

BIOSECURITY FAILURES IN AUSTRALIA: 12 CASE STUDIES

12. EMERALD FURROW BEES

A case study of a neglected incursion of a new bee species.

Species: Emerald furrow bee (*Halictus smaragdulus*)

Origin: The Mediterranean

Australian occurrence: NSW

Potential environmental impacts: This bee 'could have serious impacts due to its high relative abundance, long seasonal activity, and an apparent preference for introduced plants and declared noxious weeds in New South Wales'.²¹⁶ Potential impacts of concern are competition with native fauna, transmission of parasites and pathogens, disruption of native plant pollination networks, and exacerbation of weed problems by increasing pollination of introduced plants. Too little is known yet to predict its ecological impacts but bioclimatic models suggest it will thrive across much of southern Australia.²¹⁷

Potential economic or social impacts: Likely costs include those due to increased weed spread.



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Summary of biosecurity issues: The emerald furrow bee was discovered by chance in riparian areas of the Hunter Valley in NSW in November 2004.²¹⁸ Although a recent introduction (it hadn't been observed in past surveys) it was well established, being the second most common bee trapped in some places. Apart from a few surveys in 2008-2010 funded by philanthropy, this new introduction has been ignored. Little is known about the bee's ecology, distribution and impacts. By the time impacts become clear it could be too late to do anything about it. It is important to prevent further introductions that could increase the species' environmental tolerances in Australia.

Particular biosecurity issues

Risk assessment and contingency planning: As far as we are aware there has been no risk assessment or contingency planning for this species. Ashcroft et al. (2012) warn that it 'would be prudent to prevent further introductions that could diversify the gene pool and broaden the environmental tolerance of the species in Australia'.

At-border biosecurity: It is not known how the bee entered Australia. DNA from specimens showed 2 maternal lineages, indicating the introduction of more than one individual.

Monitoring and research: This bee incursion exemplifies a catch 22 in environmental biosecurity. Governments are loath to fund management without evidence of serious impacts but by the time the impacts become clear it is typically too late to eradicate or contain invasive species. Furthermore, funding for research is extremely limited. Surveys to determine the distribution of this bee were done with philanthropic funding.²¹⁹ The surveys included the involvement of citizen scientists, an increasingly viable option for some biosecurity work.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Ashcroft et al. (2012)

²¹⁷ Ashcroft et al. (2012)

²¹⁸ Gollan (2009)

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²²⁰ Ashcroft et al. (2012)

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Issues for the inquiry

Incursion responses

- Should new incursions automatically trigger risk assessment to determine the most appropriate response?

Risk assessment and contingency planning

- Given that three new exotic bees established in Australia have been detected since 2000, should there be risk assessments, pathway analysis and contingency planning to reduce the risks of further bee incursions, including new variants of existing naturalised species?

References

Ashcroft M, Gollan J, Batley M. 2012. Combining citizen science, bioclimatic envelope models and observed habitat preferences to determine the distribution of an inconspicuous, recently detected introduced bee (*Halictus smaragdulus* Vachal Hymenoptera: Halictidae) in Australia. *Biological Invasions* 14:515–527.

Gollan J. 2009. *Ecology of a recently discovered exotic bee (Halictus smaragdulus) in Australia*. Final report to the WV Scott Charitable Trust. Australian Museum