MEDIA MONITORS

The Press
17-Jun-2011
Page: 12
Farming
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Market: Christchurch
Circulation: 83024
Type: Metro
Size: 305.87 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTF--

Farmers foot the bill to maintain bee pollination

Tim Cronshaw

Farmers are subsidising the varroa treatment costs of beekeepers to keep pollinating bees on their properties.

With wild bees extinct, or soon to be, from the varroa bee mite, farmers are valuing the services of beekeepers more than ever to pollinate clover and other crops.

North Canterbury hill country farmer Ross Little said an Akaroa beekeeper had been on their property for decades until forced out by the disease.

He said to keep a local beekeeper on the property and clover pollinated he was assisting with treatment costs.

"The feral bees have already gone and the neighbours tell me the same thing. When the seedbank goes we will wonder what has gone on."

Little, a former Environment Canterbury councillor, is the chairman of the Bee Friendly Farmer Group.

He said some beekeepers were pulling out because beekeeping had become uneconomic from varroa treatments of $30 to $40 a hive. It had become more important than ever to retain bees on farming properties.

"As a hill country sheep and beef farmer I have always appreciated the role of bees in pollinating clover. They have been our unpaid workers for a long time and they do a wonderful job for us worth billions of dollars."

Trees for Bees, a Federated Farmers Bee Industry Group programme, has been set up to ensure farmers have a viable pollinated bee force. A database is being set up so farmers know which plants and trees they can plant to assist feeding bees.

The pollination of pasture is estimated to provide $1.8 billion worth of nitrogen each year to New Zealand soils.

AsureQuality trainer Tony Roper said the work of bees was becoming more recognised as hives in the United States and Europe were collapsing.

He said international reports showed about 90 per cent of the world's food came from 100 crop species and 71 per cent of these were pollinated by bees.

"Bees are indicators of the health of the environment. If bees are dying from the ecosystem what species are next?"

Roper said wild bees had died out in areas and it was only a matter of time before there were only managed bees.

He said farmers could assist by planting nectar, fat and protein-providing plants to retain healthy hives and to avoid agrichemicals which kill bees.

Bee hives need a balance of young and old bees to stay healthy so young bees can assist with work in the hive without having to forage and gather pollen outside until they mature. Young bees are forced to do this when chemicals wipe out the foragers.

Farmers are being recommended to provide shelter and water for bees near hives, clear access for beekeepers and to prevent livestock, especially cattle, from rubbing against or kicking over hives.

Some trees are better for bees than others. Pinus radiata only produces 9 per cent protein compared to Sydney blue gums at 28 per cent, pussy willow 22 per cent or canola 23 per cent.

Clover seedbanks are expected to be exhausted in six years without pollination. Alternatives such as overdressing or fertiliser are expensive.

Pollen is in good supply from December to March, but is tight in April and May when larvae can develop into weak adults. In winter the main source is gorse which is a weed for farmers.

Mite hunting: Beekeeper Cliff Lochhead checks one of his hives for varroa mite near Tuahiwi, close to Rangiora. Photo: JOSEPH JOHNSON