AN African beetle is waging war on Australian bees, with researchers warning it could decimate the beehive industry and push up food prices. Queensland scientists are leading the push to determine just how much damage the African small hive beetle is doing and early results are worrying.

University of Queensland entomologist Bronwen Cribb says an initial survey of the state's licensed beekeepers showed smaller backyard operators took a king hit from the beetle last year.

The pest, first detected in 2002, destroyed one in two backyard beehives in Queensland last year.

Large industry beekeepers also reported a 5 per cent loss but that figure is expected to be much higher when the results of a follow-up survey are finalised.

"It will be higher, we just don't know how much higher," Dr Cribb says.

She says the insidious beetle has crept up on the industry and if it's not controlled it will have very serious consequences for beekeepers, honey production and some food crops.

"It's not just our honey industry that's at stake. Without bees, biodiversity in our flora and the pollination of our fruit and vegetables is at risk — we don't want more upward pressure on prices," she says.