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MEMO

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Bee health: what is the EU doing?

Questions & Answers

1. What has the European Commission done for better bee health?

The Commission contributes to bee health on many areas:

On the **veterinary side**, the Commission: created an EU Reference Laboratory for bee health in 2011; co-financed voluntary surveillance studies to estimate the extent of bee mortalities since 2012; trained hundreds of national veterinary officials in bee health under the Better Training for Safer Food initiative since 2010, and ran research projects to deal with honeybee health. In addition, the Commission takes into account the limited availability of veterinary medicines for bees during the review of the EU veterinary medicinal products legislation. A Commission proposal is planned to be adopted in the second quarter of 2014.

On **pesticides**, the EU has one of the strictest regulatory systems in the world concerning the approval of pesticides. All pesticides on the market have been subject to a thorough and in depth assessment by Member States' authorities and by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). For the assessment the latest scientific knowledge is taken into account, including independent studies. For pesticides the Commission further strengthened the data requirements for the submission of the dossiers, reviewed together with the EFSA the **risk assessment scheme concerning the impact of pesticides on bees** and took actions on 4 specific insecticides where a risk concerning bees was identified (additional details are reported in the questions below).

On **agriculture**, the Commission has maintained the level of EU funding to national apiculture programmes for the period 2014-2016 (taking into account the accession of Croatia), which amounts to € 33,100.000 per year.

On the apiculture sector (beekeepers), the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU brings important benefits. We eat more honey than we produce and honeybees take an active part in the pollination of crops. For several years, the EU has been providing support to the beekeeping sector, essentially through national apiculture programmes and rural development programmes.

On the **environment**, the Commission ran the LIFE+ programme which can be used for the benefit of wild bees; initiated the preparation of a Red List of Threatened Pollinators, to be published by the end of the year; and ran a research project to deal with the decline of both wild and domesticated pollinators in Europe.

2. Why was an EU surveillance study into honeybee losses and their causes carried out?

From 2007 various European and global publications and fora warned about bees disappearing (especially following news on "colony collapse disorder" in the USA), and about alarmingly high mortalities, severe and rapid decline in European honeybee colonies (winter mortalities around or in excess of 30-40%).

An EFSA project in 2009 indicated that the honeybee surveillance systems in the EU Member States were weak. There was a lack of representative official data at country level and comparable data at EU level to estimate the extent of colony mortalities.

The study (*EPILOBEE, A pan-European epidemiological study on honeybee colony losses 2012-2013*) addresses these weaknesses for the first time by harmonising the data collection methods.

It also assists the veterinary services in improving their capacity to undertake such surveillance. The methodology can be implemented and used as necessary, adapted to specific needs as appropriate for further work such as applied research, policy development, routine surveillance or to cross-check with data from other sources (e.g. from national or regional monitoring, from international standardised beekeeper surveys etc.).

Full report is available here:
http://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/live_animals/bees/index_en.htm

3. What are the key findings of the study?

The study, which covers almost 32.000 colonies across 17 Member States during the period from autumn 2012 until summer 2013, shows that colony mortalities exist in the EU with significant regional differences.

Winter colony mortality rates ranged among participating countries from 3.5% to 33.6% with a distinct North/South geographical pattern.

The countries where mortalities on average were below 10% (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia and Spain) represent the majority (over 59%) of hives (6.485.000) of the surveyed population and 47.3% of all EU honeybee population.

Countries with a mortality rate between 10% and 15% (Germany, France, Latvia, Poland and Portugal) represent 34.6% of the surveyed population or 27.7% of all EU honeybee population (3.793.170 hives).

Members States with more than 20% mortality rate (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Sweden and UK) represent 6.24% of the surveyed population or ca. 5% of all EU population (684 500 hives).

Overall rates of **seasonal colony mortality** (during beekeeping season) were lower than winter mortality and ranged from 0.3% to 13.6%.

4. How representative are the findings and how do they compare to previous data?

17 Member States participated on a voluntary basis. They co-financed the study with the European Commission, which contributed with €3.3 million (70% of eligible costs).

The surveillance was specifically designed to **collect data on a representative sample of apiaries and colonies, also by way of on-site investigations**. A representative sample was reached through a random sampling of apiaries of the entire Member State or of some regions of the Member State considered as representative of the Member State's situation. Member States were recommended to randomly select beekeepers and apiaries from a national list of beekeepers. Within each apiary, a number of colonies were randomly selected in order to be representative of the apiary. The sampling frame was the same for all the Member States.

