

MARCH 14, 2012 BEEKEEPER NEWSLETTER

2012 Bee Supply

Due to a mild winter, most bee operations incurred below normal winter losses. In January there was a surplus of bees, including some strong colonies. By February, the supply had dwindled, but there were still many colonies out there without an almond home. As bloom approached in February, most all bees got placed.

2012 Pollination Season and Nut Set

Pollination weather this year was excellent, the best that I can remember. Frosts on March 7th and 8th caused isolated damage but overall loss to frost was minimal. Nut set looks excellent on all varieties except Nonpareil (most Nonpareils had a bumper crop last year and this variety tends to alternate-bear). Because Nonpareil represents about 1/3 of the state acreage, per acre yields may be less than last year's record 2600#/ac., however the total state crop may exceed last year's record 1.95 billion lbs since bearing acreage has increased. The big concern on the part of growers is water; the lack of rain means more expensive water and, for a few growers, the use of wells with high enough salt content to hurt this year's crop (and reduce flower bud set on next year's crop). Strong winds in early March toppled some trees in isolated orchards in Kern County. Almond prices remain good at close to \$2/lb.

Notable Quote

"Lots of things can reduce almond yields – weather conditions, drought, insect infestations. But if you don't have the bees, you never get to begin." Joe MacIlivaine, President, Paramount Farms; Los Angeles Times, March 4, 2012.

Paramount Raises the Bar

Paramount Farms, long noted for their low bee rental prices, raised their 2012 prices to \$145/colony for 8-frame colonies with a \$7.50/frame bonus up to 10 frames (\$155/col. Total) and an additional \$5/frame up to 12 frames (\$165/col. Total). Paramount's full-time bee man, Dr. Gordon Wardell, who knows what it takes to get strong almond colonies, is behind this price increase. Because of the volume of colonies rented by Paramount (80 to 90 thousand) their prices set a standard for the almond industry. Next time you see Gordy, tell him *Thanks, Gordy!* If you're under 30 (or if you're from Texas) its *Thank you, Dr. Wardell!*

Where Dat Rock?

Beekeepers occasionally tell me *Thanks* for helping to keep bee rental prices at sustainable levels. When I hear such comments, I often lapse into my *Aw-shucks* rock-kicking mode. The rock I have been using, will be handed over to Dr. Wardell in a formal ceremony to be announced later this year.

Not Just Your Average Joe

Our contract with you states that colonies will be a *minimum* of 8 frames, while our contracts with growers specify an 8-frame average. I understand that you can grade for an 8-frame minimum, but still have an occasional colony that will be below 8 frames (its estimated that 2% of queens are lost every time bees are moved). Each year, one or two of our beekeepers throw in sub-par colonies, figuring if they average 8 frames, there will be no problems. In order to show our growers that they are getting better colonies than other growers, including Paramount, we must supply better than average colonies.

The Shafter Experiment Station

You may have heard that the USDA is closing its Cotton Research Station on 80 acres of ground in Shafter (20 miles northwest of Bakersfield). The Station was a bee hive of activity during

cotton's hey-day, with both USDA and UC scientists, producing excellent studies, not only on cotton, but on a variety of row and seed crops (they even utilized bees on some caged seed trials). With California cotton acreage down from over a million acres to around 250,000, the station was felt to be expendable. The Station would make an ideal Bee Lab, and, if common sense prevailed, the Tucson Bee Lab (hampered by Africanized bees) would be closed, to be replaced by a Shafter Lab. Logic and common sense are sometimes in short supply when government bodies make decisions, and the USDA, paralyzed by inertia, took no action on a Shafter Lab.

The Shafter Station is leased from Kern County. Recently, a small band of San Joaquin Valley cotton growers, *San Joaquin Quality Cotton Producers*, led by Greg Palla, made the gutsy decision to lease the Station from Kern County so that cotton research could continue on several important fronts. They did this knowing they didn't have the funds to justify the lease, but counted on attracting tenants from other ag disciplines to help cover costs. They will also plant cotton on available ground at the Station and use cotton income to help defray costs. The bee industry could learn from this intrepid band of warriors. Christi Heintz is spearheading efforts to establish a bee presence at the Station. The lab is in the heart of almond country, and Station bees (if they were established) could be rented to almond growers within a mile or two (including Paramount Farms) at far less expense than bringing in bees from other areas.

Eric Mussen Serves Notice

From Eric's Jan-Feb 2012 Newsletter, *From The UC Apiaries*:

"Recently one of our commodity groups approached the highest level of the UC Cooperative Extension administration and asked what it would take to get a CE Specialist position – about to become vacated due to retirement – refilled IMMEDIATELY. The response was – a six-year commitment of \$220,000 a year (salary, benefits, support, overhead) starting at the date of the retirement. There would be a brief lag due to recruitment and hiring procedures.

This is a bit steep for beekeepers and producers of honey bee-pollinated crops to provide, so I am going to give more advanced notice in the hope that the position of Extension Apiculturist can remain filled, with little gap, through EARLY decision making and planning. Thus, my targeted date of retirement, health permitting, is Aug. 31, 2014. That will complete my 38th full year of service since 1976."

