

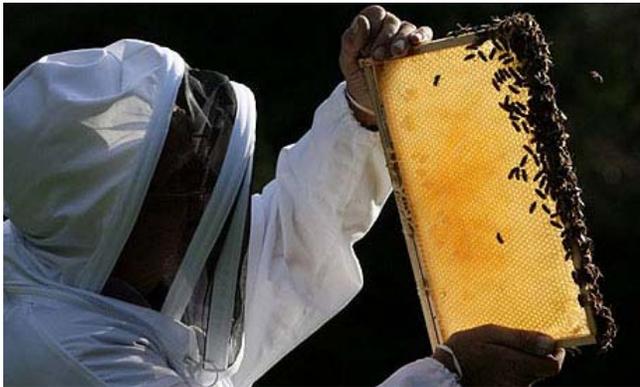
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UK honeybee population in crisis as winter weather devastates colonies

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A beekeeper tending to his hive. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty

British honeybees have been devastated by bad weather, stress and disease with more than one in five colonies thought to have been killed off over the winter, according to the government and the British Beekeepers' Association (BBA).

Figures released under freedom of information legislation show that annual colony losses have doubled in the past five years from just over 6% in 2003 to nearly 12% in 2007. With 10% of colonies inspected so far this year, losses are running at over 21%, approaching the colony collapses found in the US and in parts of continental Europe last year

"We have always had winter and spring losses but these numbers are beginning to look worryingly high. The rate of loss is important. If it climbs to 25% -30% then we are in serious trouble. If it were to go up to 60% then we will be out of beekeeping in just a few years", said Tim Lovett, chair of the BBA.

Last month, food and farming minister Lord Rooker said that without emergency measures the honeybee was likely to disappear from Britain, threatening the £165m a year fruit industry.

Yesterday, the government pledged to give higher priority to investigating bee colony losses. "While it is not unusual to see some losses over winter, there are early signs of significant colony losses across the country, which are being investigated. A more complete understanding will emerge in the coming weeks", said a Defra statement contained in monthly advice to beekeepers.

The government, which fears that Britain could lose much of its bee population if trends continue, said that the work of the bee inspectors has been "reprioritised". "If they carry out the inspection and there is no obvious explanation for the loss, samples will be sent to the National bee unit (NBU) for priority testing and investigation". Beekeepers experiencing significant losses were urged to contact their local inspector.

But the NBU said there was no evidence yet that the losses seen in the UK mirrored the situation in the US where 36% of all colonies were wiped out last year, mainly because of a poorly understood disease dubbed "colony collapse disorder", thought to be linked to the widespread varroa mite and other factors. CCD has spread to France, Germany and Italy but has not been confirmed by the government in Britain.

Britain has roughly 240,000 colonies managed by 44,000 mostly amateur beekeepers. The high point of beekeeping in Britain was in 1947 when 76,000 beekeepers kept 360,000 beehives.

The NBU, which has a budget of only £1.5m a year, said yesterday it was monitoring the situation carefully. "The poor spring we've experienced extended the bees confinement. This additional stress is likely to have provided the opportunity for pathogen spread, and virus levels to build up."

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