

How Many?

Counting beekeepers isn't easy

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T HERE'S been a chronic, decades-

long problem in the American beekeeping industry that has, interestingly, twice risen above the radar in just the past few months. First, in early 2005 the National Academy of Sciences, a society of scholars mandated by Congress more than 100 years ago to advise the federal government on scientific and technical matters, was directed by congress to undertake a study to determine the status of pollinators in North America. A distinguished committee of 15 scientists from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico with expertise in a wide range of fields was selected. After more than a year of cooperative effort the study was completed and a firstdraft report was released in December, 2006. We reviewed this early report extensively in Bee Culture magazine in our January and February issues this year, and the finished report is now available at www.nap.edu. The Pollinator Status report was global in its observations, scary in what it predicts, and worthy of the attention of everyone concerned with the future of pollinators, pollination, and life as we know it. In the end they laid out the current role, importance and status of pollinators, including but certainly not limited to honey bees. They looked at causes of decline in the population of all pollinators; measured the effects pollinators have in agriculture and the natural world; discussed monitoring techniques and strategies for maintaining populations; and made a host of recommendations

to accommodate each of these areas.

At the very top of the list of recommendations this elite group of scientists made for better pollinator management was the request to begin by measuring the U. S. beekeeping industry. Essentially, they want to count every bee, every beekeeper, every colony, how much honey they make and every pollinated crop they get involved with during the season. They want this information so they know what the baseline for the pollinator population is now (especially honey bees). This is so they can easily measure any changes their actions produce over time. It's standard scientific operating procedure.

Coincidentally, while these scientists were studying this problem, another disaster was unfolding across the U.S. that absolutely would affect the Status of Pollinators in North America – Colony Collapse Disorder. An incredible media explosion ensued when CCD became news. I think half of all the beekeepers in the U.S. were interviewed by local, regional or national news organizations for their individual take on the newest CCD news.

It got enough attention that there was a Congressional hearing in March and when the officials were done hearing the woes of the beekeepers and the problems the CCD Working Group was having in finding the cause – money being right up near the top – congress ordered the USDA to get to the bottom of the problem - immediately.

And they did. Within two weeks USDA Officials had called together a group of 60 or so specialists (appropriately, some were also part of the NAS study) to map out a plan to study the CCD problem in detail, and with as little duplication in effort as possible...and to find funding for the work that needed to be done.

They did good in the day and a half they had together (there's even a group photo), and at the end of the session they came up with a list of recommendations on what to look for, and who should do the looking.

But right at the top of the list was – yup, you guessed it. They made it a priority to get a count of every bee, every beekeeper, every colony and what they were doing... pollination, honey production, and all the rest. Coincidence?

Both of these groups want this information for the same reason, but sadly it does not exist, anywhere, at all, in any form.

Well, almost not.

The Government statistics folks (NASS) do a survey every year of honey bee colonies, honey production per colony and how much the honey sold for. They don't count beekeepers at all, and beekeepers with five or fewer colonies don't even exist, nor does the honey they produce, the colonies they own, or the pollination their bees accomplish.

So this annual count gets some data.

But there's no information on how colonies are maintained, what else they do with their bees, management techniques, or colony losses on an annual basis. To be fair neither the government nor the beekeeping industry have asked for this much data or supplied money to find out. So this particular report falls woefully short of what the scientists want, and lacks any meaningful detail at all.

The National Honey Board has some data, too. The Honey Board, you know, is our federally-backed industry marketing group that promotes generic honey . . . not just U.S. honey but anybody's honey. To fund their promotions they ding honey producers and honey importers a penny a pound produced or imported, which adds up to a chunk of change every year....\$4 million or so actually. They make sure they get their money by assessing domestic beekeepers who produce more than 6000 pounds of honey in a season, and importers who bring in that much or more. The Honey Board accountants monitor honey packers who buy honey from beekeepers or importers and large stores who do the same to make sure they find everybody who handles at least that amount of honey or more. And if they find someone who isn't paying their appropriate

fair share they send the Federal tax collectors after them. And those guys play for keeps.

