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Ontario bee wintering losses more than three times Canadian average

Milton, ON. In the most recent survey of 2015 winter losses issued by the Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists (CAPA), Ontario beekeepers reported losing almost 38% of their bees this winter. This is more than 3 times the national average of 12.4% of other provinces.

While the winter was generally regarded as unusually cold, the magnitude of Ontario's bee losses were not attributed by beekeepers to the weather. Beekeepers in the neighboring province of Quebec with a similar climate and winter suffered only about half, or 18.7%, of the winter losses of Ontario.

Ontario grows almost two-thirds the corn and soy in Canada. Nearly all corn seeds and 65% of soy seeds are treated with the neonicotinoid pesticides implicated by PMRA as the cause of bee kills in Ontario.

"The only way to explain our excessive winter losses is the amount of corn and soy treated with neonicotinoids", said Tibor Szabo, Ontario Beekeepers' Association president. "Ontario's winter was no worse than most other provinces, yet our losses were triple. And this number doesn't even consider additional losses in the spring from weaker, overwintered hives."

The survey asked beekeepers with more than 50 hives for the "main cause of death" of overwintered hives. A number of options were provided for beekeepers to choose from, but this year the survey omitted neonicotinoids or pesticides as an option. However, in a winter-loss survey undertaken by OBA earlier this year, 36% of beekeepers suspected pesticides weakened their hives. In the CAPA survey, in the absence of pesticides as an option, Ontario beekeepers most often cited starvation, weak colonies in the fall, and poor queens.

"These responses are consistent with colonies under stress", said Szabo. "Chronic exposure to neonicotinoids from pollen, comb and honey in the hive will cause the hive to fail without showing the classic signs of acute bee kills we see in the spring and summer."

Surprisingly *varroa* mites, often cited as the key killer of bees, were not mentioned as a cause of death by beekeepers. In fact, Ontario beekeepers rank highest in their *varroa* mite control practices with 97% of all beekeepers treating their hives for mites. Ontario beekeeping practices are often cited as exemplary due to an active tech-transfer program and a robust provincial apiary inspection regime.

Beekeepers can sustain winter losses in the area of 15%. To recover colony numbers for pollination of fruits and vegetables, beekeepers need to spend excessive time, labour and queen replacements to make up for winter losses of 38%.

The Ontario government recently announced regulations aimed at reducing the amount of neonicotinoids used on corn and soy. The government has set 15% as the target for bee mortality in Ontario by 2020.

“Ontario beekeepers lost more than 1 out of every 3 colonies this winter”, continued Szabo, “We cannot maintain a sustainable beekeeping industry unless we get this situation under control.”

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