

The Southern North Island region covers the bottom half of the North Island. From White Cliffs just north east of New Plymouth in Taranaki to the base of Mt Ruapehu across to and down the Ruahine Ranges to the Manawatu Gorge and then across to the East Coast. This vast area has different climatic zones and produced different floral types of honey as can be expected.

The Taranaki region (like Canterbury) in the 1940's to 1980's was a very productive honey regions mostly producing clover honey which was exported to the UK. The soil fertility is high thanks to Mount (Egmont's) Taranaki's early volcanic activity and was and still is a dairying region.

In those days paddocks were protected from the constant westerly winds with hedges of barberry and boxthorn. It was possible to produce two boxes of honey off barberry, two off boxthorn and then three boxes off clover when paddocks were closed off for hay production. The region supported many small family business with hive number in the region of 1200 hives.

Today the area is classified by beekeepers as a green desert. Farming practices have changed, cow numbers have doubled, the introduction of rotational grazing has meant that clover production has dropped. Farmers removed all the hedges and instead of hay, farmers with new grass mower that mulch the grass can cut and dry it sufficiently in a day to bail. The grass at its best nitrogen levels, just before producing flowers. Nitrogen based fertilizers are applied by farmers quick growth but this also suppresses clover in the pasture but it has also over time suppresses the soil organisms. One contractor has noted that the bailage coming off some paddocks has gradually declined over the last twenty years so now the farmer is only getting halve the bails he did 20 years ago.

Beekeepers now concentrate hives in sheltered spots close to rivers where there are still spring pollen and nectar sources and move hives into the back country for manuka honey production. Today beekeepers are scattered through the region with most located in the New Plymouth area with just a couple in South Taranaki. Generally beekeepers get one very good honey crop every five years.

Taihape/Raetihi region is effected by the mountain (Mt Ruapehu) and before the second world war had only a few small beekeepers. The region produced bush honeys (kowhai, manuka, North Island clover – darker than South Island clover, etc.), which didn't have a market in the clover UK market. Following the war, returned soldiers were granted land and a couple managed to survive in the region until manuka became popular and have subsequently taken advantage of this honey crop which went for the lowest to the highest returning honey. Raetihi region grows a lot of vegetables thanks to their cold winters and warm late summers

Wanganui district is know as a sheep and cattle region. Its now a popular region for beekeepers because of the Whanganui river and manuka.

Palmerston North district was mostly a sheep farming region and just after the war had one of the largest beekeeping operation centred in Palmerston North. Walworth had 3000 hives in the Wanganui, Bulls, Palmerston North and Hawkes Bay. Gangs would go out and sleep in farmer shearers shed while attending the bee hive being away most of the week. It took a day to travel what we now travel in three hours.

300 hives were moved into the Wellington area to produce manuka honey. All the clover honey was removed from the hives and the manuka honey frames put on the hives as winter feed. The Wellington area, like the Wairarapa are known as marginal for beekeeping being effected by winds due to its close proximity to Cook Strait. Like most of the Southern North Island, micro climates allow beekeeping to exist but crop vary from year to year due to the weather and wind. Manuka UMF start comes off the hive at below the Molan standard and now the new MPI manuka standard.

For many years beekeepers in the Wellington and Wairarapa region were paid table grade prices until we discovered that the manuka UMF increased with age. This discovery (known to the packers but not to beekeepers) changed the profitability of beekeeping in the region.

The East Coast, Wairarapa region was mostly a sheep production region with hot dry summers. In late December once the equinox winds start, the grass dries in three weeks from a lush green to brown. The lambs are sold and pasture rested.

In the 1970 to 1990's there were five family beekeeping businesses in the area producing clover and bush honeys. Today there are perhaps three times as many with three large businesses based around Masterton concentrating on mānuka in the coastal and hill country regions. This region is popular for manuka as the honey produced has a relative high activity being in the region of 15 UMF.

Today vast numbers of hives are migrated into the region to follow the mānuka flowering. The scrub always flowers well and looks great. Native bees thrive in the district where there are suitable nesting sites as these mostly collect pollen from the mānuka and kanuka. However even though mānuka flowers well each year, it doesn't always yield well, being very dependant on moisture available to the roots (rain once a week) and good mild weather. It can take up to two weeks from the commencement of flowering to start nectar secretion. Being an open flower it takes three days for the nectar to concentrate in the flowers to become attractive to bees. Rain every three days means no nectar, a cold southerly from with rain can turn nectar production off.

Science has also come to the fore. In recent years, we have learnt that if mānuka is sprayed or cut every second year, the following year it produces well, have good root stock and little new growth. Also this type of thinning allows more sunlight on the scrub so it grows and flowers better.

Now so many hives are moved in the mānuka area that mānuka production is becoming unviable. It's not unusual to have 200-300 hives concentrated within a 3 Km radius. Following two bad production years 2017 and 2018 many beekeepers are financially stretched. Theft of bee hives or honey boxes has become a problem. Some late entrants to the so called "Mānuka gold rush" have already lost their businesses as they had nothing to sustain themselves through poor seasons. Some of our existing beekeepers are now working "off farm" to sustain their business hoping that next year will produce a good crop.

Beekeeping has always been effected by up and down in production and by the commodity price of honey on the world market. It pays beekeepers to never put their honey into one overseas market. These buyers are shrewd and know that they can at anytime reduce the price and put your business at peril so that you will accept a lower price. The German buyers (the biggest buyers) in the world have dropped priced some yours by going to each country and saying so so is offering this can you match or go under that price. They managed one year to drop the price for \$5 per kg down to the \$3 level and the whole beekeeping world suffered.

Beekeepers should always know their cost of production. You have to be able to sell for a profit and put enough away to feed your hives right through the next year when the crop can fail as well as putting something away for your retirement and holidays.

Too often beekeepers have relied on making money from their business when they retire. You may end up with empty boxes that are only fit for fire wood, a reason why banks don't lend on bee hives.

For all our troubles beekeeping is still a very enjoyable business. Yes its can be stressful, managing hives and relying on nature to produce perfect weather over the six week period when you hope to get a honey crop.

Beekeepers can help to manage their cash flow by paid pollination but it also pay to be close to the crop so your transport costs and stress to hives are kept to a minimum. In some area it pays to put propolis screens on hives or if there is an excess of pollen, collect pollen for the bumble bee industry.