Notes from Joint Industry/MPI Manuka Honey Science Steering Group (MHSSG)
10 October 2018 at ApiNZ offices, Wellington, 8.30am to 11.30am

Attendees: Tony Wright ApiNZ Board director; Karin Kos, ApiNZ Chief Executive; John Rawcliffe UMFHA; Ian Fletcher, NZ Beekeeping Inc. Steve Hathaway, Director Science and Risk Assessment; Claire McDonald, Senior Adviser.

The Group continued to develop the work programme which covers four key areas:

1. **Monitoring the ongoing performance of the definition** with the aim of ensuring it remains fit for purpose**;**
2. **Developing generic sampling guidelines** for honey to provide robust and repeatable sampling procedures that are universally adopted by industry and verifiers.
3. **Establishing a honey reference collection** for the ongoing scientific study of New Zealand honeys.
4. **Further evaluating the stability of chemical and DNA markers (**current and potential), in the MPI manuka honey definition.

Monitoring the ongoing performance of the definition
MPI has published a considerable body of scientific data on regional variation in markers for manuka honey as part of the three-year study (MHSP) to develop the manuka honey regulatory definition. MPI has completed a further analysis of data recently supplied by industry, following concerns voiced over regional variability of the levels of the chemical marker 2-MAP (attached).

The MHSSG discussed the findings of this further work, noting that this is an analysis based on limited data. The results in MPI's report are somewhat similar to the level of regional variation that was found in the MHSP. But both studies lack the ability to quantify region-to-region and season-to-season variability in terms of the effects on the actual volume of honey from manuka-growing regions that does not meet the regulatory definition. Implementation of the reference honey collection will assist in this.

The Group will look to receive quarterly updates on various aspects of the performance of the manuka honey definition, for example, tracking export figures, looking at lab/method performance over time, and providing the interim results of relevant studies arising from the MHSSG work programme. The type of information that can be supplied and the format is now being investigated.

The Group discussed recent concerns raised by some stakeholders in relation to the level of the 2-MAP marker for mono-floral honey and how it was seen as negatively impacting on Northland and other producers.

Actions:

- MPI manuka honey science team will meet with the group on 29 October
- The MPI technical report on regional variation that was recently completed will be shared with industry once permission has been received from those who supplied the data.
- MHSSG to explore other sources of data on regional variation.

Developing generic sampling guidelines

MPI advised that an RFP (Request for Proposal) has gone out to research providers to design and carry out a study to identify the different sampling and processing techniques that represent current industry practice, with the goal of developing best practice guidance so that results from samples are fully representative of the batch and provide the same results on repetition.

The aim of the study is to build standardised and practical sampling guidelines for testing honey at different points in the supply chain as that will improve the robustness and repeatability of test results. Part of the contract will be co-opting industry experience and expertise to ensure that the project design is feasible and practical.

Action:

- MPI to update Steering Group once the RFP process is completed (RFP closes on 1 November 2018).

Establishing a reference collection

The Steering Group recognised the importance of a fully representative national honey reference collection that provides an ongoing and accumulating resource for monitoring a range of honey characteristics and for research purposes. Benefits include robust measurement of: the performance of the regulatory definition and levels of individual markers on a nationwide basis, grade and other markers/characteristics, food safety indicators, bee health indicators. Thus the reference collection will be multi-purpose and a national collection of all honey types.

There was agreement that the reference collection needed to be a joint industry and regulatory collection, officially recognised by regulators, and that it needed to be future proofed. There was also a recognition that strong governance and stewardship is critical and this needs careful consideration by the industry and MPI. Discussion centred on issues like rules and controls around use, terms of reference, the importance of employing people with the relevant technical expertise, agreement around the specifications for sampling etc.

While getting a full reference collection underway is complex and will take time, the MNSSG recognised the need for rapid progress to address some the issues faced over the short term. For this reason, the Group proposed:

- A pilot programme (operational research trial) that can be embarked on this season, funded by both MPI and industry with agreed protocols and governance.
- This will inform the longer term national reference collection project and samples collected in the first year of the pilot trial may well be co-opted into the national reference collection at the conclusion of the trial.

Action:

- MPI to progress the operational research format
- Subcommittee made up of John Rawcliffe, Tony Wright, Steve Hathaway, Claire McDonald to meet and establish the design of the trial, protocols and governance
- Industry/Government funding to be agreed as part of this trial.

Further evaluating the stability of chemical and DNA markers (existing and potential)

Discussions have been held with FERA UK and York University on scoping a stability trial for the markers making up the regulatory definition, along with other markers of interest to industry and/or MPI

The rationale for using an international government partner such as FERA UK is their independence and expertise in this area. This project will extend the stability assessment timeframe, ideally to at least three years at room temperature to match common industry practice regarding product best-before dates. The project will include stability assessment of the DNA marker over this time period.

Action: Follow up with FERA regarding its work on scoping the trial.

Communication to all of industry
The Group agreed on the importance of communicating with all of industry on a regular basis and that notes of all meetings would be publicly available through the relevant industry/government websites.

Action: Agreed notes of meetings to be publicly available on industry/government websites

Background to the MPI/Industry Science Steering Group
In the lead up to, and after MPI's introduction of its manuka honey science definition, industry groups and MPI's science team have been working closely together on science issues related to the definition and its implementation. The MHSSG is focused on ensuring that NZ science is international best practice and that the manuka honey definition remains 'fit for purpose'.

The Group is made up of MPI's science team and representatives from ApiNZ, UMF Honey Association and New Zealand Beekeeping Inc. The current work programme includes:

1. **Monitoring the performance of the manuka honey definition** with the aim of ensuring it remains fit for purpose**;** at this stage focused on investigation of regional and seasonal variations. Also exploring reporting on other aspects of relevance to the industry, eg export data; lab/method performance.
2. **Developing generic sampling guidelines** for honey to provide robust and repeatable sampling procedures that are universally adopted by industry and verifiers.
3. **Establishing a national honey reference collection** for the ongoing scientific study of New Zealand honeys.
4. **Further evaluating the stability of chemical and DNA markers (**current and potential), in the MPI manuka honey definition.