

Posted on Sat, Mar. 04, 2006

Fewer bees, high pollination fees hurt farmers, crops

By Linda A. Johnson

Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. - With all the sophisticated technology today's farmers use, little honeybees remain crucial, pollinating billions of dollars of fruit, vegetable and nut crops each year while collecting food for their hives.

But the number of honeybees and managed beehives is down so much that production of pollinated plants has fallen by about a third in the last two years from the usual \$15 billion per year.

"I've heard people complaining about bee shortages all over the country," said Kevin Hackett, head of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's research program for bees and pollination. He said 15 years ago, "there were twice as many hives as there are now."

Today, commercial beekeepers manage 2.5 million U.S. colonies, or artificial wood-and-screen box hives, with roughly 65,000 bees each. The big drop in the honeybee population the last several years is mostly due to the parasitic varroa mite destroying more than half of some beekeepers' hives and wiping out most wild honeybees.

Commercial beekeepers, crunched by huge bee losses and rising costs for fuel and chemicals to kill varroa mites, have boosted the fees they charge farmers to rent honeybees.

Given the varroa mite epidemic, other environmental pressures and a drop in the number of beekeepers, government agencies and even the National Honey Board are pouring money into research to help the honeybees bounce back and grant programs to get more people into beekeeping. The National Academy of Sciences has even appointed a group to investigate whether all bees, butterflies, birds and other pollinators in North America are endangered by habitat loss, insecticide use, invasive species and other influences.

For farmers dependent on pollination, the current shortage means they must pay higher bee fees that they generally can't recoup or risk a big drop in crop production.

"I think some of the growers are going to rent less hives this year and take a chance" yield holds up, said Ned Lipman, who raises cranberries on two 50-acre farms in Manchester and Berkeley townships, Ocean County.

"There's an acute shortage of bees nationwide," Lipman said.

Honeybees and some wild insects and birds, in extracting nectar and pollen from the flowers of crops and transferring pollen grains among plants, increase the size and total yield of crops from apples to zucchini. Until World War II, most U.S. farmers maintained their own honeybee hives; early settlers brought beehives from Europe along with crop seeds.

Now Lipman hears he'll have to pay \$55 for each of the 200 honeybee hives he normally rents each spring, up from \$42 last year. The bee shortage is hitting California farmers particularly hard, because the fast-growing popularity of almonds grown there has sharply increased demand for honeybees when the supply is much lower.

Almond pollination prices have risen dramatically, from less than \$50 per colony to as much as \$150 per colony in just three years, said Daniel Weaver, president of the American Beekeeping Federation and a fourth-generation beekeeper with more than 8,000 honeybee colonies in Texas, North Dakota, Montana and California.

The higher prices beekeepers can command in California, in turn, has led some to shift beehives there from states farther east, despite the cost and time involved in getting approval to ship bees across some state lines. Lipman said that's exacerbated the beehive shortage elsewhere.

Besides the harm to hives from nature's effects, interest in beekeeping has been falling as commercial beekeepers and hobbyists alike get older and give it up.

That's one reason New Jersey's Department of Agriculture started a new program giving \$300 grants to first-time beekeepers to cover costs of starting up a hive - after completing the "Bee-ginning Beekeepers" training course offered each spring by Rutgers University's agricultural school, Cook College.

The grant program aims "to get more people interested in keeping bees, in hopes of some people getting into it commercially," said Bob Hughes, president of the New Jersey Beekeepers Association.

Hughes, 72, tends more than 200 hives set up on a couple dozen farms and in gardens on large properties around the state. Some of his hives are used for the field training on the final day of the beekeepers course, when students learn how to safely handle bees, remove honey and maintain the hives.

The new grants generated so much interest that the 50-person class in early April is booked and for the first time a second class will be given, in early May, said Lipman, the cranberry farmer, who also runs the Cook College continuing education program where the course is taught.

In North Carolina, a similar program last year that gave two beehives and Russian honeybees free to startup beekeepers quickly drew more than twice as many applicants as the hives available.

Lipman said such programs eventually should push the price of hive rental back down as more people become commercial beekeepers.

Meanwhile, along with the drop in honeybees, U.S. honey production is down from around 225 million pounds a year in the early 1990s to last year's 175 million pounds, which were worth about \$158 million, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

In New Jersey, where honeybees pollinate about \$116 million worth of crops each year, honey production now is less than half of the 900 pounds a year produced in the late 1980s. That's partly because the Garden State then had about 4,500 beekeepers, nearly double the present number, according to state apiarist Paul Raybold.

ON THE NET

American Beekeeping Federation: <http://www.abfnet.org>

New Jersey Beekeepers Association: <http://www.njbeekeepers.org>