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NEWS

As bees continue to die off, suspicion turns to chemically coated seeds and other factors

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BY BILL HANNA
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For Collin County commercial beekeeper John Talbert, the mysterious malady that is killing off bees means he's keeping his hives close to home.



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"It's like people and the swine flu: The more people you get together in one spot, the higher probability you're going to have a health problem," said Talbert, who lives near Josephine in southeastern Collin County. "I don't move them around and keep them isolated."

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But here and abroad, many other beekeepers haven't been as fortunate.

Last winter, 29 percent of U.S. hives were lost to the mysterious phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder, according to a survey conducted by the Apiary Inspectors of America and the U.S. Agriculture Department. The disorder was first noticed in 2005.

Colony collapse disorder has a variety of suspected causes: pesticides, varroa mites, viruses, stress from shipping hives long distances to pollinate crops — or some combination. Colony collapse disorder typically affects commercial hives and generally not those kept by hobbyists.

But some researchers and environmentalists are focusing again on pesticides as the key culprit.

"We do feel like pesticides are playing a role in pollinator decline," said Maryann Frazier, a senior extension associate with Penn State University. "We know that the pesticides are there. We don't know yet exactly what role they're playing."

Penn State's research is undergoing peer review and is expected to be published by the end of the year.

Focus on neonicotinoids

Environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, are targeting chemically coated seeds, called neonicotinoids. They have called on the Environmental Protection Agency to suspend use of neonicotinoids, an artificial form of nicotine, until more conclusive research can be completed. Italy, France, Germany and Slovenia have restricted the use of some of these pesticides.

California's Department of Pesticide Regulation, where more than 1 million honeybees are needed each winter to pollinate the almond crop, is also re-evaluating some neonicotinoids that may be harmful to bees.

"What we're asking the EPA is to go with precautions," said Laurel Hopwood, chairwoman of the Sierra Club genetic engineering action team. "Let's go ahead and suspend them until we get all of the research completed."

Bees are crucial to U.S. agriculture, adding an estimated \$15 billion in value each year to staples such as nuts, fruit and vegetables, many of which require bee pollination.

Commercial beekeeper Clint Walker, who is based in the Central Texas town of Rogers, has been suspicious of pesticide use since the number of his hives dropped from 2,000 in summer 2005 to 600 in

January 2006. The portion of his hives that pollinated cotton fields that had been sprayed in West Texas collapsed, while his hives that stayed in Central Texas and pollinated wildflowers experienced no problems.

But he will wait for definitive proof before assigning blame.

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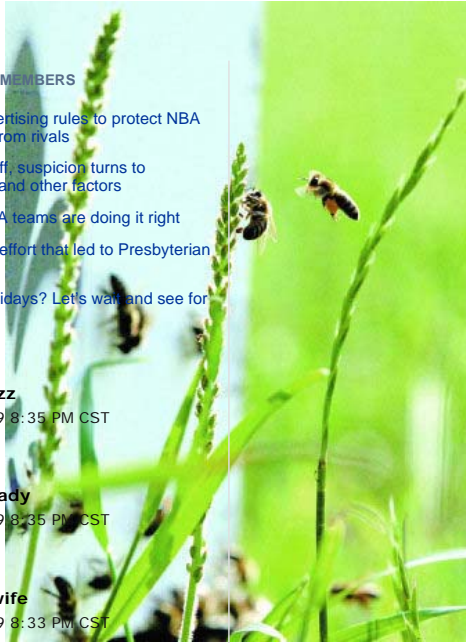
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European honeybees from one of John Talbert's hives near Josephine. Colony collapse disorder has him taking extra care. S-T/Laurie L. Ward



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STAR-TELEGRAM/JILL JOHNSON

Beekeeper Clint Walker has lost hundreds of hives and has been slowly rebuilding them. Star-Telegram/Jill Johnson

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