

New funding to help Ontario beekeepers address stress factors?

Written By MARK PAVILONS

The federal and provincial governments are providing cost-shared funding to support and strengthen the health of honeybees and the overall beekeeping sector.

Through a targeted intake under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, the federal and provincial governments are investing up to \$500,000 to help beekeepers make improvements to better manage pests such as Varroa mites, diseases and other stressors and to grow their bee-related business.

"The health of bee populations is vital given the importance of pollinators to food and seed production," said Marie-Claude Bibeau, federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. "Our government is committed to providing beekeepers with the tools and support they need to maintain and enhance bee health, while ensuring a sustainable future for both beekeeping and the Canadian agriculture sector."

"We're giving the province's beekeeping sector a boost to help improve and sustain the health of honey bees and to support the important role they play in the agriculture sector," said Ernie Hardeman, Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. "This is another example of our commitment to protect our agriculture industry while also working to help our hard-working beekeepers, farmers and food processors to succeed in their business efforts."

"Bees are important pollinators that are essential to maintaining healthy ecosystems and a healthy environment," added Jeff Yurek, Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. "Our government is committed to ensuring pollinators are well protected while supporting our farmers and beekeepers to thrive. Through our Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan, we're working to protect vulnerable natural areas and other important habitats for future generations."

Under this special application intake, beekeepers will be able to apply for funding to support the following:

- Equipment to prevent the introduction and spread of disease and increase overwinter survival of bees.
- Sampling and analysis for pests and diseases to increase adoption of integrated pest management and other best practices.
- Business supports to help beekeepers grow their business.

Caledon beekeeper Steve McElroy said it's good to see the federal and provincial governments working together to support bee health.

"Many beekeepers have been suffering unsustainable losses and I expect this funding will help. The money is targeted at the commercial beekeeper, and it appears that beekeepers with less than 10 hives will not be eligible for funding."

McElroy did point out there's no mention of the potential impacts of pesticides in the list of factors influencing honey bee health.

"The impact of pesticides has been a major concern for beekeepers," he said. "It is important that the government support the monitoring of pesticide use as it changes and indicate that it will be willing to take action when concerns are recognized. For example, has the extent of the reduction in neonicotinoid use been effective? Are the alternatives an improvement?"

"I hope that this funding announcement will be recognized as a measure that will be provided in addition to, not instead of, serious attention to pesticide use options."

Andre Flys, president of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association, said he's happy they're on the governments' radar.

Funding, no matter how small, is appreciated, he said. He's meeting with the ministry to learn about the details of this new funding. Both Yurek and Hardeman, Flys said, made many accurate comments about the myriad of challenges our pollinators face in this province. I'm all for increasing our capacity for innovation, pest and disease management, forage and education and part of our mandate at the OBA.

He did say, however, it's extremely unfortunate the long list of stressors both ministers came up with did not include pesticides.

It makes me wonder how committed they are to enhancing the environment when they cannot even utter the word 'pesticide.' I'm not trying to pretend it's the only problem my bees and our natural pollinators face but we have study after study showing our pollinators are constantly being exposed to unsafe levels of agricultural pesticides and these guys couldn't even mention the word in a long list of stressors? It makes one think it wasn't by accident.

More detail on eligible activities and cost-sharing amounts for this targeted intake will be available in the near future, with the application intake opening on Sept. 3.

At 23 per cent, Ontario's average overwinter bee colony losses for this past winter were down significantly from the 2017-18 winter, based on beekeepers' responses to OMAFRA's spring 2019 survey.

The health of managed honeybees is complex and influenced by several factors, including diseases, pests, genetics, environmental stressors and extreme weather.

In addition to producing honey, Ontario-managed honey bees pollinate a wide range of crops, including apples, apricots, asparagus, blueberries, squash and canola, both within Ontario and in other provinces.

The Canadian Agricultural Partnership is a five-year, \$3 billion commitment by Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments that supports Canada's agri-food and agri-products sectors.

The beekeeper cost-share funding program has a continuous application process, with applications accepted until funding is fully allocated.