

Honeybees overcome negative buzz in Washington

June 23 2009, By Robert Hotakainen

Official Washington is all abuzz over honeybees.

At the White House, two types of parasite-resistant [honeybees](#) developed by U.S. scientists will be delivered to the first family's new garden next month.

On Capitol Hill, California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer wants Congress to spend \$20 million to research colony collapse disorder, which has caused big losses for the nation's beekeepers in recent years.

Both developments are welcome news for honeybee backers, who have found themselves getting slapped around this year.

When an early version of an economic stimulus bill contained \$150 million in subsidies for honeybees and other farm products, many Republicans howled in protest.

"This is nonsense," huffed Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate's minority leader.

And when Congress passed a \$1.7 million earmark for Texas honeybees as part of a broader appropriations bill, critics cited it as a prime example of pork-barrel spending.

Beekeepers find themselves on the defensive and say they must educate members of Congress about the importance of their industry. They're

doing it with the help of lobbyists. Yes, bee lobbyists.

"Life is interesting. My inbox is rather eclectic," said Thomas Van Arsdall, a bee lobbyist or, more officially, the director of public affairs for the Pollinator Partnership.

He's busy making plans for the third annual National Pollinator Week, June 22-28, a time for schools, churches, garden clubs and others to celebrate honeybees and other [pollinators](#). "They're important if you like to eat," explained Van Arsdall.

Beyond the Beltway, at research labs at the University of California, Davis, scientists are out to build a better bee.

Researchers are using imported semen from bees in Italy, Germany and Turkey to develop new crosses of honeybees that will be more resistant to pests and disease.

Their work is financed partly by Oakland-based Haagen-Dazs, which relies on fruits and nuts pollinated by bees for nearly 40 percent of its ice cream flavors. As part of the national campaign, the company also created a new Honey Bee vanilla ice cream last year.

Colony collapse disorder, first reported in 2006, is marked by a sudden decline in a bee colony's population and the mysterious absence of dead bees. Many scientists believe that it's caused by stresses that can include parasites, pesticides and pathogens that build up in bee colonies.

As Congress considers spending more on honeybee research, beekeepers such as Barry Olmstead are hoping to cash in. He and his son, Joshua, have created the Save the Bee Foundation and plan to apply for a federal grant to study why so many honeybees are disappearing.

"That's the biggest thing, because everybody's losing more than half their hives each year," said Olmstead, 48, of Elk Grove, Calif., who figures he has been stung about 200 times.

"Here's the thing that people don't really understand: About one-third of the world's produce is pollinated by bees," he said.

If he gets a grant, Olmstead said, he and his son would work with university researchers, local and national bee associations, and apiarists to advance the cause of honeybee research.

"We gotta figure out what's going on here," he said.

Before Congress passed the \$787 billion stimulus bill in February, the honeybee subsidies became a target of ridicule for many opponents.

An early version of the stimulus bill included \$150 million for disaster relief for honeybees, livestock and farm-raised fish, but that was removed after critics complained that it was a waste of money.

It became "a hit of the pundits," said Troy Fore, director of government relations for the Georgia-based American Beekeeping Federation Inc.

Expect to hear a lot about honeybees in coming months. They'll get a big moment in the sun in July, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture takes its new mite-resistant bees to the White House garden. One of the new bees is based on a strain of honeybees from Russia, which are highly tolerant of cold weather and require less artificial breeding than typical honeybees.

And on Capitol Hill, Congress will decide whether to spend more on honeybees when members tackle the appropriations bills.

In a letter to Senate appropriators last month, Boxer said Americans take "the indispensable services" of honeybees for granted and that federal support of honeybee research has been lagging. In arguing for her proposed \$20 million in research funds, she noted that the number of managed honeybee colonies in the United States has dropped by half since 1940.

Fore said beekeepers are counting on Boxer's bill to provide the money for more research into the mysteries of colony collapse disorder.

"Our main goal is for science," Fore said. "We don't know what's causing CCD, and we don't know what to do about it. ... The truth is that beekeepers do need help. That's the truth of the story."

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