



**ACT**  
Government

Territory and Municipal Services

# Code of Practice for Beekeeping in Residential Areas of the ACT - 2016



**Territory and Municipal Services**

## Introduction

The Code of Practice for Beekeeping in Residential Areas in the ACT outlines the duties of owners, carers and keepers of honeybees (*Apis mellifera*), which under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* are classified as a domestic animal.

The Code provides minimum standards for the management of urban beehives and is a good reference point for amateur backyard beekeepers as well as members of the public concerned about beekeeping practices in their neighbourhood. Adherence to the standards set out in the Code will help limit the introduction and spread of bee diseases and parasites and the inconvenience to neighbouring residents due to the presence of bees.

## The importance of honeybees in Australia

Honeybees are pollinators and, thus, play a vital role in Australia's primary production. It is estimated that horticultural industries which depend on honeybees are worth around \$2 billion per year to the Australian economy. In addition, the honey industry in Australia is worth approximately \$60 million per year.

## Bee diseases and parasites

Exotic bee species and pests and diseases not yet established in Australia would pose a major threat if introduced to the country. Of most concern is the varroa mite (*Varroa destructor*). Australia is the last continent not affected by this significant bee parasite. If it were to become established in Australia, wild beehives would be at risk of dying off, which would significantly reduce the vital free pollination service currently provided to agriculture by wild honeybees. Honey production from commercial hives would also be greatly affected. Information on diseases and pests to honeybees can be found in the publication *Biosecurity Manual for the Honey Bee Industry* on the [Plant Health Australia website](#).

It is illegal to introduce live bees into Australia without approval. Enquiries should be directed to the [Australian Department of Agriculture](#)

## Disease control

Disease control for beekeeping in the ACT is regulated by the *Animal Diseases Act 2005* (the Act) and the *Animal Disease Regulations 2006*. Under the Act, five diseases and pests of honeybees are declared. They are:

- Acariasis (tracheal mite) of bees (*Acarapis woodi*)
- Tropilaelaps mite (*Tropilaelaps clareae*)
- Varroasis (*Varroa destructor* and *V. jacobsoni*)
- American foulbrood disease
- European foulbrood disease.

At a minimum, hives should be inspected for disease in Spring and Autumn. If these diseases or pests are detected the ACT Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) must be notified immediately. Under direction from the CVO, the beekeeper may be required to undertake necessary control measures such as:

- destruction of the hives and or bees
- segregation of the hives and or bees

- decontamination of the hives and or beekeeping equipment
- restricted movement of the hives and or bees

## Sale and purchase of bees and used beekeeping equipment

Beehives and beekeeping equipment should be purchased with caution, as there is a risk that the colonies and beekeeping material may have come from a diseased apiary. To avoid buying diseased bees and material, always obtain a vendor's declaration from the seller first. This written declaration will provide the buyer with important information about the health of the bees and/or material being offered for sale. A vendor's declaration form can be found on the [NSW Department of Primary Industries website](#).

## Animal nuisance aspects of urban beekeeping

A person affected by an animal nuisance, as defined in the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*, may complain in writing to the Registrar of Domestic Animal Services. It is important that, prior to lodging a formal complaint, a person adversely affected by bees first tries to address the problem through consultation with their beekeeping neighbours. If that fails, contact can be made with Domestic Animal Services through Canberra Connect on 13 22 81.

## Number of permanent hives

One of the main issues with beekeeping in residential areas is the interaction between bees and people who live in or use areas near hives. Together with management practices outlined in the next section, a limit on the number of hives is recommended to minimise the risk of conflict between people and honeybees.

### *Hive numbers*

| Block Size                                    | Number of Hives |
|---|-----------------|
| Small block (less than 600m <sup>2</sup> )    | 2               |
| Average block (up to 1000m <sup>2</sup> )     | 4               |
| Large block (larger than 1000m <sup>2</sup> ) | 8               |
| Rural   | No limit        |

Please note: A hive is defined as a colony of bees headed by a queen bee.

## Management of Hives

### Hive placement

Bees require a dry, sunny position, preferably with a north-east aspect. Windy, exposed locations are not suitable as, in these conditions, the colony has difficulty maintaining the hive's temperature and humidity.

Beekeepers should place their hives in positions that are not likely to disturb the public. Therefore, hives should not be located close to schools, childcare centres, hospitals, sporting grounds or other public facilities

and, where possible, should be out of sight of the public. Hives positioned in the front yards of houses should be well screened by vegetation and placed a minimum of four meters from access walkways and the front door. The hives should be positioned in a quiet area of the yard, and not directly against the neighbouring property. Bee flight paths should be above two metres when crossing property boundaries and access walkways. This can be achieved by using a barrier such as shrubs, hedges, a wall or a fence.

Hives are not permitted to be placed in nature reserves, parks or on any other public land without approval from Territory and Municipal Services. Permission must be sought from the land-holder if you wish to place hives on a rural property for which you do not hold a lease.

## **Swarming**

Swarming is a natural instinct of honeybees and mainly occurs in spring to early summer. Honeybee colonies should be managed to prevent or minimise swarming. A useful method is the division of a colony into two or more units. This reduces its population and likelihood to swarm. This procedure is known as artificial swarming and its practice is effective in managing the bee's natural drive to swarm. A keeper employing this technique will not be considered in breach of the hive number limits outlined above.

The provision of additional supers for brood rearing and honey storage, and the replacement of old or failing queens may also reduce the swarming impulse.

## **Hiving swarms**

Beekeepers should take responsibility for a swarm that has originated from one of their colonies and capture it as soon as it has formed into a cluster. Swarms need to be collected to prevent them becoming a nuisance, for example, by flying to nearby properties and establishing in houses, trees or similar sites.

