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Millions pledged to stop general bee decline

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Honey bees, bumble bees, b...
- Their numbers have been de...
- Experts: New diseases, pests...
- Without effective pollination p...

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TEXT SIZE  

LONDON, England (CNN) -- A British consortium pledged Tuesday to spend up to £10 million (\$14.5 million) in research grants to find out what is causing a serious decline in bees and other pollinating insects.



Bee populations have recently seen sharp declines across the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Those insects -- including honey bees, bumble bees, butterflies and moths -- play an essential role in pollinating many vital crops, but their numbers have been declining steadily in recent years, scientists say.

In the United Kingdom alone, the number of pollinators has fallen between 10 and 15 percent in the past two years, according to the Biotechnology and Biological Science Research Council (BBSRC), a government-sponsored research group.

"This funding will give some of Britain's world-class researchers the chance to identify the causes of the decline we're seeing in bee numbers, and that will help us to take the right action to help," British Environment Secretary Hilary Benn said in a statement.

The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs and the BBSRC are each committing more than £2 million (\$2.9 million) to the initiative. Also pledging funding are the Natural Environment Research Council, partly funded by the British government; the Wellcome Trust, a medical research charity; and the Scottish government.

Together, the group plans to put out a call for researchers to apply for the funding, and will decide which researchers will get the money, up to £10 million, said Matt Goode, a spokesman for the BBSRC.

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"What we're hoping for is that across the £10 million, we will fund scientists who will be able to look at the entire system -- environmental factors, social factors, agricultural factors -- to address this problem as a whole," Goode told CNN. "We want to build a new community of pollinator scientists that can keep on top of this for the future as well."

Bee populations have recently seen sharp declines across the United States, Canada, and Europe, but the reasons are not fully understood, the British Beekeepers' Association has said.

New diseases and pests could be part of the problem, as could habitat loss, the inappropriate use of chemicals in farming, and poor weather conditions, the association said in a January report on the problems.

The declines could have a serious effect on food security because bees are essential to pollination. In the early spring, honey bees are the only pollinators present in substantial numbers, so they are particularly important for early flowering crops like fruit, the association says.

As an example, bees are 90-percent responsible for pollinating apple crops, the beekeepers' association says.

"It is generally held that one in three mouthfuls of the food that we eat is bee-pollinated, and bees likewise play an immeasurable part in providing food for our wildlife," the report said. "Colony losses thus have a significant impact on food production and sustainability."

Without effective pollination, the planet faces higher food costs and potential shortages, BBSRC Chief Executive Douglas Kell said. The funding can help scientists understand why bee populations are declining and how the decline can be stopped, he said.

The decline of bees is especially acute in the United Kingdom, because the vast majority of honey bee colonies are managed by amateur beekeepers who operate for pleasure rather than profit, the beekeepers' association says.

In the United States and other countries, there are substantial commercial beekeeping sectors with enough financial backing to regenerate lost honey bee colonies, the association says. But in Britain, amateurs who have four or five colonies cannot recover in the face of substantial losses and may have to give up their hobby.

Such losses naturally have an impact on the availability of honey, the honey bee's primary product. The United Kingdom already imports more than 80 percent of its honey, the association says, so world shortages would make it even harder to find -- and more expensive to buy -- in Britain.

"The devastating effect that this decline may have on our environment would almost certainly have a serious impact on our health and well-being," said Mark Walport, director of the Wellcome Trust. "Without pollinating insects, many important crops and native plants would be severely harmed."

Alarm bells were raised in 2007 when scientists noted a phenomenon in America called "Colony Collapse Disorder" (CCD), the beekeepers' association said. The phenomenon sees worker bees suddenly leaving the hives and never returning, and it has affected billions of bees across the United States.

"If a bee leaves the hive and can't find its way back then it's dead. If a lot of bees do that, then the colony is dead," explained Chris Deaves of Twickenham Apiary in southwest London.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded \$4.1 million last year to scientists across the country to find out what is causing the decline.

"One of the suspected causes of CCD is the intense ways that we manage bees in the 21st century," said Keith Delaplane, a professor at the University of Georgia who is taking part in the study. "Beehives are moved, put on pallets, loaded on trucks, moved overnight 500 miles and set down some other place. They are constantly in stimulating foraging mode."

The use of chemicals to control bee parasites may also be contributing to the problem, he told CNN.

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▼ **Sound Off:** Your opinions and comments

Pete
 updated Tue April 21, 2009

I wonder if it has anything to do with all the cell phones and wireless devices we use nowadays. Maybe the electronic waves disrupt the bees' navigation abilities.

TheLearnedHand
 updated Tue April 21, 2009

Matt, without bees there won't be any food to feed anyone (one in three mouthfuls of food are bee pollinated according to the article). Feeding the starving children will be the least of our problems when we can't fee ...[more](#)

greatNW
 updated Tue April 21, 2009

Perhaps these research teams should partner with Washington State University. They're working on this problem here in Washington. Check out this related story from yesterday: [more](#)

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