

# Honeybee health and the challenges for the beekeeping sector

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**PURPOSE:** to clarify the key issues related to honeybee health and key actions that the Commission intends to take to address them.

**BACKGROUND:** in the past decade several health problems have affected the beekeeping sector in different countries worldwide. In particular, in recent years, there have been several reports of increased mortality in bees both in the EU and elsewhere. This has caused serious concern all over the world, but scientific studies have not been able to determine the exact cause or the extent of these increased mortalities.

Nevertheless, the health of bees is linked with many factors of a different nature (bacterial, viral, parasitic, etc); availability of appropriate treatments; invasive species; and environmental changes. Other factors to be considered include the use of pesticides in agriculture.

It is important to protect bee health proactively, taking into account the particularities of beekeeping, the different actors involved.

Beekeeping is a widely-developed activity in the EU, both at professional (keepers with over 150 hives) and hobby level. There are around 700,000 beekeepers in the EU out of which around 97% are non-professional. That is why the EU has established certain harmonised rules to protect and maintain the health of bees, while Member States may regulate other aspects of bee keeping and related activities.

In the spirit of the [Animal Health Strategy for the European Union](#) (2007-2013 – "Prevention is better than cure") adopted in 2007, beekeeping organisations concerned about bee health in the EU recently called for more focus on to the issue.

In November 2008, the European Parliament also passed a [resolution on the situation in the beekeeping sector](#). This called on the Commission to carry out specific actions and to ensure that those actions were coordinated.

The Commission has already launched a number of initiatives to address the concerns of the beekeeping sector and others are planned.

**CONTENT:** the objective of this Communication is to clarify the key issues related to bee health and **key actions** that the Commission intends to take to address them:

- financial support to Member States in order, *inter alia*, to fight *Varroa* (an important bee parasite that is present and well established in the EU);
- checks on the **animal health requirements for imports from third countries** of live bees and bumble bees to avoid introduction into the EU of exotic bee diseases;
- assess the possible implications for the bee sector in the framework of the preparatory process for the creation of the new Animal Health Law;
- a more frequent use of **guidance documents** at EU and/or national level, or at the level of the sector concerned, could also be envisaged to address issues for which legislation at EU level would not be appropriate;
- start a pilot **surveillance programme** by the end of 2011 as regards bee mortalities;
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designate an EU Reference Laboratories (EURL) for bee health which should become operational by April 2011;

- improve knowledge and **training** on bee health – the contribution of the Better Training for Safer Food programme;
- improve the availability of **veterinary medicines** for bees;
- authorisation of **pesticides** at EU level only if their use has no unacceptable effect on bee health or bees or its use leads to negligible exposure of honeybees;
- preparation of a Communication on the **EU Biodiversity Strategy** to achieve the EU 2020 biodiversity target, which will look at ways of preventing or mitigating the loss of biodiversity by addressing its cause. The implementation of this strategy is expected to have a beneficial effect on bee health;
- approval of the national programmes of the 27 Member States to **improve the production and marketing of apiculture products** for the period 2011-2013. The EU contribution to the financing of the programmes has increased by almost 25 percent compared to the previous period (2008-2010), from 26 M€ to 32 M€ per year;
- support **research projects** in bee health and the decline of both wild and domesticated pollinators, including honeybee colonies, in Europe;
- improve **communication between relevant players**, at EU or national, regional or local level and also across policy areas;
- strengthen the global link to **international activities** (for instance the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)).

This Communication should serve as a basis for further discussion with the European Parliament, the Council as well as Member State authorities and stakeholders. This should contribute to identifying possible further actions needed at EU level.

It is important to understand that such actions can only be successful if all interested stakeholders take part in a constructive and transparent manner. This is why the Commission will initiate discussions in the appropriate fora to obtain extensive feed back on its intentions, and to improve its assessment and management of the bee health situation. Non-governmental organisations and beekeeping industry platforms in particular can play a dual role both to initiate and implement many new actions.