These are the first results of its kind, i.e. collected and verified by the national competent authorities under the supervision of, and training by, the veterinary services, using EU harmonised methodology. This makes it difficult to compare them to previous data which may be missing incomplete or collected otherwise. Mortality rates less than 10% for large populations are encouraging.

5. Since the findings show that honeybee decline is less dramatic than first thought, will the Commission maintain its ban on neonicotinoids?

The Commission based its decision on new scientific information which became available in 2012 and on which EFSA was asked for an assessment. EFSA identified high risks for bees for some uses of three neonicotinoids (Imidacloprid, Clothianidin and Thiametoxam) and Fipronil. This assessment confirmed that the approval criteria of these pesticides were no longer satisfied. Furthermore, **EPILOBEE did not take into account bumble bees and solitary bees**, which are also affected by the pesticides and covered by the EFSA assessment. At the time the measures were taken, the results of the EPILOBEE programme were not yet available.

6. Why does the EU surveillance not include pesticide monitoring?

The Commission did request the EU Reference Laboratory to include pesticides in the study. However a draft project was discussed with Member States experts and at that stage it was not considered feasible to carry out such a surveillance programme on pesticides together with the one carried out.

The EPILOBEE study which is still ongoing was not designed to assess the effect of the use of the banned pesticides on bee health. It would be unacceptable from a scientific view point to draw any conclusion from the results of this study on the use of the pesticides in question or to infer that the measures taken by the Commission were not appropriate.

7. What is the status of the EU surveillance study?

These are the results of the first year of the surveillance studies, running from autumn 2012 to summer 2013. The studies are being repeated with the participation of 16 out of the 17 Member States for another year, between autumn 2013 and summer 2014, to see whether any trends can be established.

8. What is the situation with wild bees and are they important?

The surveillance study only looked into honeybees. Scientific data on wild pollinators, including wild bees is scarce, but current indicators show a worrying decline. We should have a better understanding at the end of this year when, thanks to joint work between IUCN and STEP in a Commission funded research project, will provide the first results on status and trends of European wild pollinators. However, preliminary results already suggest that wild bees face a serious threat. The recent assessment of bumblebees indicates that 24% percent of the 68 species of bumblebees that occur in Europe are threatened with extinction on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Domestic and wild bees are closely related, face the same threats and are both necessary to ensure crop pollination and maintain biodiversity. Therefore, the status of wild bees can give us insights into local changes and warn beekeepers about potential threats. Wild bees can jump in and provide pollination service when honeybees face decline or help increase the pollination efficiency of the latter. They are crucial for the survival of wild plants that honeybees cannot pollinate.

9. How does the recent CAP reform help to support the sector?

Member States can submit tri-annual national apiculture programmes for EU co-financing. Thanks to the reform the measures which can be funded have been updated and completed. In particular, EU funding will be available for actions aimed at combatting beehive invaders and diseases, particularly varroasis. All Member States have national apiculture programmes in place for 2014-2016.

With the new Rural Development Programmes, Member States have at their disposal a series of measures and eligibilities such as training, advisory services, participation in quality schemes and promotion, investments, cooperation projects and risk management which can be co-financed by the EU. Agri-environment-climate measures in these programmes can also make a positive contribution to creating a better environment for bees. Other measures in the reformed CAP may be indirectly beneficial for of bees. The compulsory greening measures of the new Direct Payment Regulation, in particular crop diversification and ecological focus areas, could contribute to a better environment for bees.

10. Does our countryside have an impact?

Agricultural practices that result in changes in land-use and habitat loss also represent a serious threat to many bees in Europe. Therefore, biodiversity-friendly measures in agriculture will be essential to reverse negative trends and are crucial for our food supply security. Among these are the provision of good forage through flower-rich field margins or buffer strips along agricultural fields and the preservation of species-rich grasslands or meadows that underpin stable populations of pollinators. The restoration of degraded ecosystems would also be an important support of pollinators.

For more information:

Honey production in the EU: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/honey/index_en.htm

National apiculture programmes:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/honey/programmes/index_en.htm and
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/evaluation/market-and-income-reports/apiculture-2013_en.htm