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Farm bill complicates plight of honeybees

Carolyn Lochhead, Chronicle Washington Bureau
Saturday, April 19, 2008

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(04-19) 04:00 PDT Washington - -- The hand of nature, usually unseen and unappreciated, is coming down hard on California agriculture. The honeybees that pollinate its \$21 billion bounty of almonds, avocados, berries, melons and other produce that make it the nation's farming giant are disappearing from an unexplained cause.



The hand of Congress works in equally mysterious ways: A new five-year farm bill under negotiation may spend a few million dollars saving bees, but definitely will spend billions on farm subsidy policies that contribute to their destruction.

The Bush administration is pushing hard to cut commodity subsidies and divert more funds to environmental and nutrition programs in the farm bill. Congressional negotiators are pushing back to expand subsidies at the expense of these programs and want to raise more tax revenue to do it. Unable to reach agreement and facing a White House veto, they have extended the negotiations until Friday of next week.



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Domesticated honeybee colonies suffered a 35 percent decline last winter. Wild pollinators such as native bees, wasps and butterflies are suspected to be in sharp decline, too, according to scientists, beekeepers and others at a symposium organized by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who is struggling to get \$20 million in the bill to research the cause of the honeybee decline.

Likely culprits of so-called colony collapse disorder are new systemic pesticides that are safer for humans but intentionally disrupt insect neurology, causing memory loss and navigation failure.

"It's all correlative at this point," said May Berenbaum, one of the nation's top entomologists.

Troy Fore, head of the American Beekeeping Federation, said the new pesticides "don't so much kill them outright. They affect the things insects need to be able to stay alive and make a living. They're safer for mammals, of course that's humans, but they're pretty bad on bees."

Other suspects are habitat loss, exotic pests and diseases, and the rise of vast monocultures of single crops that create "floral deserts" when not in bloom.

Wild bees also hard hit

Wild bees have also been "hard hit, but it is impossible to determine" how badly, Berenbaum said. "There is evidence of decline in the abundance of ... bumblebees, some butterflies, bats and hummingbirds, but for most pollinator species, the paucity of long-term population data and the incomplete knowledge of even basic biology make definitive assessment difficult."

Most terrestrial plant life requires pollination. Without it, plants cannot exist. For some species, Berenbaum warned, "extinction

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is a possibility."

On Capitol Hill, House and Senate negotiators are hammering out final details on a farm bill that will supercharge the industrialized crop production that scientists believe weakens vital pollinators. To do that, they are looking to trim existing farm conservation programs known to help pollinators survive.

"We don't really know what all problems are with honeybees," said Judith Redmond, a partner at Full Belly Farm, an organic produce grower in the Capay Valley (Yolo County) north of San Francisco that has hosted University of California bee researchers. "But what we do know ... is there are 4,000 species of native pollinators. They are very efficient at pollinating specific crops. They need habitat. Very clearly from our farm experience and the research done on our farm, the habitats that we've installed here have made a difference to the pollinator population."

Instead of expanding these efforts, Congress is adding a new program costing as much as \$5 billion that will almost certainly intensify the push to plow fragile prairie land in Montana and the Dakotas where beekeepers rest their bees when California's nut and fruit crops are not in bloom.

Billions for farmers

Taxpayers have invested billions of dollars paying farmers to protect this land under 10- and 15-year contracts, but high grain prices, driven in part by federal ethanol subsidies, have created pressure to allow farmers to break those contracts without penalty to grow more grain.

Even if the contracts simply expire, Ducks Unlimited, a conservation group, warns of an "astounding" loss of wetlands and wildlife, including little-understood pollinators, in the

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northern prairies.

"It's looking like we're going to lose about two-thirds of the (protected) land in our area," said Jim Ringelman, director of conservation programs for Ducks Unlimited in North Dakota. "Most birds won't use cropland to reproduce in. It's just not habitat that works for them."

Or bees.

As beekeepers haul more than a million hives to California nut and fruit crops from as far away as Florida and the Dakotas, "one of the reasons they are having so much difficulty is as they drive across the country, there is nothing for them to eat," said UC Berkeley biologist Claire Kremen, who is conducting bee research.

Farm bill negotiators may have to trim these programs to make room for billions of dollars in automatic payouts to a few big commercial farms growing a few grain crops whose market prices are shattering records.

The 91 percent of California farmers who grow produce and are struggling against urban encroachment and environmental regulations will get none of that money. The farm bill throws a comparative pittance to the organic farming that shuns pesticides and rotates crops in a traditional method that attracts wildlife. Organic farming remains just 0.5 percent of U.S. agriculture despite soaring demand. Buyers are forced to look to China for organic produce.

The rise in grain prices is threatening U.S. organic markets. Conventional grains that are easier and cheaper to grow than organic grains are fetching eye-popping prices and luring farmers away from organics. Shortages of organic feeds are filtering down to organic livestock and dairy producers. That is

driving organic retail prices sky high and threatening the growth in organic markets that have proved beneficial to wildlife and conservation efforts.

Research in the farm bill is likewise a sideshow. Boxer will be lucky to get money for emergency bee research. Instead, farm bill negotiators are likely to include a costly depreciation write-off for racehorses, and a pesticide provision that opponents fear could prohibit the Department of Agriculture from promoting safer farming methods. Boxer is also fighting that provision.

The farm bill "is literally the largest public investment in conservation with private landowners for wildlife habitat that Congress ever does," said Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis. "And we have only one shot at it every five years. We have to try to get it right."

'Permanent disaster'

Farm bill negotiators want instead to pour billions of dollars into a giant new "permanent disaster" program. It will go mainly to the very grain growers in the Dakotas and Montana who are now plowing virgin prairie and marginal land set aside for conservation. The program is all but guaranteed to produce crop failures, while providing an enormous financial incentive to destroy pollinator, bird and other habitat.

Other programs that share costs with farmers to encourage conservation also are at risk.

In California, UC Berkeley biologist Kremen is convinced that crop diversification and "hedgerow" plantings of different types of plants between fields could help both domesticated honeybees and wild pollinators.

Almonds bloom in burst

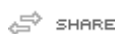
Pollinator declines are "linked to industrial agriculture in multiple ways," she said. Large monocultures of almond crops planted in the Central Valley on farm after farm bloom in one explosive burst, creating huge demand for honeybees, which then mix by the millions in a perfect setting to transmit pests and diseases.

Their food is limited to one type of blossom, a thin diet that Kremen compared to a person living on just rice or chocolate pudding.

Wild pollinators who need food the rest of the year cannot survive. Monocultures "reduce the populations of wild pollinators, reducing the number of species and their abundance," Kremen said. "You've taken a native ecosystem and replaced with a single crop blooming at a single time. The rest of the year there is nothing blooming on those fields, there is nothing for pollinators to eat."

E-mail Carolyn Lochhead at clochhead@sfgchronicle.com.

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