

Honeybee health and the challenges for the beekeeping sector

2011/2108(INI) - 06/10/2011

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own-initiative report by Csaba Sándor TABADJI (S&D, HU) on honeybee health and the challenges of the beekeeping sector, in response to a Commission communication on the subject.

The report notes that beekeeping as an economic and social activity plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of rural areas, creates jobs and provides an important ecosystem service via pollination, which contributes to the improvement of biodiversity by maintaining the genetic diversity of plants. However, a decrease in the number of bee colonies has been reported in both the EU and other parts of the world, as well as a declining trend in pollinator species, which contribute to agricultural productivity. In the agricultural sector, the health of individual bees and colonies is affected by numerous lethal and sublethal factors, many of them interconnected.

Given this context, the report puts forward the following recommendations:

(1) Research and dissemination of scientific knowledge: Members consider it important to take urgent measures **to protect bee health**, taking into account the specificities of beekeeping, the diversity of actors involved and the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity.

The Commission is invited to:

- **increase the level of support for honeybee-health-related research** under the next financial framework and to focus the research on (i) technological developments, (ii) disease prevention and control, (iii) defining sustainable agricultural practices, (iv) promoting non-chemical alternatives and (v) generally further encouraging Integrated Pest Management techniques and the development of veterinary medical products for current EU honeybee disease-causing agents, especially the *Varroa destructor* mite;
- promote the setting up of **appropriate national surveillance systems** in close cooperation with beekeepers' associations and to develop harmonised standards at EU level to allow comparison;
- support a European Network of '**reference hives**' to monitor the effect of environmental conditions, beekeeping practices and agricultural practices on bee health;
- draw up **three-year programmes** based on a declaration by all Member States of the number of hives actually registered rather than on estimated figures;
- encourage a greater degree of **information-sharing** among Member States, laboratories, beekeepers, farmers, industry and scientists, on ecotoxicological studies affecting honeybee health so as to make possible informed, independent scientific scrutiny.

Members welcome the establishment of the **EU reference laboratory** for bee health and call on the Commission to set up a steering committee, together with representatives of the beekeeping sector, to assist it in establishing the annual work programme of the EU reference laboratory.

The report also calls for **support for training programmes** for beekeepers on disease prevention and control. The Commission is invited, in cooperation with beekeeping organisations, to submit guidelines for the veterinary treatment of hives.

(2) Veterinary products: the report recognises that the development of **innovative and effective treatments against Varroa mites**, which are implicated in some 10 % of annual losses, is of high importance. It calls on the Member States to provide financial support for the research, development and field-testing of new bee-health medicinal products. It highlights, in particular, the need to offer the pharmaceutical industry incentives for the **development of new medicinal products** designed to combat bee disease.

The Commission is invited to:

- draw up common guidelines regarding veterinary treatment in the sector in order to reduce the negative effects of diseases and pests;
- work out more flexible rules for the authorisation and availability of veterinary products for honeybees, including medicines of natural origin and others that do not have health effects on insects;
- look into the possibility of extending cover under the European Union Veterinary Fund to bee diseases when the fund is next revised.

Members welcome the Commission intention to propose **a comprehensive Animal Health Law**. They call on the Commission to adjust the scope and financing of European veterinary policy to **take account of the specific characteristics** of bees and beekeeping so that bee diseases can be combated more effectively via i) adequate availability of effective, standardised medicines in all Member States, and ii) the financing of bee health in the framework of the European veterinary policy.

(3) Effects of modern agriculture on bees: the report emphasises that the European Union has only recently, with the committed involvement of the European Parliament, adopted new, stricter rules on the authorisation of plant protection products and their sustainable use, in order to ensure that they are safe for human beings and the environment. Noting that these rules include additional, strict criteria relating to bee safety, Members call on the Commission to keep Parliament informed about the successful implementation of the new rules.

The Commission is invited to **improve risk assessment methodology for pesticides** in order to protect colony health and population development.

The report calls, in a spirit of dialogue between beekeepers, agricultural stakeholders and public authorities, for the setting up of a system to encourage preliminary notification of beekeepers in all Member States in advance of pesticide applications, especially aerial insecticidal treatment operations. It also calls for the setting up of a system to provide on request information about the position of hives when these operations take place.

(4) Production and food safety aspects, protection of origin: Members call on the Commission to:

- **constantly monitor the animal health situation in source countries**, to apply the strictest animal health requirements and to put in place an appropriate monitoring system for the propagation material coming from third countries, in order to avoid introducing exotic bee diseases/parasites such as *Aethina tumida* beetles and *Tropilaelaps* mites into the EU;
- increase **transparency** regarding the frequency, percentage, characteristics and, above all, the results of the security checks performed at border control posts;
- include **No Action Levels (NALs)** or Reference Points for Action (RPAs) or Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) in honey and other apicultural products for substances that cannot be authorised for the European beekeeping sector, as well as to harmonise veterinary border controls and controls on the internal market;

- modify the annexes to Directive 2001/110/EC (Honey Directive) in order to improve the **standards of EU production** by establishing clear legal definitions for all apicultural products, including honey varieties;
- **harmonise rules on labelling** with the provisions of the Regulation on Agricultural Quality Schemes and to introduce obligatory labelling with the country of origin for imported and EU-produced apicultural products.

The report calls for action to **boost consumption of European honey and apiculture products**, including by promoting honeys with characteristics specific to certain varieties and geographical areas.

(5) Measures in connection with the conservation of biodiversity and the forthcoming reform of the Common Agricultural Policy: Members call on the Commission to **provide significantly more financial resources**, by **stepping up the current support for apiculture in the CAP after 2013** and guaranteeing the continued existence and improvement of the existing support programmes (Regulation (EC) No 1221/97) for the beekeeping sector. They call on the Commission to provide a **safety net** or a common insurance system for apiculture in order to mitigate the impact of crisis situations on beekeepers.

The Commission is invited to:

- consider the possibility of creating a special scheme for assistance to beekeepers within the framework of the direct aid scheme, for example through bee colony payments, which will help safeguard the beekeeping sector in the EU, keep beekeepers in beekeeping, encourage young people to become beekeepers and ensure bees continue to act as pollinators;
- promote sustainable agricultural practices in the CAP, to encourage all farmers to employ simple agronomic practices in line with Directive 2009/128/EC and to strengthen agri-environmental measures specific to the beekeeping sector, in the spirit of the new EU Biodiversity Strategy.

As regards the conservation of bee biodiversity, the report urges the Commission:

- within the framework of Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 (Habitats Directive), to define the conservation status of the species *Apis mellifera* and, where appropriate, to include it in the Annexes to the Directive;
- within the framework of Council Directive 92/65/EEC of 13 July 1992, to ban, at least temporarily, the import from third countries of live bees and species of the genus *Bombus* sp. in order to prevent the introduction of exotic diseases.