Case study – Supporting Australia's response to the varroa mite outbreak

The APVMA plays a critical role in protecting Australia's biosecurity, agricultural productivity and food systems by enabling access to safe and effective agvet chemicals in response to emerging risks. This role was demonstrated during Australia's response to the incursion of Varroa destructor (varroa mite), a parasitic pest that poses a serious threat to honey bees, commercial pollination services, honey production and the broader agricultural sector.

Varroa mite was first detected in sentinel hives at the Port of Newcastle in June 2022, triggering a nationally coordinated eradication response led by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI). As the independent statutory regulator of agvet chemicals, the APVMA worked closely with NSW DPI and other stakeholders to deliver its full suite of regulatory functions and ensure timely access to chemical control options necessary to support the biosecurity response.

Applying a risk-based and evidence-driven approach, the APVMA issued 11 emergency use permits and 2 minor use permits to NSW DPI. These permits enabled the lawful use of unregistered products and off-label applications where no suitable registered alternatives were available. Permits were issued both proactively—anticipating the potential spread of the pest—and reactively, as detections occurred in new locations across New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. As a precautionary measure, permits were also extended to Queensland to support preparedness planning.

Consistent with its commitment to acting swiftly where there is evidence of serious risk, the APVMA worked collaboratively with Commonwealth agencies, state and territory regulators, product holders and industry bodies to facilitate access to effective chemical treatments while maintaining appropriate regulatory oversight. This included preparedness activities undertaken prior to the incursion, ensuring that Australian beekeepers could access authorised varroa treatments quickly should an outbreak occur.

Following the declaration that varroa mite was no longer eradicable, the APVMA adapted its regulatory approach to support the transition from eradication to long-term management. Working closely with government and industry stakeholders, the APVMA facilitated continued short-term access to treatments through permits while placing the onus on product holders to progress full product registrations for ongoing use. The APVMA also worked with registrants to amend the conditions of registration for two shelf-registered varroa treatments to authorise their supply for use in Australia.

Throughout the response, the APVMA communicated clearly and transparently with stakeholders about regulatory requirements, permit conditions and available control options. This ensured consistent understanding of obligations while supporting confidence in the regulatory framework.

By applying proportionate, risk-based regulation and responding decisively to an evolving biosecurity threat, the APVMA supported Australia's varroa mite response at every stage. This case study demonstrates how the APVMA's regulatory posture is applied in practice to protect agricultural productivity, public confidence and environmental safety, while supporting innovation and system integrity.