

Coal miners shift to beekeeping

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University of Delaware's Debbie Delaney is helping former coal miners learn a new trade -- beekeeping. Credit: University of Delaware

Former coal miners or citizens whose lives have been shaped by the coal mining industry in southern West Virginia spent their summer learning how to establish and operate bee colonies thanks to help from the University of Delaware's Debbie Delaney.

Delaney, associate professor of entomology in UD's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, spent her summer in Summers

County working as a consultant through Appalachian Headwaters which is a non-profit organization that formed the Appalachian Beekeeping Collective. Delaney said that the goal was to help get the socioeconomic growth program up and running for displaced miners in 14 counties in southern West Virginia.

"We got about 500 nucleus colonies or nucs, which are small colonies of bees, and a queen and all summer we've been erecting bear fences and creating bee yards so we can grow the colonies over the season and get them through the winter," said Delaney.

Beginning next year, local partners will come on board and get hives which will be a way for them to generate income.

Delaney said that how much income will vary depending on what kind of forage is available during that time of year—and that since the initial installation began after foraging season, they have had to feed the bees a lot to get them up to weight to make it through winter.

"Typically, I'd say in that area of West Virginia, if they do things right, they should be able to get close to 200 pounds [of honey] off of each hive," said Delaney.

The way the program operates, the local partners will get the colonies, pull their honey off and bring it to the experts at the Appalachian Beekeeping Collective to extract.

"I've been helping them design a big honey processing building that will be able to process 100,000 pounds of honey and then we will bottle it, we'll market it and we'll sell it to a higher end community," said Delaney. "We're not just selling the honey but also a story which is really cool."

Kate Asquith, program director at Appalachian Headwaters, said that

starting a beekeeping operation can be a risky and expensive endeavor and they wanted to help the first-time beekeepers get over those hurdles.

"This is a way to make sure that they're getting as much profit from their beekeeping as they can," said Asquith. "Our hope is that we can help people get a lot more money for the work that they're doing and Debbie is a really big part of all of it. She's been a wonderful piece of helping us plan out the program."

Appalachian Beekeeping Collective is headquartered at an old camp that was once owned and operated by [coal mining](#) companies that saw thousands of kids of coal miners go through the camp from different mining states.

"These people are so tied to this place. When I was there over the summer, at least twice a week somebody would drive by and say, 'I went to camp here 50 years ago. This place means so much to me' so it's a really special spot," said Delaney. "There's so much rich history there."

Because the people are tied to the land and invested in the history of the area, Delaney said that it made sense to get them involved in beekeeping.

"They're native and they've been there for generations and they know every mountain, every hill has a name even though it might not be on a map. Because they're so tied to the land, this operation had to be something that was sustainable and that was also very connected to the environment and beekeeping is definitely both of those things," said Delaney.

The area also has a rich history of beekeeping as Delaney said she would find antique beekeeping equipment at area flea markets.

"Everybody's grandfather had bees. It's because it's all hardwood forests

there, which all produce nectar and pollen and so it's a really good area for beekeeping, really high quality forage. I think both of those things make it ideal," said Delaney.

The plan is for those beekeepers to keep their own apiaries but get bees raised by the Appalachian Bee Keeping Collective.

"We're trying to raise a strain of Appalachian honey bee that is mite resistant and that's a big piece of what Debbie is doing," said Asquith. "She's really skilled with natural beekeeping methods and has been a really big help for us."

Asquith said that the first class of beekeepers, who will be trained over fall and winter, will number around 35 but next year the program will ramp up to include 85 beekeepers.

For the first-time beekeepers, Delaney said that the biggest challenge is going to be overcoming the fear of being stung.

"They're going to be working with an insect that stings and learning the social behavioral cues of a colony, to read them, to know when they need to apply smoke or how much protective clothing they should wear; just learning to feel comfortable around them so that they are safe and that the participants can work them safely," said Delaney.

Provided by University of Delaware

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