Eric has thrown the ball in the beekeepers' court, with plenty of advance notice. What will beekeepers do with it? Will beekeepers fill Eric's position when he retires? If past history is any indication (see last year's referendum) don't count on it.

Another Notable Quote

"It is high time agriculture does its own research with its own money, financed by its own profits, and quits looking for a taxpayer handout." Mark Dickson, Stanford Human Genome Center. From *California Farmer*, April, 2008, p.13.

Grape Growers Step Up

California table grape growers just voted (by a very large margin) to continue their Table Grape Commission devoted to research and promotional programs. This is the 9th year they have voted to continue these programs.

Fungicides

Almond growers need to apply bloom-time fungicides for disease control. Fungicides can harm bees, although Eric Mussen indicates that the adjuvant-spreaders added to the tank mix may be more harmful than the fungicides themselves (see Eric's Jan-Feb. newsletter). I admonished (tactfully, I thought) one of our growers for making a mid-day fungicide application during full

bloom. The grower explained to me that there was no way he could line up applicators and cover his extensive acreage without spraying some blocks in the middle of the day during bloom. He admonished me (translation *butt out of my business*) probably deservedly, for interfering with his efforts to protect his crop. It's a fine line and diplomacy skills were never my strong suit. You can, perhaps, understand the grower's point in this if you contemplate how you would feel if someone told you that you were using too much Tactic or fumagillin.

One of our beekeepers – who asked to remain nameless, and I will honor his request – has been directly sprayed with fungicides the past two years while working his bees during bloom. In spite of these repeated dousing, he remains upbeat and respects the fact that growers must protect their crop (he told me to stay out of growers' business). The upside of these repeated dousings is that Gilly no longer has athlete's foot and the fungus that was getting a toehold in his beard has completely disappeared!

Bees CAN Utilize Pollen Directly

Someone made a comment on the internet recently that pollen must be converted to bee bread before bees can digest and utilize it. Tsk, tsk, Not True! Bees can indeed ingest and utilize pollen directly.

Oliver's Twist

Those of you that read Randy Oliver's articles in the American Bee Journal probably wonder, like me, *when is this guy going to run out of batteries?!* Randy is like the energizer bunny, churning out month after month of good stuff. Randy has outdone himself with an article that will appear in the April ABJ: *Nosema – The Smoldering Epidemic*. It's a new and perceptive twist on the malaise that many bee colonies suffer. It's a scholarly piece (not that there's anything wrong with that) and is destined to be called a *classic* in the future. Don't miss it!

The Nosema Microscope

For many beekeepers – for top tier beekeepers – a microscope has become as essential as a hive tool. Not treating for Nosema until you have to will save you significant \$. Treating when you don't have to not only wastes money, but nosema-treatment chemicals are not easy on bees. Randy Oliver's article *The Quick Squash Method* (to determine whether to treat for nosema; see Feb. ABJ) tells how to sample and how to cut down on time-consuming spore counts. You can purchase a microscope at (877)409-3556 (around \$500; ask for the Randy Oliver microscope).

Two Million Blossoms

The book *Two Million Blossoms – Discovering the Medicinal Benefits of Honey* by Kirsten Traynor (no relation) has just come out. It's a great book and should be the definitive book on the subject for many years. Now available from Dadant or from Amazon. Kirsten's husband, Michael, is a professional photographer and a great one – you've seen his pictures in the ABJ.

It is calculated that it takes 2 million blossoms to make a pound of honey, hence the title of the book (has to take a lot fewer flowers during an orange or sage flow). Coincidentally, it is estimated there are two million almond blossoms per acre. Frank Eischen assigned one of his workers to verify the figure, but he stayed out past dark and missed the bus back to Texas.

Nutra-Bee

There are lots of pollen-protein feed supplements out there, but the one I've heard the best reports on is *Nutra-Bee* by Keith Jarrett. At least two of our beekeepers use it and have great almond bees. To see a video on Nutra-Bee, do a Search for *Feeding Bees Nutra-Bee*. Keith feeds

heavily in the fall and by January has 2 boxes so full of bees that he shakes them into boxes for other beekeepers so that they can meet their almond commitments. For info and prices, contact Keith at (916)205-2400 (cell) or (209)223-9616 (home).

Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?

Beekeepers are the backbone of our organization – always have been and always will be. The product you provide has enabled us to set and maintain a high standard for strong bee colonies for almonds. Your efforts, and the efforts of our two main fieldmen, Neil Trent and Bill Mathewson (who show your bees to growers) have kept us at the top of the almond game.

Because you bring bees to us, you are, by definition, an elite beekeeper. As such, as almond acreage increases, and as almond prices remain profitable, you will be courted by others. We hope you stick with us and remember who brought you to the dance. We plan to make a modest price increase for 2013 in order to keep up with Paramount and others.

Perks

We've been neglectful in the past in showing our appreciation for your services to us. Hoping to change that, we're offering the following: If you're through Bakersfield, give a call and we will give you complimentary tickets to the Bakersfield Blaze baseball games or the Bakersfield Condors Ice Hockey games (whichever one is in season). And there's more!! We'll buy you breakfast at the IHOP (*anything* on their menu!) or, if you prefer, the Grand Slam breakfast at Denny's! We're here for you!

Joe Traynor