



B-PLUS

BEEKEEPING REPORT FROM MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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BACKGROUND FOR HONEY LEGISLATION

[From APIS newsletter, Dr. M. T. Sanford, Editor, University of Florida]

"The U.S. Congress will soon consider new farm legislation to replace the expiring Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990." This is the first sentence in the foreword to Agricultural Economic Report No. 708, Honey: Background for 1995 Farm Legislation, USDA, April 1995, by Frederic L. Hoff. The document contains a wealth of historical information and analysis on the beekeeping industry and is a fine supplement to AER 680, The U.S. Beekeeping Industry, May 1994 (see July 1994 APIS). Besides a summary of changes in the honey price support system from the 1960s to 1994, it discusses the structure of the beekeeping industry, effects of the honey program on all levels of U.S. society and current policy issues. This publication is mandatory reading for anyone who might have an interest in how the honey industry fares as part of the 1995 farm bill.

In general, this report shows a historical downward trend in colony numbers, beekeepers and profit margins. In 1947, there were 5.9 million hives in the United States. There was a steady decline until 1973. From then until 1986, colony count leveled off at about 4.1 million. A precipitous drop followed, with hives declining 16 percent since 1989 to the present level of 2.9 million. During the same period, the number of beekeepers has also declined, although exact figures are not known. Honey production mirrored colony numbers to some degree, declining from 272 million pounds in 1952 to 150 million pounds in 1985. The average production in the 1950s and 1960s was 240 million pounds, dropping to 209 million during the 1970s and 1980s.

As beekeeping operations have increased in size, production per colony has been higher, averaging 66 pounds per colony since 1986. Outfits of less than five hives were dropped from production figures in 1986, inflating this average. The value of honey production has increased over the years. It averaged \$42.3 million from 1945-1971. Since then, it went to a high of \$141.5 million in 1979, then dropped to \$121-\$125 million from 1991-1993. In spite of the general rise in overall production, honey prices have remained relatively low, declining from a record high of \$0.61 per pound in 1981 to \$0.54 in 1993. The report only covers up to 1993 and, therefore, does

not reflect current prices, driven even lower by a recent flood of imports. A decline in honey program payments from \$100 million in 1988 to \$16 million in 1993, along with an increase in operational expenses over 15 percent has also hit beekeepers hard. Most beekeepers supply pollination free as a byproduct of their honey-producing activities. About a million colonies are estimated to be involved in commercial pollination. Fees range from \$9.50 per colony to as high as \$35. Using an average figure of \$20, the estimated value of purchased pollination services is \$40.7 million in 1988. This value is estimated to increase in the future.

The report concludes: "The fate of the honey price support program will likely be determined by the 1995 farm bill." It lists several options Congress might consider:

1. **Extend Provisions of the Existing Honey Program:** This would force producers to depend more on honey sales and commercial pollination for most of their income. However, it would also provide some income protection in a sluggish and weak honey market.
2. **Adopt and Extend Provision of Government Reform and Savings Act:** This program would make loans, but eliminate subsidies. Although not providing beekeepers with income because loans are repayable with interest, it could be a source of working capital.
3. **Protect Program With Import Quotas:** Controlling imports using import quotas or tariff-rate quotas would eliminate beekeeper dependence on the honey program for income. This is highly unlikely given the prevalent "free trading" philosophy.

A full copy of the report can be requested by dialing 1-800-999-6779. The cost is \$9 and includes postage. Visa and MasterCard are accepted. I reiterate what I said last July, "The beekeeping community now has plenty of ammunition to back up its arguments for public support in many arenas. However, the time and expense to produce this document will go for naught, if those in the beekeeping industry do not use the information to its fullest potential."

TALES FROM THE LONESOME HIVE

The LH took several different turns this year. But then has their ever been two years alike in beekeeping? The hive came through the winter in very good shape. I had not taken any fall honey from them even though we had an exceptionally good aster and goldenrod flow. So the bees did not lack for food at any time. I then had to start a non-swarming tactic as even in early April they were filling four (6 5/8") hive bodies. So I started my division to raise a new queen along about the second week in May. Everything worked as planned. The division made queen cells and they emerged. However, the virgin may have been lost in mating as she never started laying. So the first week in June I had to unite the two colonies. The nuc now had lots of room within this super for the old queen to lay eggs, and maybe that was all it took to keep the colony busy. In any event the LH did not begin to swarm. The colony then proceeded to fill up the remaining room in the two supers that I had on the colony from last fall. The first day of summer I put on two Half-

comb Cassette supers. Almost since that day we have not had much total nectar come into the hive. Not the best conditions to produce comb honey.

We really don't know what it takes to make plants secrete nectar. Beekeepers have all kinds of theories, and scientists have been very reluctant to spend time working on the subject since there are so many variables. Such things as how much water (rainfall) has come before the plants begin to bloom. What is the ideal temperature for the plant to secrete nectar? Is it important to have cool nights and warm days? What is the ideal temperature for the bees to fly? Does the plant have the right minerals? As you can see testing this kind of system, in the real world, is a nightmare. There have been some studies completed, but the information is very limited. I have come to the conclusion that we get the best honey flows when the temperature is high. That is, if everything is about normal otherwise. What I mean by normal is that the plants haven't dried up or lack important nutrients. The most recent example of what I am talking about occurred last fall with the goldenrod honey. We had temperatures in the low to mid 80's for about two weeks after Labor Day and the bees just poured the nectar into the hives. The plants were in good conditions prior to that time so we made lots of honey.

Currently we are experiencing off-and-on weather with spotty rain and sometime cool temperatures -- just not ideal for producing a good crop of honey. Maybe the spigot will turn on soon.