

Beekeepers face stinging losses  
Parasites suspected in colony collapses

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Alberta's beekeepers say they're experiencing higher-than-average losses to their winter hive stocks for the second year in a row.

Losses are estimated at about 25 per cent in overwintered bee colonies across the province, said Paul Laflamme, head of Alberta Agriculture and Food's pest management branch.

That's 10 per cent higher than what is considered normal.

"It seems that the two worst areas are the Peace and Northwest regions," Laflamme said.

La Crete honey farmer Ernie Martens, who normally runs 1,000 hives, is estimating his losses at 70 per cent.

"We're trying to figure out ways to rebuild but I'm not sure how," he said.

Martens said he's been careful to control pests, mites and any other stress factors on his bees, but suspects that he may be facing a mystery ailment that has plagued beekeepers in the United States since 2006.

"Personally, in my operation, I do have a colony collapse disorder," Martens said. "I have all the classic symptoms of what they're finding with colony collapse."

CCD is characterized by a rapid loss of adult honey bees in a colony. Beekeepers usually find a live queen and the brood remaining in a hive, but adult bees are simply gone, with no evidence of dead bees. There is currently no known cause for the disorder.

So far, Laflamme said he has not received reports of CCD in Alberta.

In the 2006-07 winter season, the province's beekeepers were devastated by an average 30-per-cent winterkill rate. An additional 15 per cent of surviving hives were considered weak.

"It was mainly due to mites, and a few other bee diseases," said Laflamme. "Also, the type of fall we had in 2006 contributed to the problem. We had warm weather and then it turned cold very quickly and we had snow very quickly, so the bees were not prepared for winter."

Stephen Pernal, research scientist for Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, said that varroa mite populations in Canada have developed a resistance to common pesticides. "In beekeeping operations where we've seen heavy losses, there has always been high levels of mites," he said.

Pernal also noted the rise of a new variation of nosema, an internal parasite of honeybees that kills off colonies over time and can be hard to detect.

Antibiotics are often used to keep the parasite in check over the winter.

Kevin Nixon, president of the Alberta Beekeepers Association, said the industry is hurting.

"There's definitely people leaving the business," he said. "Some guys who are getting into their 60s -- if they're getting hit harder, or two years in a row, or honey prices are low, they're at the age where they can get out of it."

But it's not just the beekeepers who might lose their livelihoods. If heavy losses persist, Alberta's \$3.2-billion canola industry would be decimated.

"We would not exist without bee pollination," said Danielle Letain, senior production agronomist at Pioneer Hi-Bred Ltd.'s canola production facility in Lethbridge.

About 70,000 hives will be used to pollinate fields this year. Bees are also used to pollinate a variety of fruits, berries, and nuts.

"We've been contracting bees for numerous years and definitely over the last two years we've been hearing more concerns," Letain said.

Because Pioneer contracted pollinating services early, Letain said she hasn't seen a significant increase in pollination rates, but "it's becoming a little bit of a challenge to stay the course."

Alberta Agriculture and Food began surveying commercial beekeepers with 400 hives or more earlier this month by phone and fax to pinpoint the extent of winterkill. Laflamme expects to see preliminary results next week but said response to the survey has been slow.

Nixon worries that by the time numbers come in, it'll be too late.

"Alberta Agriculture won't take any action until they take these numbers, and by the time they get these numbers, our season will be well underway and close to production time."

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