

Pollination Post Varroa - What Does it Really Mean for Berries?

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On 16 December, Berries Australia hosted a pollination webinar featuring Bianca Giggins from AHBIC, Emeritus Professor Ben Oldroyd from the University of Sydney and commercial beekeeper/grower Richard Klaus from NZ.

This webinar was designed to help berry growers understand the realities of *Varroa destructor* and what its spread means for pollination and horticulture. The speakers outlined how Varroa has moved through Australia so far, drawing on early observations and comparisons with New Zealand's experience. They emphasised that spread is often faster and more complex than expected, influenced by bee movement, environmental factors, and human activity.

A major concern is the decline of feral (wild) honey bee populations as Varroa becomes established. This decline could significantly reduce 'free' pollination services that many growers have – knowingly or unknowingly – relied upon. In New Zealand, feral colonies collapsed rapidly, and growers had to adapt to more structured pollination planning.

General advice for Australian growers is:

- strengthen your relationship with beekeepers
- understand hive quality indicators
- budget more for managed hives
- improve on-farm pollination conditions

With funding received from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries' Community Bee Innovation Fund (CBIF), Berries Australia will deliver a project over the coming 18 months to strengthen the relationship between the berry industry and

beekeepers and build a mutual understanding of the factors affecting hive health on farm.

The Community Bee Innovation Fund grant program aims to boost Queensland's bee biosecurity, increase bee-related business resilience and protect our environment, economy, industries and communities from the impacts of *Varroa mite* (*Varroa destructor*).

The funding received by Berries Australia through the grant program will fund the '**Better Berry Bees**' project, which aims to further increase grower knowledge about hive health, management and pollination services, while also improving beekeepers understanding of the berry industry including on-farm practices.

A mutual understanding of each industry and the factors affecting hive health will ensure that growers can confidently evaluate services provided by beekeepers, and beekeepers are confident that hive health is being maintained on-farm, with growers aware of what to report on if problems arise. It is anticipated that building relationships and mutual understanding between growers and beekeepers will lead to better pollination outcomes, healthier hives, and increased sharing of information/data between the parties.

Workshops, focus groups, and the development of resources such as information sheets, short videos, and case studies will be among the project's key deliverables. There will also be the opportunity for growers to participate in additional training on hive health, pollination and trials of hive monitoring technology for on-farm hives.

Resources available in the Berries Australia Resource Library at bit.ly/BA-RL

The Pollination Guide is an excellent resource; to download the guide search '**Pollination Guide for the Australian Berry Industry 2024**'

In December, Berries Australia hosted a webinar with AHBIC which explored the critical challenges and future implications of pollination in a post-Varroa landscape. To watch the recording search '**pollination webinar**'.