

ALMOND GROWER NEWSLETTER . . . May 1, 2012

2013 Pollination

We are making a \$6/colony price increase for 2013 for our 8-frame or better colonies at the **start** of bloom. For 8-frame bees by the end of bloom (6-frames at the start of bloom) our 2013 price is \$150/colony.

Paramount Raises the Bar

Paramount Farming has always paid below average prices for almond bees --- until this year. This year, with their bonus payments, Paramount beekeepers averaged \$162/colony with many getting the top rate of \$165/colony. This amounts to a \$30/colony increase in price for many Paramount beekeepers over 2010 prices. In contrast, our \$6/colony price increase for 2013 is our first price increase since 2010.

There are probably two reasons for Paramount's current price. First, they likely anticipate a shortage of strong colonies down the road and want to secure a stable bee supply for future years. Also, Paramount hired a top-notch, full-time person, Dr. Gordon Wardell, to oversee their bee program. Dr. Wardell came aboard in 2010 with a strong background in honey bees and honey bee nutrition. Dr. Wardell is well aware that it takes considerable supplemental feeding in order to come up with 8+ frame bees for almonds. A good part of Dr. Wardell's pre-Paramount career was spent on honey bee nutrition and on designing bee feeds that will maximize bee populations in February (do a Search for Gordon Wardell Megabee or Tucson Bee Diet for more information). Supplemental feeds are costly; no beekeeper can afford them unless he can recoup the costs in almond bee rentals.

Strong Almond Bees Hurt Beekeepers

For most beekeepers, feeding bees to build strong colonies for almonds is detrimental to their bottom line. Not only does it wear out expensive queens (@ \$20 ea.) but it creates "monster" colonies by the end of almond bloom. Such huge colonies are not only susceptible to swarming (losing half the bees in a colony) but require expensive supplemental feeding to keep them from starving until the next major honey plants start to bloom (usually oranges in April).

CCD (Colony Collapse Disorder) Still With Us

In spite of their best efforts to maintain colony numbers, many beekeepers continue to lose up to 50% or more of their colonies to CCD each year. Most of these losses don't show up until January. We constantly upgrade our bee supply in the weeks and days prior to almond bloom, as some colonies decrease in strength while others increase. Getting a strong colony in the middle of winter is an expensive undertaking. Eric Mussen (UC Extension Apiculturist) estimates that it takes over \$200/colony annually to come up with strong almond colonies.

Our Inspection Program – Your Guarantee

Our colony inspection program insures that you get what you pay for – 8+ frame colonies at the **start** of bloom. Our two main inspectors, Bill Mathewson for Kern and Tulare Counties and Neil Trent for Fresno County north, are retired beekeepers who brought bees to us for 15+ years before they retired. In the 10+ years they have worked with us, they have never had a beekeeper dispute their evaluations (in some cases it took an on-site visit to resolve an issue) and we have never been sued by a beekeeper for downgrading his colonies. Our inspection program is known in the bee industry as *tough but fair*.

Some beekeepers sign up with us but leave after one year because they don't like our inspection program (...*them dudes really do look at your bees!*). This is more true for large-scale beekeepers (those that run over 20,000 colonies). These beekeepers are used to placing field-run

bees – no sorting out sub-par colonies. These field-run bees often average 8 frames of bees, but we insist that beekeepers cull out any colonies less than 8 frames which is why the bees you get from us almost always average 10 to 12 frames. We do work with several large-scale beekeepers, but take only a small portion of their bees – maybe 2,000 colonies out of 20,000. We get their best bees and they find it easy to rent the rest of their bees elsewhere; it's worked out well for both of us.

Most large-scale beekeepers prefer not to work with us because they can usually rent their bees without having to jump through our inspection hoops. One such beekeeper has assuaged almond grower concerns by giving his almond clients bee veils, hive tools and smokers and showing them how to open hives --- good luck with that one!!

Gauntlet Thrown, Gauntlet Accepted

We have a 3-year no-compete clause with our beekeepers – they can't sign up any of our growers until 3 years after working with us. The 3-year period is up in 2013 for a large beekeeper that used to work with us but who apparently didn't like our program. He has told me *"Joe, I know your almond growers and I'll be going after them."*

O.K.

Tough Times for Beekeepers

Controlling the virus-spreading varroa mite is felt by bee scientists to be a key to minimizing the effects of CCD. At this time, the most effective varroa-killing chemical (some feel the *only* effective chemical) is unavailable to beekeepers and it is unknown if or when it will become available.

Another key to combating CCD is nutrition – making sure bees get ample pollen (ideally from a variety of flowers sources since the amino acid makeup varies among flower species; ample nectar is also critical). Many, or most almond bees spend the summer in the plains states – Minnesota, Montana, North and South Dakota – where in past years they have done quite well, mainly on canola, alfalfa and clover. Canola acreage has remained steady, but alfalfa and clover acreage (upon which bees thrive) is being replaced by corn and soybeans. Bees collect pollen from corn, but corn pollen is low in protein and it's nutritional value is questionable. Soybeans don't produce a lot of nectar or pollen and are subject to much more pesticide applications than alfalfa or clover.

Maintaining adequate year-round bee forage for honey bees is critical, but is becoming more and more difficult as beekeepers try to maintain colony numbers in the face of more bee colonies on diminishing bee pasture.

Keep In Touch

Call anytime for an update on our (your) bee supply.

Your past business is appreciated and I hope to work with you again in 2013.

Beat wishes for a bountiful almond harvest.

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