

populations in the mid 2000s.

Hartnell said New Zealand had about 6000 beekeepers. About 5000 were "small hobbyists"; urban and lifestyle block-holders wanting to protect the honey bee's pollination role in food production.

The remainder were commercially harvesting manuka, if they could, while also doing their bit for primary industry.

Hive thefts were a worldwide problem, including in Israel where hive raids, or "borrowing" across the Palestine border was a domestic sore-point, he said.

Hartnell said hive thefts in New Zealand were as difficult to tackle as sheep rustling. By the time a farmer realised



DEAN KOZANIC/FAIRFAX NZ

Hivemind chief executive Christian Walsh.

150 sheep had been rustled from a paddock, the stock would be off to the meatworks.

He suggested something similar to the country's new livestock tracking system might be needed.

Although bees couldn't be tagged, apiaries were already using surveillance cameras and movement sensors, he said, and the Bee Industry Group was now looking at the value of location sensors inside hives.

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Hivemind chief executive Christian Walsh has a handful of staff in Christchurch building wireless sensors linked to GPS and weight scales.

In the Bay of Plenty, Steens Honey has a similar product called Hive Tracker.

Walsh said beekeepers could log in to Hivemind's GPS-linked database to check their production. The remote view would save a trek to the "wop wops" for inspections.

But the kit also reveals tampering. "The theft side of it is a part of the puzzle, and it's a pretty strong one at the moment," Walsh said.

One security option was to use the police's approach to speed cameras; installing sensors at every fifth hive or so, while plastering a site with warnings saying the hives were monitored.

Hivemind's existing GPS-based system sits on top of a hive, giving a GPS location, but the latest model could be hidden under a hive lid.

"Then, if you nick the whole lot, you'll be able to find it, down to a few metres."

Some of the sensors could detect movement and send a signal back to base.

Hivemind had about 45 customers and about 100 systems in the field. About half of its customers were in New Zealand and the remainder in Australia.

The sensors are made by Kilmarnoch Enterprises in Christchurch. They use batteries which can last up to a year. Every six hours they send data back to base and then go back "asleep".

There was plenty of room to expand in New Zealand and overseas, including in the United States, Walsh said.

The US would give the company a "counter-seasonal" mix of income, as beekeepers ordered units for their busy spring and summer seasons.

Walsh said sensors were becoming widespread but the trick was connecting them to a "communications and infrastructure backbone".

Hivemind's sensor used satellites to relay signals, instead of mobile networks which could be patchy in remote areas. The downside to satellite communications was its higher cost. Beekeepers tended to be more "averse" to technology than others in primary industry so the price of the devices was important, Walsh said.

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