



Pollinator Stewardship Council

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Bee Losses Are Not Sustainable

The Bee Informed Partnership released its analysis of honey bee losses for 2014 yesterday, (<http://beeinformed.org/2015/05/colony-loss-2014-2015-preliminary-results/>) showing beekeepers lost 42 percent of their colonies between April 2014 and April 2015. The Associated Press noted “it’s not quite as dire as it sounds” because beekeepers can split their surviving hives, according to Dennis vanEnglesdorp of the University of Maryland.

Yes, it’s , beekeepers can split healthy hives to make more colonies. But apiaries with 40 percent losses probably don’t have very many healthy hives, and it’s not likely splitting weak colonies will succeed. Logistics aside, what is really missing from this picture is an understanding of the economic investment required to return the number of colonies to previous levels.

This is best understood from the vantage point of the beekeeper, in the context of almond pollination, the beekeeper’s primary economic event. One beekeeper explained it thus: Do we count downhill such as 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, or do we count uphill such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5? Well, it depends on “where you start,” or “where you are going.”

If we count downhill, a beekeeper begins the year with 2,000 bee hives for honey production. The beekeeper loses some during the summer, and gets the survivors ready for winter. The beekeeper loses more colonies over the winter, and takes the remaining 1,000 good hives to almonds for rent. So, the beekeeper’s losses are 50%.

The Pollinator Stewardship Council’s mission is to defend managed and native pollinators vital to a sustainable and affordable food supply from the adverse impact of pesticides.

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If we count uphill, the beekeeper knows from past experience, to stay in business he/she needs to rent 1,000 hives to almonds. For the beekeeper to ensure 1,000 hives will be available to rent to almonds, he will need to start with 2,000 hives. This means 1,000 colonies will have to be split. The original colonies will need to be re-queened in order to begin spring with 2000 hives. Therefore, when counting uphill, the beekeeper preparing for almond pollination needs 200% more hives than he/she intends to rent. This costs staff time and hard cash for queens. Splitting a colony also takes away from its ability to make honey, as the field force is reduced. So where should the counting start? Do we examine the beekeeper's primary economic event (almond pollination), and count the economic inputs it takes to get there? Or, do we examine the high number counting down towards the beekeeper's primary economic event (almond pollination), even if this does not capture the beekeeper's economic inputs?

A true and accurate mathematical analysis will reflect what is actually happening to the bees, and what beekeepers have to do to keep our agricultural system from collapsing. Counting downhill from ivory towers, beekeeping becomes an easy race, but you have to discount how you got to the top of the hill. Counting uphill shows the effort it takes to run the race. Counting downhill or uphill each year shows how the beekeeping race has changed, but fails to capture the big picture and the number of beehives which used to last three years now only last one year. If other commodities were examined for their sustainability based on a similar survey what would be the response? If half of the cattle died every year, and the cattle industry had to double in size to generate the same number of cattle sales, what would be the repercussions, the regulatory response, and the support offered to the industry?

It has been acknowledged honey bees and other pollinators are integral to agriculture and our wild lands, and an affordable and sustainable food supply. Yet, we are not listening to the bees. Forty to fifty percent losses are not sustainable for either the bees or the beekeepers.