



## Beekeeper ordered to pay victims

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A Whangamata beekeeper who admitted selling honeycomb that poisoned 22 people last Easter has been ordered to pay more than \$3000 in reparation to victims in a case brought by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority.

Kevin Prout, of Projen Apiaries, had earlier pleaded guilty to four charges under the Food Act. Three related to the sale of contaminated honeycomb, and a fourth covered incorrect labelling of the honey, which was produced and sold on the Coromandel Peninsula.

At Waihi District Court yesterday, Prout was spared a fine for the charges relating to the sale of honeycomb, but told to pay a total of \$3,350 reparation to some of the victims plus \$750 in laboratory costs and \$450 in solicitor's fees. He was convicted and discharged for the labelling offence.

"Some victims in this case were violently sick and taken to hospital suffering seizures. It is fortunate nobody died," said New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) Assistant Director Compliance and Investigation Justin Rowlands.

He said the verdict was fair and reasonable: "People need to be aware that there are laws governing food businesses, which are there to protect the consumer. If people fall foul of these, they can expect to be prosecuted."

The court heard that 22 people fell ill after eating Mr Prout's honeycomb in March last year. NZFSA testing of the leftover honeycomb found the honey, marketed as 'A Taste of Whangamata Pure Honey', contained high levels of tutin.

Toxic honey is produced when bees gather honeydew excreted by vine-hopper insects that have fed on the native tutu bush. Although tutin has no ill effects on bees or vine hoppers, it is highly toxic to humans - as little as one teaspoon (10mls) of toxic honey can affect the nervous system.

Under the Food Act, all food sold to the public must be safe to eat and sellers of food must be able to show they have taken all reasonable precautions to ensure the food they sell is safe. At the time of the poisonings, beekeepers were expected to manage the risk of their honey containing tutin either by removing hives and honey frames containing honey for human consumption before the risk period, or by closely monitoring the tutu, vine-hopper and foraging conditions around their apiaries during the honey season.

The Food (Tutin in Honey) Standard 2008 that came into force in January 2009 sets a maximum level of tutin in honey sold for human consumption. It also requires beekeepers in risk areas to ensure their product is safe by complying with at least one of a number of risk management options. These include harvesting honey before the end of December, checking tutu bushes for toxic honeydew or placing hives away from tutu. Honey may also be blended and tested as an alternative.

"Beekeepers that follow the requirements of the food laws that apply to their business, and comply with the standard, are highly unlikely to sell products such as those that caused the tutin poisonings last Easter," Mr Rowlands said.

Information about the Food (Tutin in Honey) Standard, compliance guide and laws governing bee products are available on NZFSA's website at [www.nzfsa.govt.nz/animalproducts/subject/bee-products/index.htm](http://www.nzfsa.govt.nz/animalproducts/subject/bee-products/index.htm). All registered beekeepers have been sent information on the new standard.

**Ends**

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