

# Apiary auctions have sting in the tail for ag

By REBECCA SHARPE

**T**HE bee industry is angrily buzzing about the Forestry Corporation of NSW's initiative to auction off vacant apiary sites on the South Coast.

Forestry Corporation said the auctions were a "one-off" trial online sale of 24 vacant South Coast sites through AuctionsPlus last Wednesday, but apiarists fear wider changes are afoot.

There are almost 4000 apiary sites across the state, which are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, with fees of about \$90 for each site.

However, the winning bidders will now pay between \$194 to the top of \$3500 each year over a five-year term, for those 24 sites sold at auction.

The NSW Apiarists' Association called the auction a "cash-grab".

"The industry has suffered from low honey prices and the ongoing impact of drought during the past decade," said association president Casey Cooper.

"Resources are scarce enough as it is and we've already seen this new auction process is going to make it even harder for NSW beekeepers to access the range of floral resources they need to maintain sustainable businesses.

"Forestry Corporation needs to be

aware their change in policy is going to cause further declines in the numbers of beekeepers and hives across the state."

However, a spokesman for Forestry Corporation said the auction process offered more competition, transparency and equality for beekeepers.

AuctionsPlus chief executive officer Anna Speers said the traditional "first-in, first-served" system wasn't fair, adding the positive auction result was "an exciting sign" for the industry.

"The honey market is becoming a premium market rather than a commodity."

"We see it as an opportunity to create more competition than I could imagine in a cost-efficient way."

Forestry Corporation will now review the implications of the auction results.

Primary Industries Minister Niall Blair also called the auction a "small-scale trial" during question time at Parliament last week.

"While vacant sites have in the past been issued on a first-come, first-served basis, these ranges were considered to be highly sought-after by beekeepers due to their locations and the presence of spotted gum forests," he said.

"Forestry Corporation of NSW, in continued consultation with industry, is reviewing the way it allocates permits, with a view to developing a

formal policy that is acceptable to both the industry and the corporation within the next 12 months."

Opposition Primary Industries spokesman Mick Veitch said the government had refused to rule out an expansion of the auction trial.

"We all know what that means: the Baird government was waiting greedily to see how much they could make by forcing producers to bid against each other for their permits, and now they think they've hit the jackpot."

Mr Cooper said a larger roll-out of the auction system would affect the entire agricultural sector.

"If Minister Blair allows this so-called small-scale trial to expand across the state, then he is not only risking the beekeeping industry, he is putting much of the state's agricultural productivity at risk, causing food insecurity – and for no good reason," Mr Cooper said.

"Growers of crops like almonds, apples and cherries are already totally or highly dependent on our hives to get good yields."

Mr Blair said the government recognised the importance of access to Crown Lands and particularly state forests for apiarists.

"This trial is one way of examining practices to see if there is better way to ensure the allocation of these sites are both fair and equitable," he said.



NSW Apiarists' Association president Casey Cooper.

## Making News

**Code review:** The horticulture industry's Code of Conduct will be examined by the Federal Agriculture Department, following an announcement in Canberra yesterday.

Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce and Small Business Minister Bruce Billson said they had initiated a review of the mandatory Code, which they expected to deliver this year.

The Code was established in 2007 and regulates trade in horticultural produce between Australia's fresh fruit and vegetables growers and traders.

**Horticulture technology seminar:** Laser beams, robots and mid-air vegetable cultivation will be on the agenda for more than 100 of the country's leading vegetable growers at the 2015 Global Technologies in Horticulture Seminar to be held June 25 at the Gold Coast.

It will feature presentations from some of the world's leading speakers in agricultural technology, including Marc Oshima from the US, who will discuss making aeroponics (growing plants in air), a commercially viable production method, and Steinar Henskes from the Netherlands who will discuss the use of lasers as a harm-free method of bird control. The seminar is funded by Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited.

**Wyalong gold mine sold:** Barrick Gold Corporation has sold the Cowal gold mine at West Wyalong to Australian based company, Evolution Mining.

Barrick sold the mine for US\$550 million with final settlement expected in the third quarter of this year. Bland Shire Council mayor Neil Pokoney said the company left a positive legacy on the town.

"They have been fantastic corporate citizens who have supported a range of initiatives and programs which have provided significant benefits to our shire and the entire region," Cr Pokoney said.

With the acquisition of Cowal and the Mungari mine in Western Australia, Evolution expects to increase its annual gold production from 428,000 gold equivalent ounces in 2014-2015 to about 800,000 ounces per annum.

**Greengrocer comeback:** The local fruit and veg shop may be experiencing a revival, according to new consumer research that showed Aussie shoppers increasingly turning to specialist vegetable retailers to buy their favourite vegetables.

The Project Harvest study, which tracks consumer attitudes to vegetable purchases over time, shows the number of Australians who buy their beans and carrots at greengrocers has jumped by 37 per cent and 25pc, respectively, since June 2014.



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