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NOW IT'S TIME FOR ...

Plan bee

Beekeepers face the worst leatherwood harvest since 1981 and perhaps the worst Tasmanian honey season on record

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The sweet-smelling flowers of Tasmanian leatherwood trees usually resemble small, white roses. The beautiful blooms open up in January and flower right through February, and sometimes even early into March. Inside is the oozy, gooey sap bees gorge on so apiarists can make our state's internationally-renowned and loved leatherwood honey.

Many Tasmanians would have a jar of this sticky, liquid gold in their pantry. That's not only due to its great taste but for its medicinal properties, such as benefits to gut flora. But very few have been lucky enough to see the beautiful blooms that make the magic happen. That's because these ancient trees only grow in a small patch of Tasmania's temperate rainforest — deep in the Tarkine in the North West, and in parts of the South West Wilderness. And it doesn't grow anywhere else in the world.

It was in the early 1900s that Tasmanian apiarists, such as Ewan Stephen's grandfather Robert, started stacking up their hives and manoeuvring often difficult dirt tracks to truck their bees deep into these wilderness areas so they can be closer to the leatherwood flowers.

Today, 70 per cent of the honey produced in Tasmania relies on leatherwood trees. It's an industry worth more than \$10 million at wholesale prices. Collectively, Tasmanian beekeepers export 600 tonnes of leatherwood honey a year. All the accessible leatherwood trees have long ago been claimed by beekeepers, who pay the State Government to be able to leave their hives at these remote sites up to five hours away from their apiary. They train their bees — like athletes, the apiarists say — in the lead-up to the season so that they peak just before Christmas. Tasmanian beekeepers can usually make as much honey after just two months of leatherwood feasting as some of their competitors on the mainland produce in nine months.

But this season has been catastrophic. According to those in the know, it's the worst leatherwood harvest since 1981. And when you add the other varieties, it could well be the worst Tasmanian honey season on record. Hedley Hoskinson, 83, has been beekeeping in Tasmania for 70 years. He says he's never seen it so bad.

The business that Robert Stephens set up in 1920 is now the state's biggest producer of leatherwood honey. The apiary at Mole Creek, which is now run by his grandsons Ewan, Neal and Ken — who learnt the business from their parents, leatherwood pioneers Shirley and Ian. R. Stephens Apiarists Pty Ltd — produces 30 per cent of the state's honey. At this time of year — the end of the season — the brothers are normally packaging around 300 tonnes of leatherwood honey. This year it's zero. To add to that disaster, they are now worried about their bees starving to



Above: Ewan Stephens, product manager at R Stephens Honey at Mole Creek.

Left: Lindsay Bourke checks his hives.

Below: Bees with leatherwood honey in the hive.



Above: Hedley Hoskinson, 83, has handled bees for 70 years. He's considered the grandfather of the Tasmanian bee industry.

Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

Left: Lindsay Bourke from Australian Honey Products checking bee hives in the North-West.

Picture: HEATH HOLDEN

just too hot and dry (only about a fifth of the normal rainfall fell in January). That left the normally glossy leaves of the leatherwood trees a limp and withered mess. The few trees that did flower produced wilted blooms that dried up after only a few days so the bees had no nectar to fill up on.

Adding to those problems were the dry lightning strikes that sparked the January bushfires. The veteran beekeeper Hoskinson, who trucks his bees into the South-West Wilderness each summer, lost seven out of 50 hives to the fires. He says he would have lost the lot if it wasn't for a helicopter swooping in and water bombing the area. Hoskinson knows what happened to his hives, but many other beekeepers are still waiting to find out. In many areas it's still not safe enough to go back into the forest to inspect the hives. And even then, if the hives themselves have survived the bees could be dying. Bees don't forage for food when there's lots of smoke around: they stay and protect their queen.

