



DROUGHT RESILIENCE CASE STUDY

The Buzz of Resilience

Karl Shaw - Boorowa Bees

Keeping bees began as a hobby for Karl Shaw, but before he knew it, he had a thriving local business. "I remember I started with about ten jars of honey on a table at a market, and they went pretty quickly."

Karl immediately saw there was a demand for local honey and knew that to meet that demand, he'd need more supply. He began working with other local beekeepers who were looking for a reliable outlet for their honey, and Boorowa Bees was formed. Now in his fourth season and growing steadily, Karl produces and retails local honey, both online and at markets, as well as selling bees and nucleus colonies (nucs) to new and experienced beekeepers alike.

Karl went into business knowing first-hand how dramatically drought can affect beekeeping. His first season came on the heels of the 2017-2019 drought, where he'd seen a friend's beekeeping operation devastated by drought, "One of my commercial beekeeper friends almost got wiped out... he could only start building it up again once the rain arrived".

Beekeeping is one of many climate-dependent industries where diversity of income is a key resilience strategy. Karl has structured his business so that he has multiple revenue streams, from producing and packing honey, retailing online and at markets, wholesaling, as well as the seasonal sale of nucs, "By diversifying, it sort of evens out the peaks and troughs", he says.

Even with efforts to diversify, Karl's business still relies heavily on weather conditions. The inputs (bees, queens, floral sources) need to be reliable, and drought threatens that reliability. If Karl or his partner beekeepers can't produce honey because there are no blossoms, for example, the economic impact flows on to the retail market, and even as far as equipment suppliers.

You Don't Have to Have Experienced Drought to Be Prepared for It

Karl sees himself as fortunate because Boorowa Bees hasn't yet experienced a major downturn, though he acknowledges that in business, a plateau or a difficult year is inevitable. He keeps a close eye on his costs, "If you're running on the red line all year round, at some point you're going to go over it, and you'll be in trouble". Running the business alongside full-time employment also means he has limited hours and resources, so he's careful not to burn out.

Karl says building in buffers is a key to building resilience. This year's nuc production is an example of that. Karl produced 35 nucs for 28 orders, anticipating that not all would be viable due to queens failing, delays, or cancellations – things that ended up becoming a reality. That buffer saved the business from customer disappointment and demonstrates the importance of planning for variability in any rural business.



Karl and Stephanie from Boorowa bees

Karl's experience offers several practical takeaways for others:

Build buffers wherever possible

Whether it's livestock, stock on hand, or emergency funds, buffers allow space to absorb shocks. "It's important to have that capacity, that buffer, to allow for things to happen."

Stay flexible

Rigid schedules don't work in drought-affected industries. Weather, flowering times, supply chains, pests - everything changes. Businesses need the ability to move quickly with change.

Track environmental changes closely

Seasonal cues, crop timing, and water availability all influence business decisions. Planning now means fewer surprises later.

Diversify income streams

Multiple sources of revenue soften the blow when one area is affected by drought or market downturns.

Prioritise regular health checks

In beekeeping, stronger colonies are more resilient - and the same is true across rural businesses. Small issues caught early prevent devastating losses later.

Standing among the hives after a busy morning seeing his nucs off to new homes, Karl reflects on how quickly the business has grown and how much he has learned from the bees themselves. Beekeeping, like drought resilience, is about watching closely, responding early, and adapting constantly. "They still teach me things all the time... nature has its own way."

Boorowa Bees may be young, but its story is already a model for how small rural businesses can build resilience in an unpredictable climate through flexibility, diversification, connection to community, and an appreciation for the rhythms of the natural world.



Karl Shaw preparing his nucs



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