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## Bee acquittal stings journal

Leigh Dayton, Science writer | November 21, 2007

### **FEDERAL Agriculture Minister Peter McGauran has welcomed research exonerating Australian honeybees in the demise of hundreds of millions of their tiny American cousins.**

"Someone owes Australian beekeepers a big apology, but we won't hold our breath waiting for it," Mr McGauran said.

According to Mr McGauran, the latest genetic evidence debunks claims that imported Australian bees introduced a virus linked to the mysterious disappearance of US honeybees, a phenomenon called colony collapse disorder.

The allegation, made last September in the journal *Science*, threatened to scupper a burgeoning business worth nearly \$5 million to bee exporters because it encouraged Pennsylvania senator Robert Casey to seek a ban on Australian imports.

As well, officials with the US Plant Health Inspection Service asked Australian authorities to explain why bans should not be imposed.

CSIRO bee pathologist Denis Anderson said the new findings were solid and should end the looming trade row.

"It will take something completely new to get Australian bees back on the hook," he said.

The all-clear came from virologist Yanping Chen and geneticist Jay Evans, both with the US Agriculture Department's Bee Research Laboratory in Beltsville, Maryland.

In an upcoming issue of *American Bee Journal* they will report that analysis of honeybee samples collected between 2002 to 2007 showed that the virus, Israeli acute paralysis virus, had been circulating in the US for at least five years.

While US beekeepers reported hive declines as early as 2004, CCD was not identified until the middle of last year, prompting imports of Australian bee packages to bolster plummeting populations.

Dr Anderson was critical of the damaging *Science* report, claiming the team misinterpreted its results.

Max Whitten, former head of CSIRO Entomology, added that there was never any evidence that IAPV caused CCD, let alone that it was spread by Australian bees.

"It's more likely that stressed hives will succumb to all sorts of benign pathogens, which they could handle if healthy," he suggested.

Unlike Australian colonies, US hives are stressed by poor nutrition, pesticides and parasites.

As well, hives are trucked long distances to pollinate crops, reducing bee fitness.

Dr Anderson said what the *Science* paper showed was that CCD was linked to *Nosema*, a widespread honeybee disease.

"But it was overlooked as the cause due to lack of experience and knowledge of general bee pathology on the part of the researchers," Dr Anderson said.

"This can't reflect well on a journal such as *Science* and (its) selection of referees."

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