AN African beetle is waging war on Australian bees, with researchers warning it could damage 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 deeply worrying.

University of Queensland entomologist Bronwen Cribb said an initial survey of the state’s licensed beekeepers showed smaller backyard operators took a king hit from the beetle in 2009.

The pest, first detected in Australia 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 significantly higher when the results of a follow-up survey, carried out earlier this year, are finalised.

“It will be higher, we just don’t know how much higher,” Dr Cribb said.

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 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,” Dr Cribb said.

“This includes crops such as pumpkins, kiwi fruit, apple, cherry, plums, apricots, peaches, pears, strawberries and to some extent, nectarines.”

Traps are being devised to stop the invaders.

“The beetle doesn’t attack the bee but what it does is it gets into the hive and lays its eggs inside. When the grubs hatch out of the eggs they dig through and eat the pollen and the baby bees.”