However it should not be assumed that swarms found in the vicinity of managed hives have in fact come from these hives. Swarms from other hives and, in particular, feral colonies, may fly into nearby managed apiaries. Beekeepers wanting advice on dealing with hiving swarms should contact the ACT Beekeepers Association.

## **Feral swarms**

Swarms originating from feral honey bee colonies may fly into the vicinity of managed apiaries or native bushland, including conservation reserves. Beekeepers are encouraged to make themselves available for the collection of accessible feral swarms on both private and public land. If a bee swarm on government land is causing concern, call Access Canberra on 13 22 81. If the swarm is on private property call a Swarm Collector. A list is available on the [ACT Beekeepers Association website](#).

## **Storage of spare equipment**

Previously used beehive equipment (eg. boxes) currently not housing bees, but stored for future use, may attract bees and swarms. Pieces of equipment not stored in a bee proof area should be stacked in a manner that will not allow bees to enter.

## **Water supply**

A good water supply should be available to honeybees in a partially shaded position and in close proximity to the hives. A strong colony of bees will use over a litre of water on a warm day. Additionally, beekeepers should be mindful of evaporation. The water supply should be in place before the hives are introduced to the area, otherwise the bees will become accustomed to watering where they are not wanted and it will be difficult to change their habits.

Containers of water should have floating material (corks, polystyrene foam, sticks) in the water to provide a landing platform and reduce the risk of bees drowning. An alternative is to provide trays of damp sand and fine gravel. The water level may be topped up by having water slowly drip from a container situated somewhere above the tray.

## **Maintaining a quiet strain of bee**

Honeybee colonies managed in urban areas should be maintained with young queens of a docile strain. Docile queens are specially bred and sold by queen breeders.

Aggressive colonies should be requeened with a docile strain. However, a number of factors should be considered before deciding a colony is aggressive by nature. Bee behaviour and aggression can be affected by seasonal conditions and the skill level of the apiarist including:

- the way a hive is approached and opened
- the way combs are handled
- the use and quantity of smoke
- the type of flora and the amount of nectar flow in progress
- the type of clothing worn
- weather and the time of year
- the time of day.

## **Robber bees**

When nectar is scarce, honeybees may rob honey from other hives. This can lead to hives being infected with diseases such as American Foulbrood. When such conditions prevail, hives should be opened to a minimum. If robbing becomes extreme, they should not be opened at all until field conditions improve. Exposure of honey (including sticky honeycombs) may encourage robbing. All spilt honey should be cleaned up immediately. Buildings and caravans used for honey extraction purposes should be made bee proof, as far as practicable, to prevent robbing.

## **General advice**

### **Education**

Beekeepers are encouraged to increase and update their knowledge by attending field days and study courses and belonging to the Beekeepers Association of the ACT.

### **Swarming bees and enquiries from the public**

People who are not familiar with honeybees often have a fear of them, particularly when a swarm of bees is observed. Swarming bees are generally not inclined to sting provided they are left alone, but the following precautions should be taken:

- if you see a swarm settling on your property keep children and pets inside the house until the flying bees have clustered onto a bush or another object
- once the swarm has clustered and most of the bees have stopped flying, it is normally safe to be outside the house
- keep children and animals well away from the swarm
- wear footwear to protect your feet in case bees have settled on the ground
- do not attempt to remove the swarm yourself, this includes by hosing it, throwing stones at it, or taking any other action to make the swarm move. Such action will only aggravate the bees and encourage them to sting in defence. Interfering with the swarm will make it more difficult for a beekeeper or licensed pest control operator to deal with the bees
- arrange to have the swarm removed by a member of the Beekeepers Association of the ACT. See their [website](#) for a list of beekeepers available to remove the swarm on your property.

## **Acknowledgements**

- NSW Department of Primary Industries – Primefacts (Copyright - State of NSW)
- Apiary Code of Practice – May 1997 (Copyright - Government of Victoria)
- ACT Beekeepers Association.

## **Definitions**

**Apiarist and Beekeeper:** a person keeping bees.

**Apiary:** land used for the keeping of bees in hives and on-site extraction of honey and/or other beehive products.

**Apiculture:** the management of beehives.

**Beehive:** any receptacle housing a honeybee colony or which has housed such a colony.

**Hive** is a colony of bees headed by a queen bee.

**Bee site:** any place where beehives could be sited.

**Flight path:** the distinct route taken by many bees leaving from or returning to their hive.

**Foundation comb:** a sheet of beeswax impressed with the pattern of cell bases on which the bees build comb.

**Honeybee or European honeybee:** *Apis mellifera*.

**Honeybee colony:** a honeybee community consisting of a queen, drones, workers and brood.

**Honeycombs:** removable frames which contain wax cells made by honeybees. The cells house honey, pollen and/or brood (eggs, larvae and pupae).

**Honey extraction:** the removal of honey from combs.

**Honey flow:** the gathering of nectar from flora by honeybees.

**Pollination:** the transfer of pollen by honeybees from anthers to stigmas of flowers for plant fertilisation.

**Robber bees:** bees from any other hive attempting to gain access to stored or spilt honey.

**Strong hive:** a populous honeybee colony.

**Super:** any box containing frames placed above the bottom box of a beehive.

**Swarm:** cluster or flying mass of honeybees, including workers, the queen and drones.

## **Further information:**

Further information on bees and beekeeping is available from the ACT Beekeepers Association website and from the [NSW Department of Primary Industries](#) “Primefacts” information sheets.

## **Disclaimer**

*The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (June 2013). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of the ACT Territory and Municipal Services Directorate.*

## **Cover Photo**

Photo by Nicholas Mortimer, ANU Apiculture Society.