

Tennessee honey bees struggling

By ANNE PAINE
Staff Writer

ARRINGTON — Brown shreds hung like burst balloons from a tulip poplar tree beside Jim Garrison's bee hives.

What would have been blooms with nectar and pollen for the honey bees coming and going from the wooden boxes had withered in a killing frost.

The unpredictable climate is just one of the threats to the buzzing, flying insects, which the Tennessee Beekeepers Association says are key among the pollinators responsible for every third bite of food eaten in the country.

Honey bees alone are credited with pollinating crops worth more than \$14 billion nationally and \$67 million in Tennessee and include pumpkins, squash, cucumbers and watermelon.

Their most recent nemesis is a mysterious phenomenon called "Colony Collapse Disorder." Nationally, it is devastating masses of commercial colonies — more than half in some cases — that are counted on to produce fruit and vegetable crops. Tennessee, a state of bee hobbyists, has not encountered this in a major way, but honey bees here are still struggling.

The number of honey-producing colonies in the state has dropped by 95 percent since the 1980s. Garrison, who has about 45 hives and is president of the beekeepers' group, said he lost about a fifth of his bees over the winter.

Farmers like Mack Moss of Mt. Juliet see what's happening nationally and have pause.

"I'm a little bit concerned," he said.

Moss relies on honey bees for plump, well-shaped pumpkins for his pick-your-own extravaganza that draws thousands of people to his farm, Pumpkin Hill, each October.

Colonies wiped out

Garrison says he lost so many bees this winter likely due to starvation. A dry summer and fall meant less nectar from flowers, which meant less honey.

A mild winter, then, resulted in bees moving around more in the hives — rather than bunching up to stay warm — so they ate more honey, Garrison said.

It wasn't enough, and he should have fed them more sugar water, he said. Other beekeepers reported similar losses.

Colony Collapse Disorder was first seen with a migratory beekeeper who moves about 3,000 colonies along the east coast to pollinate crops including oranges, blueberries and pumpkins, according to the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture.

A colony often has from 6,000 to 50,000 bees, depending on the time of year. In October, the beekeeper found that two-thirds of his colonies were gone.

Commercial beekeepers elsewhere began reporting disappearances, too, said John Skinner, UT Extension insect and bee expert.

While no cases are confirmed in Tennessee, one of the state's few beekeepers who hires out colonies, Howard Kerr of Maryville, said he lost 85 percent of his 80 hives this winter.

"I would open a hive and there wouldn't be a bee in it," he said. "I don't have a clue why.

"For the first time in 40 years of beekeeping, I put my (honey) extracting equipment away into storage."

He's bought new bees, but won't have honey to sell for at least a year.

Skinner said the national disorder could be due to bacteria, fungi or viruses or to stress from being moved and exposure to chemicals.

Genetically modified seed crops and cell phone towers have been mentioned by some speculators, and jokers have added "bee rapture" to the list.

Helping bees

Honey bees were brought here from Europe and today are relied on by agri-business for many crops, including almonds, squash and cherries.

The non-profit Xerces Society wants the honey bees — and also the about 4,000 species of native wild bees — helped.

"We think" the native bees "can help and diversify our pollinator portfolio out there on the land," said Scott Hoffman Black, with the Oregon group.

They include bumblebees, the common sweat bee and the blueish or greenish black Mason bee, usually mistaken for a fly.

The group has called for incentives in the 2007 federal Farm Bill to improve habitat for the native pollinators by having a diversity of flowering plants, saving trees and grass for nesting and taking more care with pesticides.

Native and European honey bees both suffered in the 1980s when two killer species of mites wiped out many.

Lots of people, including in Tennessee, quit raising bees then.

Gray Haun, who oversees the state Agriculture Department's bee regulations, said he wasn't aware of any less food being produced here because of the bee decline over the years.

'Save our hide'

Moss, as many others, has his own hives, about three in his case, or almost one per acre of pumpkins.

“It’s almost like spreading fertilizer,” he said. “If you’re going to raise pumpkins, you better have bees.”

Clover nectar is the mainstay here for bees and their honey.

Garrison, who said local honey is in short supply, remembers his father and grandfather raising bees at a time when it wasn’t so difficult.

As it is, the financial advisor hasn’t had a good honey take in about five years.

“We were starting to have a banner year, but the freeze got us,” he said, nodding toward the stricken poplars’ would-be blooms.

“I’m hoping the clover will save our hide,” he said.

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