Bug experts dismiss worry about US 'murder hornets' as hype

May 7 2020, by Seth Borenstein

In this April 23, 2020, photo provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, a researcher holds a dead Asian giant hornet in Blaine, Wash. FILE - This Dec. 30, 2019 photo provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture shows a dead Asian giant hornet in a lab in Olympia, Wash. It is the world's largest hornet, a 2-inch long killer with an appetite for honey bees. Dubbed the "Murder Hornet" by some, the insect has a sting that could be fatal to some humans. (Karla Salp/Washington State Department of Agriculture via AP)

Insect experts say people should calm down about the big bug with the nickname "murder hornet"—unless you are a beekeeper or a honeybee.

The Asian giant hornets found in Washington state that grabbed headlines this week aren't big killers of humans, although it does happen on rare occasions. But the world's largest hornets do decapitate entire hives of honeybees, and that crucial food pollinator is already in big trouble.

Numerous bug experts told The Associated Press that what they call hornet "hype" reminds them of the 1970s public scare when Africanized honeybees, nicknamed "killer bees," started moving north from South America. While these more aggressive bees did make it up to Texas and the Southwest, they didn't live up to the horror-movie moniker. However, they also do kill people in rare situations.

This time it's hornets with the homicidal nickname, which bug experts want to ditch.

"They are not 'murder hornets.' They are just hornets," said Washington Agriculture Department entomologist Chris Looney, who is working on the state's worst on record. That's because of problems such as mites, diseases, pesticides and loss of food.

The new hornets would be different. If they get into a hive, they tear the heads off worker bees and the hive pretty much dies. Asian honeybees have defenses—they start buzzing, raising the temperature and cook the invading hornet to death—but honeybees in America don't.

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a dead Asian giant hornet, a sample brought in from Japan for research, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

This Dec. 30, 2019 photo provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture shows a dead Asian giant hornet in a lab in Olympia, Wash. It is the world's largest hornet, a 2-inch long killer with an appetite for honey bees. Dubbed the "Murder Hornet" by some, the insect has a sting that could be fatal to some humans. (Quinlyn Baine/Washington State Department of Agriculture via AP)

This Dec. 30, 2019 photo provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture shows a dead Asian giant hornet in a lab in Olympia, Wash. It is the world's largest hornet, a 2-inch long killer with an appetite for honey bees. Dubbed the "Murder Hornet" by some, the insect has a sting that could be fatal to some humans. (Quinlyn Baine/Washington State Department of Agriculture via AP)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a dead Asian giant hornet, bottom, a sample brought in from Japan for research, next to a native bald-faced hornet collected in a trap, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a suit bought for the department specifically to wear when investigating a possible Asian giant hornet nest, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney replaces a trap used to search for the Asian giant hornet during the second of four collections of them in the area, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. None of the invasive hornet species was found. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Dead Asian giant hornets, samples brought in from Japan for research, are displayed, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a dead Asian giant hornet, a sample brought in from Japan for research, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney puts a new lure into a trap after checking it for an Asian giant hornet, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. None of the invasive hornets were found during his checks. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney eyes a trap he retrieved, set in an effort to locate the Asian giant hornet, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. None were found. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a trap he retrieved, set in an effort to locate the Asian giant hornet, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The trap only held a couple of native bald-faced hornets. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Dead Asian giant hornets, queens lined-up on top and the smaller workers below, all samples brought in from Japan for research, are displayed with a field notebook, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney wipes his hands after re-setting a trap in an effort to locate the Asian giant hornet, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. None were found. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Two native bald-faced hornets sit in a collection container after being found in a trap set in an effort to locate the Asian giant hornet, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney displays a suit bought for the department specifically to wear when investigating a possible Asian giant hornet's nest, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

Washington State Department of Agriculture entomologist Chris Looney eyes a trap he retrieved, set in an effort to locate the Asian giant hornet, as he walks with it out of an overgrowth area, Thursday, May 7, 2020, in Blaine, Wash. None were found. The new Asian hornets that have been found in Washington state may be deadly to honeybees, but bug experts say the Asian giant hornet is not a big threat to people. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, Pool)

The worry for beekeeping in Washington is based on a worst-case scenario that officials have to take seriously, Looney said.

Yet even for bees, the invasive hornets are far down on the list of real threats, not as big a worry as the parasitic "zombie fly" because more of those have been seen in several states, Berenbaum said.

For people, the hornets are scary because the world is already frightened by coronavirus and our innate fight-or-flight mechanisms are activated, putting people on edge, said risk expert David Ropeik, author of "How Risky Is It, Really?"

"This year is unbelievable in a horrible, horrible way. Why shouldn't there be murder hornets?" Berenbaum said.

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Bug experts dismiss worry about US 'murder hornets' as hype (2020, May 7) retrieved 20 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2020-05-bug-experts-dismiss-hornets-hype.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.