So The Honey Board knows most of the bigger beekeepers in the U.S. but they won't tell anybody. They are a government operation, after all, and they don't have to share. They will tell you that by their count there are only about 700 or so beekeepers large enough to be considered full timers, and there are a few thousand domestic beekeepers that make 6000 pounds or more of honey a year . But this misses most beekeepers with fewer than about 50 or so colonies who don't make that 6000 pounds of honey a year. As a result, the National Honey Board data and the numbers from the NASS survey are miles apart and can't be compared in any meaningful way. What a shame. There is yet another survey taken on occasion. By us. Every so often we try and figure out how many beekeepers there are in the U.S. Not necessarily hives or bees or anything else, just beekeepers. We take a very circuitous route to get that number though. We look at our circulation data trends by state over time. We poll the bigger bee supply companies and look at their customer data by state over the same time. We poll those states that still have mandatory registration and inspection programs, and we monitor the membership numbers of as many beekeeping associations as we have (over 600 listed on our web site). Then we pull it all together, look at the big picture and kind of guess. Though we are counting only beekeepers we end up with useable data on how many colonies they operate. We're pretty good at getting these numbers because we've been at it for quite awhile. Our numbers indicate there's about 1000 commercial beekeepers,

about 5000 or so sideline beekeepers,
and maybe as many as
75 – 90,000 hobby beekeepers.
We know it's not exact, but like
the other counts, it's all we have
and it's the best there is. We don't
promote it, and it's not used by
anybody but us. Though we do
share what we find with anybody
that asks (like we just did here,
actually).

It's still the old 90:10 rule,
though, you know. Those commercial
and sideline beekeepers
are only about 10% of the population
of beekeepers, but produce
about 90% of the honey and run
about 90% of the colonies in this
country. That's not a surprise.

But we don't know other
things we should know. Surprisingly,
we don't know how many
queens are produced for sale
every year. Or how many packages.
Or how many queen cells.

And we really don't know what
hobby beekeepers do, or sideliners
for that matter when it comes
to honey production or pollination.

We can guess about all of
these and be close, but we don't
know for sure. And they don't
often share because they like to
keep those numbers close to the
vest for business purposes. No
surprise there, either.

So actually, all those scientists
have a point. We don't have
good data on anything, really.
And they say it's needed if they
are going to study pollinator
protection and solve the CCD
problem.

But being counted smacks of
government interference in the
minds of many beekeepers. Probably
in your mind too, eh? Especially
those hobby and sideline
beekeepers (about 90% of the

beekeepers overall, remember), who have only two or three colonies in the back yard, or a few out at the farm. But even larger sideline operations with several locations often take a quick dislike to this sort of government interference. One reason is that sometimes their money kind of misses the tax forms at the end of the year.

“What harm does it do to sell a little honey every year to neighbors or the good folks at work for a few bucks to help out with the bees, or for the kid’s education, or for a rainy day”, you’ll hear again and again...probably from any beekeeper selling a jar or two of honey, right?

Add to that the notion that how I manage my bees - where I keep them, how many I have, do I pollinate any crops, and do they have any problems... well, that’s my business, by gosh, and nobody needs to know that unless I want them to. Any bee inspector worth his salt will tell you that there’s a lot more bee hives owned than ever inspected. Moreover, far more states don’t have registration than do so there’s little oversight to begin with. In any event, there are more hives than we know about, doing more things than we know about, and it’ll be a pretty cold day in the tropics before they get found.

So, you see the problem. On one hand we have the government trying to help beekeepers – all those bright USDA, University and Pollinator Protection folks trying their level best to solve these new and awful problems. But to do that they want to know everything about you

and your business just so they can help.

On the other hand, you have an unknown-sized group of beekeepers running who knows how many colonies, kept who knows where, who absolutely don't want too much help, any intervention, or any counting. No counting! But what if those scientists do decide to count . . . what then? Well, if any money they find to fund these studies comes from the government, the government wants to know what they find.

And once that counting form they send, the one that tells the who, what, where, how many and how much about you and your bees, is finally returned, do you think that information will just vanish into thin air, never to be seen again? Just guess.

But what if the forms don't get filled out? What good is the research, the data, and the results then? Why bother to try if failure is pretty much guaranteed?

And if the government demands participation at the point of a gun (or the threat of a lawsuit, a fine and jail) would that help? Just guess again.

Nope, once that information is collected, analyzed, submitted and cataloged (even if it is grossly flawed information) the U.S. beekeeping industry will become as regulated and burdened as every other industry. They'll be taxed on high, need permits for anything they do, fined for everything they don't, inspected for everything, charged to within an inch of their livelihood, insured to the hilt and bothered to death. Large scale honey producers and packers will be able to pay the taxes, buy the equipment,

cover the permits and consider it all a cost of doing business and they'll pass along the costs to the consumer. Small operations? Well, they'll either go further underground or finally disappear. And hobby beekeeping will be history. Big Brother, and big business wins. All in the name of research.

My opinion? Well, CCD is indeed a deadly and horrible problem. And it is killing bees and driving beekeepers out of business. It needs solving, absolutely. And those pollinators, boy, they need protection, too. But our scientists must figure out how to do it without defining an industry that does not want to be defined. If you want to see the U.S. beekeeping industry really disappear, don't worry about CCD or loss of habitat. Just go ahead and count those bees. Go ahead. They won't be around for long.