The number of leatherwood trees destroyed in the fires is also still not known – leading to concerns about the viability of future honey seasons. Many beekeepers in the South are also worried about leatherwood trees lost through logging. Laurie Cowen, who has been beekeeping for half a century, says: "Forestry is taking them every year. They are pushing the beekeeper into the corner, so there's nothing left." He says it takes about 60 years for a leatherwood tree to produce strong amounts of nectar. "If there were more left, we could have a great beekeeping industry and our leatherwood could have been sent all around the world," Cowen says.

All this means it will be near impossible to find leatherwood honey on supermarket shelves this year. But the most worrying impact is on the beekeepers themselves. Later this month a series of industry crisis meetings are planned, to be attended by government representatives and caseworkers who specialise in providing suicide prevention information.

"It's very depressing for farmers when the forest fails like it has this year," says Tasmanian Beekeeper Association president Lindsay Bourke. "I've got 90 per cent less honey than normal. I've never seen the leatherwood in the Tarkine as dry as they are. It's so sad. Normally we are worried about getting bogged because it should be really wet, but this year it was so dry under foot the ground just cracked and crunched. The lack of leatherwood flowers has been totally devastating for our industry."

Like other beekeepers in the North West, Bourke drives his 4000 hives deep into wilderness areas around mid-December – just before the leatherwood starts to flower. He uses 50 different sites. All up, 16,000 hives are transported along rough bush tracks all along the West Coast so the bees can pollinate the leatherwood flowers and collect their nectar. This month, Bourke's team was evacuating three trucks a day out of the Tarkine – each packed with hives full of hungry bees that will now have to be fed on sugar to sustain them over the winter.

That rescue mission was vital, Bourke says, for the wider agricultural economy. He is one of the top five pollinators in the country, meaning hundreds of Tasmanian farmers rely on his bees being strong enough in spring to pollinate their crops. His bees are therefore critical to next year's crops such as the apples, pears and cherries that Tasmania has built its brand on.

"Leatherwood is so important for Tasmania because it sustains our crop-pollinating hives," Bourke says. "If these farmers aren't worried already, then they should be. My bees pollinate all sorts of things. Without bees it would be a sad, old world. There's a lot of crops that need to be pollinated from bees first."

Bourke's vice president Peter Norris says the entire agricultural system is "like a Jenga block – when you take one piece out, it can all fall over". "We need leatherwood to sustain our industry, and the fruit growers need our industry to sustain their industry," Norris says. "So without the leatherwood, it's going to have a major affect on the whole economy."

When *TasWeekend* spoke with Stuart Burgess, the chief executive of Fruit Growers Tasmania, he was unaware of the leatherwood honey crisis and its implications for next year's pollination season. Ironically, Burgess answered the call from Tokyo – where he was on the Premier's trade mission spruiking our fruit and vegetables and our honey at a trade fair. Burgess says that while he was unaware of the severity of the situation, he is concerned for fruit growers and beekeepers – and will support any government assistance to help the apiarists keep their bees alive over winter so they can pollinate crops in spring.

Primary Industries Minister Guy Barnett says the government is in the process of working with the bee industry to address both strategic needs and immediate issues resulting from the difficult season. He says this includes both the direct impact of the recent bushfires and wider seasonal impacts on production. Producers directly impacted by the bushfires have access to a range of assistance, including Bushfire Small Business Disruption grants of up to \$2000, and longer-term Bushfire Business Recovery Grants of up to \$25,000. An industry-wide crisis meeting will be held on March 29.

death or being so weak they won't make it through the winter. Ewan says they'll need to spend at least \$200,000 on sugar to feed their bees through winter. That's twice as much as normal. They've already lost about \$3 million in sales and had to put off almost half their workers. In addition, the brothers are now worried they could lose their contracts with the big supermarkets.

"We are in dire straits, real dire straits," says Ewan, who is now hoping for State Government assistance. He met with Treasurer Peter Gutwein in late February to share his story.

"It's a total disaster," he says. "We need some help and we need it pretty soon. It's hard work and long hours being a beekeeper but we've been doing it since we were kids ... we've been brought up in it and we want to keep going with it, but we do need help."

The crisis has its genesis in the fact that this summer, the leatherwood trees did not bloom like normal. The weather was