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Helping the bees

Bees are the unsung heroes of the New Zealand economy and their hard work is about to come under closer scrutiny as part of a three-year project to help prevent the types of alarming losses that are happening overseas to honey bee colonies. Researchers for the Bee Friendly Farmer Group, botanist Dr Linda Newstrom-Lloyd of Landcare Research and bee specialists Tony Roper and Marco Gonzalez fromASUREQuality will use a trap to collect the pollen off bees entering their hives as they return from their travels. "Bees mix nectar and pollen they've collected and stick it in baskets on their hind legs. By collecting and analysing these pollen pellets we'll learn more about what the bees are feeding on and what kind of pollen the bees are picking up," Newstrom-Lloyd

says. The collected pollen will be sent to ASUREQuality laboratory where the protein content can be analysed. "Once we know that, we can encourage people to plant species with flowers that have the highest protein levels in the pollen."

Bees need high levels of protein in the pollen to survive and thrive. "Some plants, such as pears and plums, have pollen with very high protein – over 25% – while others like pine contain just 9% protein and that's not sufficient."

Newstrom-Lloyd says the project aims to increase the availability of nutritious pollen sources by identifying bee plants that have protein-rich pollen and flower at the right times, especially when there is a pollen shortage in spring and summer.