Bee Disease Could Cost Local Growers

NEWARK, Del.-As in any business, farming relies on dependable workers, and every spring and summer farmers look to honey bees to pollinate their . crops.

In Delaware, fruit crops and many vegetable crops require the pollination help of those industrious worker bees.

During the growing season, beekeepers move their bee hives from farm to farm and orchard to orchard. Farmers hire the pollination services their crops require and beekeepers harvest the honey.

But this year, a disease pathogen that affects honey bees has caused bee losses of up to 50 percent in Delaware, resulting in

devastating reductions to populations.

'We're not sure what's causing this disease condition. Probably, it is a virus," said Dr. Dewey Caron, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension entomologist and bee specialist. "The only common variable so far is Varroa mites, which may be leaving the bees open to a virus that's killing them. Bees can tolerate some mites, but the mites make the bees more susceptible to a pathogen."

About a third of the food Americans eat comes directly from the pollination honey bees perform, Caron said, so the direct value to U.S. farmers and to consumers is significant. In fact, the agricultural function of the honey

bee is more economically significant than the honey.

According to Caron, the value of California's annual almond crop produced with the help of honey bees is more than twice the value of all the honey produced in the United States in any given year. In Delaware, apple, blueberry, watermelon, cantaloupe, and cucumber crops depend on bee pollination.

A loss of 10 to 15 percent of bee colonies each winter to cold weather, food deprivation, and disease is not uncommon, but losing half of the bee population could be catastrophic to growers in the entire Delmarva region.

Some documented losses have reached 50 percent on the Delmarva peninsula, though the average in Delaware is 35 percent. Both managed hives and wild bees are affected.

"It's a crisis situation," said Caron. "The devastating loss of bee colonies has an economic impact on agricultural production. Producers must have the bees, so they pay more for bee services from farther away. That's if they can find them. This is an expense the consumer will eventually see in food prices at roadside stands and supermarkets."

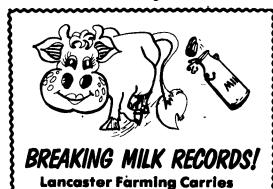
The U.S. Department of Agriculture is investigating the cause

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of the virus at their laboratory in Beltsville, Md. But regardless of their findings, this season local growers are being forced to look farther afield for a supply of bee pollinators. Caron notes that he knows of two large vegetable producers who are still trying to contract bee colonies all along the Eastern Seaboard.

"It takes one colony to pollinate an acre of cucumbers, a major vegetable crop in this state,' Caron said. "Fewer colonies means economic hardship for growers. It's a major agricultural consideration in a state where bees are responsible for \$10 million in vegetable production annually."





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