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Vanishing honeybees mystify scientists

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In some cases, beekeepers are losing 50 percent of their bees to the disorder, with some suffering even higher losses.

- Billions of bees have mysteriously vanished since late last year in the U.S
- Disappearing bees have also been reported in Europe and Brazil
- One-third of the U.S. diet depends on pollination, mostly by honeybees
- Some beekeepers are losing 50 percent of their bees to the disorder

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Go to work, come home.

Go to work, come home.

Go to work -- and vanish without a trace.

Billions of bees have done just that, leaving the crop fields they are suppose pollinate, and scientists are mystified about why.

The phenomenon was first noticed late last year in the United States, where are used to pollinate \$15 billion worth of fruits, nuts and other crops annually. Disappearing bees have also been reported in Europe and Brazil.

Commercial beekeepers would set their bees near a crop field as usual and in two or three weeks to find the hives bereft of foraging worker bees, with o queen and the immature insects remaining. Whatever worker bees survived too weak to perform their tasks.

If the bees were dying of pesticide poisoning or freezing, their bodies would to lie around the hive. And if they were absconding because of some threat have been known to do -- they wouldn't leave without the queen.

Since about one-third of the U.S. diet depends on pollination and most of the performed by honeybees, this constitutes a serious problem, according to Je the U.S. Agricultural Research Service.

"They're the heavy lifters of agriculture," Pettis said of honeybees. "And the are is they're so mobile and we can rear them in large numbers and move th crop when it's blooming."

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Honeybees are used to pollinate some of the tastiest parts of the American diet, said, including cherries, blueberries, apples, almonds, asparagus and macadamia nuts.

"It's not the staples," he said. "If you can imagine eating a bowl of oatmeal with no fruit on it, that's what it would be like" without honeybee pollination.

Pettis and other experts are gathering outside Washington for a two-day workshop starting on Monday to pool their knowledge and come up with a plan of action on what they call colony collapse disorder.

"What we're describing as colony collapse disorder is the rapid loss of adult bees from the colony over a very short period of time, at a time in the season when you wouldn't expect a rapid die-off of workers: late fall and early spring," Pettis said.

Small workers in a supsize society

The problem has prompted a congressional hearing, a report by the National Research Council and a National Pollinator Week set for June 24-30 in Washington, but with no clear idea of what is causing it.

"The main hypotheses are based on the interpretation that the disappearances represent disruptions in orientation behavior and navigation," said May Berenbaum, an insect ecologist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

There have been other fluctuations in the number of honeybees, going back to the 1880s, where there were "mysterious disappearances without bodies just as we are seeing now, but never at this magnitude," Berenbaum said in a telephone interview.

In some cases, beekeepers are losing 50 percent of their bees to the disorder, with some suffering even higher losses. One beekeeper alone lost 40,000 bees. Nationally, some 27 states have reported the disorder, with billions of bees being lost.

Some beekeepers supplement their stocks with bees imported from Australia. One beekeeper, Jeff Anderson, whose business keeps him and his bees traveling between Minnesota and California. Honeybee hives are rented out to growers to pollinate crops, and beekeepers move around as the growing seasons change.

Honeybees are not the only pollinators whose numbers are dropping. Other insects do this essential job -- non-honeybees, wasps, flies, beetles, birds and bats are also experiencing decreasing populations as well. But honeybees are the big actors in commercial pollination efforts.

"One reason we're in this situation is this is a supsize society -- we tend to favor the large with insignificant," Berenbaum said. "I'm sorry but that's not true in biology. You have to be small to get into the flower and deliver the pollen."

"Without that critical act, there's no fruit. And no technology has been invented that equals, much less surpasses, insect pollinators."

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