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Ontario beekeepers react cautiously to report of reduced losses this winter

MILTON, ON. The new report from the Canadian Association of Professional Apiarists (CAPA) indicates a sharp decline in overwinter losses for Ontario bees this winter. This is good news for all beekeepers and confirms Ontario Beekeepers' Association's (OBA) own survey of 430 Ontario beekeepers taken earlier this summer.

In OBA's survey, 60% of those commercial beekeepers reporting problems with queens "suspect pesticides weakened their hives." CAPA's survey also reported poor queen quality as the number one cited cause of overwinter losses in Ontario, a problem according to beekeepers likely affected by residual neonicotinoid pesticide exposure from contact with contaminated pollen and comb in the hive during winter.

While CAPA's overwinter loss report describes the condition of hives when they are opened, spring and summer losses tell a more complete picture. Beekeepers in Ontario have experienced additional losses of up to 5% during spring and early summer due to colonies that may have made it through winter but were too weak to repopulate, or to failing queens.

Since 2013, heavy overwinter losses for Ontario have typically been nearly three times the rest of Canada. Reduced losses this year are largely the result of the mild winter and last year's actions by grain farmers to upgrade equipment to reduce the spread of crop dust at planting.

However, real progress is expected when regulations to reduce the overuse of neonicotinoids initiated this planting season begin to take hold. It is hoped that these reductions in neonic seed applications will mean even better news for all pollinators next winter.

While Ontario beekeepers have increased colony numbers in response to strong demand for pollination services, beekeepers have had to absorb the cost of replacing failing queens and lighter honey crops from less populated hives.

The CAPA report concludes that, "The main challenge that is faced by most beekeepers is to maintain honey bee health throughout the year. This challenge is not only limited to pest management, but it includes proper nutrition and reduced exposure to pesticides in hives and environment."

Ontario beekeepers, mindful of the consequences of pesticide exposure, have taken even greater care to ensure that only the healthiest colonies are exposed to winter stresses. To assist beekeepers, the OBA with the support of OMAFRA, has enhanced its offering of beekeeper Tech-Transfer training programs and has, in collaboration with Niagara College, initiated a new commercial beekeeping course set to start next spring.

"The low rate of winter loss this year is good news that will help Ontario beekeepers begin to make up for previous years' losses," says OBA president Tibor Szabo, "but we're not out of the woods yet. Even this year, significant bee kills from neonic treated seed plantings continue."

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