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Bee Demise Has Been Greatly Exaggerated: Front Burner

By Paul Driessen Guest columnist

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Reports in the media of a coming bee-apocalypse would particularly concern residents of the Sunshine State. Florida is home to a booming \$9 billion citrus industry employing nearly 76,000 locals. As several citrus varieties require honeybee pollination to prosper, any threats to our fuzzy friends should be taken seriously. Fortunately, though beekeepers are struggling with ongoing parasite and disease problems, bee populations are doing fine.

The number of honeybee hives in the United States has remained fairly steady for the past 14 years. According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), there has even been a slight increase of colonies from 2.63 million in 2000 to 2.64 million in 2013.

There's good news for bees worldwide as well. Managed bee populations have risen from about 40 million in the early 1960s to more than 60 million today. Canada's government has reported the largest numbers of bees since the 1980s. [United Nations](#)' surveys show that Europe's colonies have slightly increased since 2001.

Readers may wonder why, if bees are doing fine, so many news stories seem to indicate otherwise. There are several reasons for the misinformation. First, many journalists reporting on these numbers don't understand that worker bees already have short life spans. They live for only six weeks in the summer. The hive generally is able to quickly regenerate to account for losses.

Second, these reporters often confuse the typical drop in populations that happens every winter with an ongoing decline. Beekeepers expect to lose a certain percentage of their hives every year as part of a natural process of overwintering. These rates of loss aren't problematic at up to 19 percent, but even beyond that number, many beekeepers can still compensate. Last year, the rate of loss in the United States was much lower than in previous years, reported the USDA. Recently, European honeybee protection network COLOSS1 announced the lowest rate of yearly winter colony loss since the group started collecting data in 2007.

Third, higher-than-normal rates of losses of bees in the winter can result in economic setbacks for some beekeepers. Bad news sells, while the good years don't get much attention.

Fourth, it is true that many beekeepers today have to work harder to maintain healthy hives. The USDA has studied this extensively and found many factors to blame. The spread of a tiny parasite called the varroa mite is the primary problem. It latches on to bees and activates multiple viruses that normally don't threaten the insects. It acts like bee HIV in this way. Beekeepers lack a way to eradicate the mites once hives are infected.

Other diseases are on the rise, and bees are tricky patients. They face lack of forage and stress from being moved around as part of the pollination business. They also can be accidentally killed as the result of off-label pesticide use or even application by beekeepers inside the hive trying to treat a health problem.

Finally, the idea that bees are on the verge of extinction is being pushed by organic food and anti-insecticide activists who claim an innovative class of pesticide called neonicotinoids are causing honeybee problems. These pesticides are engineered to be less toxic to bees and are

critical for many staple crops. They are also preventing the collapse of Florida citrus due to a virus called HLB that causes trees to produce stunted fruit.

It would be a calamity for Florida citrus and bees if activists persuade regulators to ban neonics. If that happened, many farmers would have to revert to older pesticides like organophosphates and pyrethroids, which, unlike neonics, really are bad for bees.

The greatest threat to bees is to ignore the facts in favor of a misguided agenda. As the numbers show, there is no bee-apocalypse.

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