

Bee mites may be in Pa.

Pennsylvania beekeepers must take protective measures to keep the honey bee tracheal mite from spreading throughout the state's hives, a Penn State entomologist says.

"Scientists must come up with better sampling techniques, better control strategies and better methods of detection so beekeepers know exactly where they stand," says Clarence Collison. "If they get high infestation levels, beekeepers will likely suffer increased winter losses. This has the potential to be a serious problem."

Honey bee tracheal mites are internal parasites that survive in the breathing tubes of adult bees. They feed on the host's blood until maturity, and then migrate to other bees.

"The mite is an added stress to the bee," Collison explains. "It's greatest impact is under high infestation levels at times, when the colony is already exposed to stress, such as winter confinement."

After the initial American outbreak in Texas last July, tracheal mite infestations were confirmed in ten states. A national survey was commissioned, and Pennsylvania examined 47 samples of 100 bees each in compliance with the effort. No mites were found in Pennsylvania samples.

One month after the samples were taken, however, tracheal mites were found in Pennsylvania

bees in a commercial operation sent to Florida for wintering.

"This means the mites are probably already in Pennsylvania, but weren't detected in the survey," Collison says. "Random sampling in Pennsylvania hasn't confirmed its presence, but the mite probably will be found. Infestations have been confirmed in New York and Ohio."

Northern beekeepers depend on southern bee breeders and queen bee suppliers. Some of the northern infestations can be traced back to queen and packaged bee sales and migratory beekeeping. Infestation can be controlled, Collison adds, if the mite situation encourages northern beekeepers to winter their bees on location.

"Pennsylvania beekeepers will have to produce more of their own queens. They'll have to split more of their colonies, and rely less on shipments from the South," he says. "I think that's what it will amount to."

Collison's main contention is not the spread of the disease, but the attention generated by the spread of the disease. Infestations are difficult to measure because mites are found at very low levels.

"There are two schools," he points out. "One says the mite is a serious problem at any infestation level, and something must be done. The other says infestation has been here for some time, and unless infestation levels reach 30 percent or more, we'll just have to live with it."

Since the mite find, Florida has been placed under bee quarantine by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Collison doesn't think the quarantine will be on for long.

"The purpose (of the quarantine) is to keep the mite within Florida," he says. "I think the industry has already come to the conclusion that it's going to be impossible to eradicate it."

"Right now, it looks like the infestation is the worst in Florida. But Florida officials have looked harder for the mite than any other state. The harder a state looks for mites, the greater are the

chances of finding it. It's just a matter of time until we find it in Pennsylvania colonies."

Until then, Pennsylvania will take other protective measures. The state's Department of Agriculture released a statement this week on the shipment of bees both in and out of Pennsylvania: "Pennsylvania is prepared to accept bees which have been inspected in their states according to proposed guidelines. The state is also prepared to do the required sampling so bees can move from Pennsylvania to other states that

accept these guidelines."

Collison believes that individual states might bow out of writing their own bee shipping regulations because "pandemonium could break out if every state developed its own rules and regulations."

"But if the federal government chooses not to get involved, and I suspect that that will happen, then states must accept the certificates of other states," he adds. "It must be a national effort, at least. Since it's been found in ten states, we can bet it's fairly well spread already."



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