

Protect the bees, protect the environment

Huntsville Forester

MUSKOKA – The buzz swarming southern bee farms this year wasn't the happy sound of eager honeybees going about their business, but rather the fear of farmers losing their colonies.

"It's definitely been a challenging year," said Les Eccles, tech-transfer program lead with the Ontario Beekeepers' Association. "We had a lot of winter mortality over the winter, our provincial loss was about 35 per cent, which is very high. So that was a tough start and in the spring with the pesticide issues. Last year (2012) we had a lot of issues with exposure to a class of insecticides called neonicotinoids."

The most impacted areas are in southern Ontario around Sarnia, Windsor and London where there are more farm fields. Beekeepers in Muskoka haven't been as badly impacted, as they don't have to contend with insecticide spraying on large crops.

"Up here we're not having much of a problem," said Jim Smith, Poppa Jim's Honey in Windermere. "There aren't any big corn or soy fields here, just general farming."

Smith has been a beekeeper for more than 30 years in Muskoka. He said a fellow beekeeper he'd talked with from Arthur was only able to harvest 30 pounds of honey from his colony this year, compared to Smith's 75 or so pounds.

Even though the insecticide issue isn't as prevalent in Muskoka, Smith said everyone should take an interest in the issue as it affects the food system. Without bees, he said it'd be hard to live.

"They need to pollinate so we can live. Bees and other insects are responsible for pollinating about 85 per cent of the food system," said Smith.

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency within Health Canada took numerous samples and investigated the neonicotinoids. They determined the use of the insecticide tends to correlate with corn planting and soy crops and in the cases tested caused the death of bees, said Eccles.

"With more research and people watching for it, this year we had the same issue with completely different environmental conditions, so it's not environmental it's actually exposure to the chemicals of this insecticide in general," said Eccles. "Again this year, there's been a big effect on bee colonies and bee health. It's not just corn, they've linked it to soy beans as well."

Eccles said there's a lot of misinformation floating around surrounding this issue. He said some people will argue there are actually more bee colonies now, but that's simply because beekeepers are producing more colonies to make up for the ones they've lost.

"We're losing a lot of colonies and beekeepers are draining their resources just to try and keep the numbers up and keep up with pollination services to keep fruit and vegetable production up as well," said Eccles. "They're kind of taking all the hits."

Not only has it been a challenging year for bee health, Eccles said it's also been challenging for honey crops too. He said no honey crop came in between July and the end of the year (early fall), which means a 75 per cent loss in the yielding of honey.

"Everyone's just kind of waiting for next year," said Eccles. "At this point beekeepers are preparing their hives to get through the winter. We're hoping there are going to be some changes in the rules on how this insecticide can be used on crops. PRMA has already put out a statement saying it's unsustainable the way it's being used now."

Eccles said some crops using this insecticide don't necessarily even have the pest it treats.



It's been a challenging year for Ontario beekeepers, but the insects fare better in Muskoka where they don't have to contend with insecticide spraying on large corn or soy crops.



Local beekeeper Poppa Jim has been in Muskoka for more than 30 years.