Aussie bee industry stung by insidious African beetle

BRISBANE: 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 deeply 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 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 five 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.

Dr Cribb 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.

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

It could also harm Australia’s bee export industry. Australian bees are sought after because the population has not been hit by the Varroa mite, which has decimated bee populations overseas.

Dr Cribb has teamed up with the Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation to develop beetle traps to kill or catch the invader without harming the bees.

Dr Cribb says efforts are centred on a range of possible solutions including “odour traps” that will aim to harness the beetle’s natural attraction to already infested hives.

Dr Cribb says funding is urgently needed to address a serious problem that’s received little attention.

“We’ve had to get the data together to prove there’s a case. The sooner we get on top of this the better.”

- AAP