



Kate White, Waitaki Honey Company. 3,500 hives in North Otago.

## ORGANIC HONEY PRODUCER SEES VARROA AS ONLY A TEMPORARY SETBACK

New Zealand's largest producer of certified organic honey, the Waitaki Honey Company near Kurow in North Otago, is breathing a sigh of relief at having escaped the arrival of varroa this season. But co-director Kate White is realistic the varroa mite will eventually arrive and is resigned to the likelihood of having to use conventional pesticides to treat her hives.

Kate sees varroa as only a short-term setback to her company's long-term vision of continuing to produce organic honey.

"There is no really effective way to treat varroa successfully organically in a business of our size in the initial stages of infestation, meaning we'll probably have to go (non-organic) for a couple of years, until suitable treatment options are developed" Kate says.

Waitaki Honey is run by Kate and her partner, Peter Irving, whose family involvement in beekeeping dates back to the 1940's. The company has been certified organic since 1996. It collects honey from about 3,500 hives nestled in the remote valleys of the plateau country below the Southern Alps. This region is naturally suited for organic production because of the type of farming undertaken in the region and because it is so sparsely populated.

Organic standards require hives to be located more than 5km away from any intensively farmed properties. Kate says the 'wilderness area' surrounding their hives has an abundance of clover for the bees.

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WAITAKI HONEY PRODUCES ON AVERAGE ABOUT 140 TONNES OF CERTIFIED ORGANIC HONEY A YEAR, ALMOST HALF THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF ORGANIC HONEY PRODUCED IN NEW ZEALAND.

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Fields of lush clover surround the Waitaki Honey Company's certified organic hives.

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"CONSUMERS CONTINUE TO DEMAND GREATER TRANSPARENCY IN THE FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN."

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The company has its hives located in dramatic landscapes – from the Lindis Pass into the Waitaki Valley, and up the Hakataramea Valley. This gives the operation two distinct weather patterns, with an easterly aspect in the Hakataramea and the nor’west further up country.

Farms where the hives are located must provide a declaration of any sprays that have been used and the honey is then tested to make sure there has been no contamination.

Waitaki Honey produces on average about 140 tonnes of certified organic honey a year, almost half the total amount of organic honey produced in New Zealand. It specialises in clover honey, plus a small amount of borage honey. Most is exported, with the largest markets being Germany, Denmark and Japan. A small amount of the honey is also used by a New Zealand company, which makes organic fruit drinks.

Organic honey generally sells for about 25 per cent above the price of conventional honey. Kate says this premium is necessary to cover the loss of income from pollination services, which conventional beekeepers enjoy.

Late last year, the Waitaki Honey Company was one of the first New Zealand food producers to sign up as a member of Oritain, a company set up to trace and verify the origins of food products. Kate sees membership of Oritain as giving Waitaki Honey a further marketing edge, particularly in Europe and Asia, where consumers continue to demand greater transparency in the food supply chain.



A beekeeper checks hive health.



The Waitaki Honey Company’s hives, in the North Otago wilderness, are captured in a mural by Michael Hight at Auckland’s SkyCity Hotel.

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“KATE SEES VARROA AS ONLY A  
SHORT-TERM SETBACK.”

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