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27 June 2017

Myrtle rust low risk to Manuka honey industry

Comvita (NZX:CVT) CEO Scott Coulter, said based on information the Company has been collating about the ongoing myrtle rust situation, we believe the overall risk to the NZ Manuka honey industry is low.

“New Zealand Manuka honey is produced from *Leptospermum scoparium* (Manuka plants), which is the only *Leptospermum* variety found in New Zealand. *Leptospermum scoparium* is also found in Tasmania, and is part of the large family of *Leptospermum*'s found in Australia. Because of this, Tasmania is particularly relevant to our Manuka Industry as it has similar varieties and environmental conditions as New Zealand.”

“Neither our Australian JV partner Capilano (ASX:CZZ), or apiary businesses in Tasmania, with whom we have been speaking, have had any reports of myrtle rust being found in *Leptospermum* species since the fungus was discovered in mainland Australia in 2010 and Tasmania in 2015. There has been no impact from myrtle rust on their honey production,” said Mr. Coulter.

“We have also been communicating with the Tasmanian government agency, the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (DPIPWE), which has not detected myrtle rust in the *Leptospermum* species in Tasmania since its incursion.”*

“While it is early days in terms of analysing the effect of myrtle rust on Manuka plants in New Zealand, this information is consistent with what we are seeing here. Myrtle rust hasn't been found on Manuka plants in the wild and so far, has only been found in plant nurseries and domestic environments, including the one infection found on a Manuka plant, which was in a nursery. Plant nurseries tend to have young plants in warmer and more humid environments than natural sites, and are thus generally more susceptible to fungal infections.”

Myrtle rust spore production is stimulated in the warmer months when the humidity is high and when leaves are wet for six hours or more. Current scientific knowledge indicates temperatures of 15-25° are required for the myrtle rust to complete its life cycle, otherwise the fungus remains dormant.*

Nevertheless, Comvita is taking the myrtle rust incursion seriously and is undertaking the following initiatives as part of our ongoing response to the situation:

- Standard operating procedures on how to identify, assess and report the condition;
- Educating our beekeepers to recognise and report myrtle rust (although there's no sign of this in the field so far);
- All Comvita nursery stock destined for extensive plantings is being regularly inspected;
- Ensuring a treatment regime is applied before any plants are distributed from nurseries;
- Investing in mobile hive units so hives can be moved and relocated should myrtle rust be detected;
- Investigating ways to introduce resistance to our Manuka plant breeding programme across the plant varieties we have developed. This may include working with Australian partners and research institutes which have been investigating the impact of myrtle rust on native species in Australia;
- Working with scientists in New Zealand to apply the learnings from Australia and model potential outcomes in our local environment.

As indicated in our 5 May statement, Mr. Coulter said, we continue to work closely with Ministry for Primary industries (MPI) and other scientists in a collaborative way, to understand myrtle rust and its possible impact on the myrtle species in New Zealand.

To reiterate the MPI guidance, if you see myrtle rust, please do not touch it. Take a photo, note its location and notify MPI, 0800 809 966.

Background

The Ministry for Primary Industries, New Zealand, Myrtle Rust Protection & Response:

<http://www.mpi.govt.nz/protection-and-response/responding/alerts/myrtle-rust/>

Biosecurity Tasmania, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water & Environment:

*<http://dpiuwe.tas.gov.au/Documents/myrtle.pdf>

Ends.

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Background information

About Comvita (www.comvita.co.nz)

Comvita (NZX:CVT) is a global natural health company committed to the development of innovative products, backed by ongoing investment in scientific research.