

Death knell sounds for Europe's beekeepers



Honeybees are seen on a honeycomb at The National Beekeeping Centre in Stoneleigh, central England, November 21, 2008. Photo: Darren Staples

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By [Pete Harrison](#)

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Europe's beekeeping industry could be wiped out in less than a decade as bees fall victim to disease, insecticides and intensive farming, international beekeeping body Apimondia said on Monday.

"With this level of mortality, European beekeepers can only survive another 8 to 10 years," Gilles Ratia, president of Apimondia, told Reuters.

"We have had big problems in southwest France for many years, but also now in Italy and Germany."

Last year, about 30 percent of Europe's 13.6 million hives died, according to Apimondia figures. Losses reached 50 percent in Slovenia and as high as 80 percent in southwest Germany.

With 35 percent of European food crops relying on bees to pollinate them, it poses a big threat for farmers, said Ratia.

"It is a complete crisis," said Francesco Panella, who tends about 1,000 hives in Piedmont, northern Italy. "Last year, I lost about half my production. I can't survive more than 2 or 3 more years like this. My son won't be able to continue my trade."

Mystery has surrounded the recent decline of bee numbers, but most keepers blame modern farming methods and the powerful new pesticides used on crops like sunflower, maize and rapeseed.

Two main factors were responsible for weakening bee colonies: insecticides and the parasitic mite *Varroa*, says Apimondia's scientific coordinator Gerard Arnold. Once weakened, the hives are then decimated by viruses and other diseases.

Evidence of farming's impact comes from the fact French honey output has suffered in intensive sunflower farming areas but has remained steady in mountains and chestnut forests, said Henri Clement, president of the French beekeeping union.

Beekeepers are perplexed about why so little attention is given to an industry that supplies 58 percent of Europe's appetite of 340,000 tonnes of honey a year.

"If cattle were producing 30 percent less milk each year, it would not be acceptable. But that is what we have had to put up with," said Josef Stich, who keeps 200 hives near Vienna.

Earlier this year, the European Union voted to phase out the most toxic pesticides after years of wrangling, but many bee-keepers feel ignored by politicians.

The honey industry's concerns are drowned out by the interests of the giant corporations that produce the pesticides, said Apimondia's Ratia.

"Politicians are more susceptible to the big lobbying of the chemical industry," he said. "We beekeepers can talk and talk, but we don't receive much consideration."

(Additional reporting by Jeremy Smith; Editing by Matthew Jones)