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It's been 16 months since Dave Hackenberg of Dade City became the first beekeeper in the country to say publicly that something was terribly wrong with his insects.

In the intervening time following the identification of the malady now known as Colony Collapse Disorder, things haven't gotten any better for the nation's bees, which pollinate about one-third of U.S. crops ? some \$15 billion worth.

In fact, things have gotten much worse. Their numbers are continuing to dwindle from the disorder.

A survey of 22 apiarists from 10 states who took their bees to California to help get out the almond crop estimates about 37 percent of the 230,500 colonies managed by those beekeepers have been lost, said Jeff Pettis, a research entomologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's bee research lab in Beltsville, Md.

A year ago, a similar survey put bee losses at just 30 percent.

"There is a significant crisis going on here," Dave Mendes, a beekeeper based in Fort Myers and Dartmouth, Mass., said last week from California.

Hackenberg ? who also keeps bees in Lewisburg, Pa., and was one of 30 Florida beekeepers to cart their critters to California ? said Colony Collapse Disorder hit some of his compatriots hard.

"It was like a train wreck," he said. "There were a lot of beekeepers who had severe losses, people that had never seen this happen before."

Now the crisis ? in which seemingly healthy adult worker bees suddenly abandon their hives, never to return ? appears to be reaching the ears of federal officials.

Last week, U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., led a bipartisan group of senators in calling on the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Committee to set aside \$20 million for research into the problem of the disappearing bees.

Boxer's letter was designed to speed the funding process, spokesman Nathan Britton said.

The bill, which has been passed by the Senate but has stalled in the House, contains \$100 million for a five-year study of the disorder.

In addition, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., is leading a push to get the USDA to increase its efforts to identify the cause and remedy for the disorder and to put more dollars into research.

Signatures are still being collected for a letter that will be sent to the USDA, Baucus spokeswoman Sara Kuban said.

Although the USDA issued a Colony Collapse Disorder research action plan in July, Baucus' letter expresses concern about how the program is being implemented.

"We are concerned that USDA has not adequately funded critical work as outlined by the CCD

Action Plan to identify the cause of CCD," the letter said. "This is disturbing, and is not indicative of the high priority that eradicating CCD must have within the department."

Baucus is seeking a detailed response from the USDA about past and future funding for projects concerning the disorder and honeybee health.

Kevin Hackett, national program leader for research on bees and pollination at the Agricultural Research Service, said this fiscal year's budget for honeybee research is \$7.7 million, with 80 percent of that going to studying the disorder.

"We are trying to implement all the corrective measures we can to make the bees as healthy as they can be coming out of the winter," Hackett said Friday. "We do believe bees are under so many stresses, they are not making it through the winter in a robust condition."

Among the possible culprits are varroa mites, which kill bees and transmit viruses.

Pesticides and insecticides, as well as the chemicals used to control the varroa mites, are being scrutinized to see if they are causing the problem. Migratory stress from being moved long distances also plays a role, Hackett said.

But Hackett said that "moving beehives" isn't the only thing hurting the insects.

"It is something else. It is a perfect storm, if you want to call it that," he said. "Anything that weakens or ages them will contribute, we believe, to CCD."

In the meantime, beekeepers wonder how much more their industry can take.

Although this season's almond pollination was blessed with perfect weather and went well,

hard-pressed beekeepers have nevertheless had to raise their pollination rates.

That could eventually affect food prices, said Jerry Hayes, chief of apiary inspection with the Florida Department of Agriculture.

"If the consumer doesn't care about where food comes from, if they think that food comes from Publix, then maybe we are all wasting our time," he said. "The USDA projection is that 40 percent of our vegetables will be from China by 2012."

He also said Africanized, or "killer," bees might be imported from Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement if almond growers and others can't find enough here. It now takes half the nation's bees to pollinate California's almonds, Hackett said.

Hackenberg, the Dade City beekeeper, said he'd like to see the USDA declare an emergency so research could be given the muscle it needs.

"If it was cows or chickens dying, we would have people standing in line to fix the problem," he said.

Hackett said his department takes the disorder "very seriously," and is working hard to get things moving.

"We are trying to get the results out as fast as we can and speed projects up as fast as we can," he said. "American agriculture depends on the bees."

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