022. An emergency response was initiated but was ultimately unsuccessful in eradicating Varroa mite, and in February 2024 a 24-month Transition to Management (T2M) plan was approved.

Although the primary focus of the T2M plan has been on training beekeepers and providing them with the skills they need to manage Varroa mite, the plan also acknowledged the impact that Varroa mite will have on pollination dependent industries, like berries. As such, my position as National Pollination Industry Coordinator was created to help connect industries to the information and resources they need to function with Varroa mite as the new reality in Australia.

With the Pollination Coordinator's position wrapped up last month, it seemed timely to report on what has occurred during the twelve months of my position as part of the T2M plan.

The national varroa mite management webpage currently stores all the varroa fact sheets produced through the project and a general pollination guide which can be downloaded or printed to be used in your pollination business. Find out more at www.varroa.org.au.

The berry industry has its own pollination guide, which can be found in the Berries Australia Resource Library by searching 'pollination guide'. Alongside the pollination guide there are two quick reference guides, which are designed to be go-to documents that can be used on farms without having to go through the whole pollination guide. Both of these can be found in the Resource Library by searching 'NVMMP' alongside a wide range of fact sheets including:

- On farm reference guide for Honeybee management
- Quick reference spray application guide
- European Honeybees and how our actions impact successful pollination
- Beekeeping tips for best pollination outcomes
- Pollination and Pollinator Friendly Plantings

All this information will be available on the National Varroa Mite Management webpage until December 2026 and is also available at the Berries Australia Resource Library.

To ensure you always have access to them I would highly recommend that you start creating your own pollination library with articles and any other documents that might be helpful in creating a successful pollination season.

How varroa will impact pollination in Australia is still not fully understood, but preparation is the best tool we have now. How pollination will occur on your property needs to be considered and will vary widely within farming operations. Each option below has its own advantages and disadvantages and should be carefully considered when planning your pollination strategy.

Varroa mite Photo credit: GillesSM

Alternate pollinators

Tropical regions may have greater success with this approach, as more managed pollination options are available. In contrast, temperate zones face more challenges, as alternative pollinators in those areas are often solitary or may not be naturally attracted to the crop.

Some regions, such as Tasmania, are seeing great success with hoverflies and are finding they could become a viable alternative or complementary option for pollination in the future. There is also growing evidence that these alternative pollinators produce excellent results, leading to larger, higher-quality fruit that is hardier, easier to pick, and has a longer shelf life.

Right now, European honeybees remain Australia's main source of pollination. However, with feral and wild hives disappearing from our farming landscapes, alternative pollinators will be needed to help fill the gap.

Mechanical pollination

Mechanical pollination is generally not practical on a large scale but may be better suited to high value, protected cropping systems. As this area has the potential to grow into a significant tech sector, it's worth keeping an eye on emerging developments.

Owning your own hives

This option involves additional responsibilities, such as managing pests and diseases, finding a place to keep the bees during the off-season, and hiring or training staff to maintain and manage the hives if no one on your team has those skills. However, the upside is that you'll always have bees available when pollination is needed, and the hives could even generate extra income if used to pollinate other crops beyond your own.

Things to think about when deciding which direction to take will encompass things like the timing of your pollination. Do your pollination needs coincide with other major pollination events such as almonds, which are 100% reliant on managed pollination? This may limit the availability of commercial hives in your region during almond pollination.

There is however the potential to develop a relationship with a small local commercial or recreational beekeeper who may have enough hives to complete your pollination. My advice would be to seek out and contact local beekeeping associations.

As part of the T2M plan over 8,000 beekeepers have participated in the training programs and discussions with the Varroa Development Officers and so will be fully equipped to undertake pollination when needed.

We are all in this together and need to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Acknowledgements

The National Varroa Mite Management Program (NVMMP) is overseen by the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests (CCEPP) and the National Management Group (NMG). The NMG is made up of representatives from the Australian Government, every state and territory government, relevant peak industry bodies and Plant Health Australia.

NATIONAL
Varroa Mite Management
PROGRAM