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Plea for more research cash as two billion bees die from rampant disease

The number of honeybees wiped out by virulent diseases which threaten their ultimate survival as a species reached almost two billion in the last year, experts have warned.

By Patrick Sawer
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They accused the Government of failing to invest in the research needed to stem diseases and parasites which are now thought to have destroyed one in three bee colonies over the past year.

Colony Collapse Disorder has severely affected bee populations in America and Europe Photo: Getty

The British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA) has calculated that up to two billion bees succumbed to sickness between November 2007 and April 2008, with a similar number expected to be wiped out by the end of this winter.

It wants ministers to increase the £200,000 currently spent on the research of bee health to £8 million over the next five years.

The BBKA warns that unless the money is spent a cure will never be found - leading to the ultimate extinction of Britain's honeybees.

Tim Lovett, President of the BBKA, said: "Bees are probably one of the most economically useful creatures on earth, pollinating a third of all we eat. They provide more than 50 per cent of pollination of wild plants on which birds and mammals depend. We must identify what is killing them and that means research.

"The increased funding we are asking for is a drop in the ocean compared to the billions of pounds the Government has found for bank bail outs."

Beekeepers will bring their plea for help to Gordon Brown's doorstep on Wednesday, when they deliver a petition of 130,000 names to Downing Street calling for immediate Government action.

The BBKA carried out a nationwide survey of how many of Britain's 274,000 bee colonies, each one with 20,000 bees, failed to survive last winter. It found that one in three had failed to make it through to spring, with the

resulting loss of at least 1.8 billion bees.

The losses have been blamed on a phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder, a disease that has also severely affected bee populations in America and Europe, along with a resistant form of the parasitic Varroa mite.

But the cost of the disease is not just in lost bees. The decline in honey bees is threatening the sustainability of home grown food. Bees pollinate more than 90 per cent of the flowering crops we rely on for food, thereby contributing more than an estimated £1 billion a year to the economy. The loss of 90,000 bee colonies last winter - each of which makes a £600 contribution to the agricultural economy each year - will have cost £54 million.

"The decline in honey bee numbers could have a catastrophic effect on food production, putting pollination of fruit and vegetables at risk," said Mr Lovett. "This will have an inevitable knock on effect in the food supply chain."

Furthermore, the rampant spread of the Varroa mite is hitting supplies of honey, with Rowse Honey - the UK's leading manufacturer - warning that English honey will run out by Christmas. It has pledged £100,00 to support research into bee health.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said it was developing a bee health strategy for finding a cure for threats such as Varroa and has spent an extra £90,000 on investigating the increase in bee colony deaths.

In a statement it said: "The fact that funding for the bee health programme has been maintained at the same level over a number of years, when other programmes have faced major cuts, is a positive signal of the importance Government attaches to this area of work.

"Demands for substantially increased funding in the current financial climate are unrealistic, particularly when there is not yet any clear strategy on what is trying to be achieved in relation to bee health policy. What is most important is that we have a clear understanding of disease threats and how to tackle them."

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