

Bee Culture

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CATCH THE BUZZ

Honey Bee Health Hits Congress, EPA and The White House. You'd Think Something Would Get Done, Wouldn't You?

Alan Harman

The rental fees honey producers charge for pollination services in the U.S. continues to rise due to increasing demand.

U.S. Department of Agriculture acting chief economist Robert Johansson tells a House of Representatives hearing that the average rental rate per hive doubled between 2005 and 2009 to more than \$150.

"In 2012 the fees charged for honeybee pollination services exceeded \$650 million," Johansson tells the U.S. House agriculture sub-committee on biotechnology, horticulture and research.

U.S. honey producers are responding to higher honey prices, he says.

"The number of producing colonies and average production per colony grew from 2.6 million colonies producing 57 pounds per year in 2013 to 2.7 million colonies at 65 pounds per colony of production in 2014."

But he says there is still plenty of room for growth – in 1993, there were more

than three million colonies at 73 pounds of production per colony.

Subcommittee chairman Rodney Davis (R-IL) called the public hearing to review the federal coordination and response regarding pollinator health.

“Pollinators are essential in crop pollination, however, as the issue becomes increasingly politicized, there is growing disconnect between scientific facts and public perception of the role pesticides play in pollinator health,” Davis says.

“Federal coordination and communication is vital in establishing rules and regulations impacting pollinator health and farmers’ abilities to produce food. It is essential that agencies work together to promote their health without overburdening farmers and politicizing the issue.”

Agriculture Committee Chairman K. Michael Conaway (R-TX) says agriculture policies must be based on sound science and include input from the agriculture community.

“What we do in Washington, and how agencies work with each other, directly affects farmers and ranchers’ ability to do their jobs,” he said.

Davis said that despite the overwhelming consensus within the scientific community regarding the relative importance of the various factors contributing to overall pollinator health, the factor near the bottom of the scientific community’s list seems to be the factor highest on the list of activist groups.

Pesticides and in particular those known as neonics were attracting the lion share of media and public interest attention.

Davis said neonics are highly effective and have seen a very rapid adoption rate among producers because of the significant benefits they offer.

“It is frustrating that efforts to innovate and employ new, proven technologies to enhance our ability to produce food, feed and fiber are constantly under attack,” he said.

He noted the an Executive Memorandum from President Barack Obama established a White House Task force to review pollinator health that was supposed to release its findings by the end of last year has still not reported,.

The order also directed the various departments and agencies assigned to the

task force to work together to develop a National Pollinator Health Strategy, but Davis says this is not happening – agencies continue to take unilateral action without consultations.

Johansson said the USDA collaborates with the Environmental Protection Agency on a number of key issues, such as on the Federal Pollinator Health Task Force.

“Through cooperation on environmental issues affecting agriculture and rural communities, the EPA and the USDA have developed strong working relationships,” he said.

James Jones, assistant administrator of EPA’s office of chemical safety and pollution prevention, told the sub-committee that pollinator protection is an extremely high priority for the EPA.

“Over the past several years we have taken many steps to develop scientifically sound analytical techniques for assessing the potential impacts of pesticides on pollinators and have acted, based upon this science, to reduce those exposures determined to be of most significant risk,” Jones said.

“As the science continues to advance, through the registration and registration review programs, the agency will continue to work with stakeholders to put in place any additional mitigation strategies to continue to protect pollinators.”

He said the strategy developed by Pollinator Health Task Force co-chaired by the USDA and the EPA will be released in the “very near future” and is the result of a strong interagency collaboration with a focus of improving pollinator health and increasing pollinator habitat.

“Mitigating the effects of pesticides on bees, many of which are intended to kill insects, is a difficult task but is also a priority for the federal government, as both bee pollination and insect control are essential to the success of agriculture,” Jones said.

The EPA has focused its pollinator efforts in three primary areas – advancing the science and understanding of the potential impact of pesticides on pollinators; taking appropriate risk management actions, based upon the available science;

and collaborating with domestic and international partners to advance pollinator protection.

Jones told the hearing that collaboration with domestic and international partners to advance pollinator protection is critical.

Over the past three years, the EPA has co-hosted pollinator summits on several topics, including seed treatments, honey bee health, Varroa mites, and forage and nutrition.

In addition, through its Pesticide Program Dialogue Committee, the EPA sought advice on how to improve pesticide labeling, increase methods for reporting bee kill incidents, expand the availability of best management practices for reducing pollinator exposure to pesticides, and develop a consistent approach for investigating bee kill incidents.

“In response to the advice received, the EPA has greatly improved pesticide labels for the neonicotinoids and has imposed similar labeling requirements for other pesticides that are acutely toxic to bees,” Jones said.

“We have expanded the various methods that bee kill incidents can be reported, both via the EPA’s website and other mechanisms, and we worked with states to develop a more consistent approach and guidance for investigating bee kill incidents.’

EPA has also worked with stakeholders and land grant universities to make more publically available information on best management practices for reducing pesticide exposures to bees.

“In the near future, as part of the roll out of the Pollinator Health Strategy, the EPA will soon announce additional initiatives for continuing to improve pollinator health,” Jones said.

“We will take those actions based upon the best available science and utilizing our longstanding principles of public engagement and transparency.

“The EPA we will also continue to work with the USDA and other federal and state agencies to protect pollinators while also ensuring that growers can meet their pest control needs in order to maintain a diverse ecosystem and provide for a

healthy and abundant United States food supply.”

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