

TAYLOR: Hopes rise for bees in N.S.

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Bees in Nova Scotia seem to be making a comeback of sorts.

There were 60 new beekeepers registered with the province this year alone, says Joanne Moran, bee health adviser with the provincial Agriculture Department. That brings the total number of Nova Scotia beekeepers to about 250.

Many of those new beekeepers have taken up the practice as a hobby, but Moran believes it may be a sign of the growing awareness of the importance of bees and a desire among people to become involved.

She estimates there are 19,000 to 20,000 hives in Nova Scotia, with about 50,000 bees in each hive during the summer peak.

Farmers rely on bees to pollinate their crops, so any sign the bee population may be in trouble has negative implications for Nova Scotia's multibillion-dollar agricultural sector.

The bee mortality rate this spring averaged about 17 per cent, down from a few difficult years that had an average mortality rate of about 35 per cent, says Moran. It is an improvement, but that still isn't the 12 to 15 per cent mortality rate for bees that "overwintered" in Nova Scotia about 10 years ago.

The lack of an extended cold spell last winter probably worked to the bees' advantage, Moran says. That and the fact that bee experts are finding better ways to battle the parasitic varroa mite.

It has caused damage to the bee population and has been a major industry concern, Moran says.

Most importantly, beekeepers are learning how to maintain strong bee colonies, especially heading into winter. The healthier the bees, the stronger the colony and the better chance the bees will be able to battle the mite and winter weather, says Moran.

During the cold months, the bees huddle together and create a ball that will feed off a frame in the hive. Once the food runs out, the cluster will move on to another frame, Moran says. But if the weather is too cold, the bees won't be able to move and will starve.

Sierra Club Canada says heavy pesticide use is to blame for bee kills, especially in Ontario. The environmental group is pressing political leaders to ban pesticide use.

The organization has singled out Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, also the agriculture minister, and has asked her to raise the pesticide issue at the annual meeting of federal, provincial and territorial agriculture ministers today in Halifax.

While aware of the pesticide issue in other provinces, Moran says it doesn't appear to be a major concern for Nova Scotia beekeepers. There have not been any reports of extraordinary losses "for any reason" in this province.

Dave Sangster, executive director of the Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia, says his membership relies heavily on bees to pollinate the crop. Sangster says wild blueberry producers harvest about 18 million kilograms of blueberries annually, but he fears the crop will be "a little light" this year.

Poor weather in early June meant the bees weren't active and the pollination period wasn't as successful as it previously has been.

There is a growing demand for bees, Sangster says, because more blueberry farms are being created. The last two years, blueberry growers have been allowed to import Ontario bees to help with pollination. This year, about 5,000 hives were imported to Nova Scotia, Sangster says.

Although the honeybees are an important part of the blueberry business, he says the growers rely on all kinds of pollinating insect and some growers have started importing the bumblebee to do some of the work, especially in early spring.

"The bumblebee seems to be a little heartier than the other bees and moves around more in the damp weather."

Blueberries have become an important food export for Nova Scotia, with the frozen product being shipped around the world. For those interested in learning more, the association will be hosting its annual field day Saturday at its Debert headquarters on Dakota Road.

Any beekeeper with more than 50 hives is considered a commercial operator. Moran says keepers make their money by renting their bees to farmers during the pollination period and then harvesting the honey, and some sell beehives to help supplement their income.

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By **ROGER TAYLOR** Business Columnist

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