

From: Vincent Kay <swordsintoplowshareshoney@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, February 10, 2018 11:01 AM
Subject: Connecticut Honeybees at Risk

We are speaking out on behalf of pollinators and the health of the environment here in New Haven County. You are receiving this email because Swords Into Plowshares Honey has bees in your geographic area that are being impacted by pesticides and herbicides. Please pass this email on to any other relevant people that have not been included. Thank you.

An open letter to the residents of Connecticut concerning the health of our honeybees and pollinators

For nearly a decade now, we have heard reports of the Chronic Collapse Disorder and how it is affecting pollinators, specifically honeybees, in this country and around the world. From day one, however, I have said that the bee die off attributed to Chronic Collapse Disorder is really the result of a new class of pesticides, herbicides, mildewcides, and fungicides that are applied not only to commercial agriculture but the homeowners' lawns and landscaping. Governments, both federal and state, have rushed the approval process to allow these new chemicals to enter the marketplace, with deadly environmental results. Here in Connecticut, Swords into Plowshares Honey is now entering its thirty-fourth year. We manage and care for between four and five hundred hives in New Haven County. It is our business to rent honeybees for crop pollination and produce Connecticut's finest honey. In essence, it is our job to raise healthy bees. So, over the past decade as people's incantation, "How are the bees? How are the bees?" continues, I feel that I at least owe a report to the citizens of Connecticut as to what we have found in the field regarding the health of our honeybees.

So, "how are the bees?" There will always be honeybee mortality when a beekeeping operation runs hundreds of hives. We test and cross-reference each hive that does die for American and European Foul Brood, two deadly and very contagious diseases. We also treat for a variety of other pests including the Varroa and Tracheal mites as well as the Hive Beetle. In addition, we protect hives from other larger predators, like bears, with solar electric fencing. Again, our business is to raise healthy bees. We have found no Foul Brood in the hives for the better part of the last decade. We do treat with antibiotics during the winter as a preventative, which is a well-established and recommended beekeeping practice. This is not to say that Foul Brood and other diseases, including mites, are not endemically killing large numbers of hives in Connecticut. Hobbyists have their hearts in the right places, but somehow we have failed as educators to teach the right methods of identification and treatment of the diseases that plague beekeeping. One only needs to go on eBay to look at the huge quantities of beekeeping equipment for sale. When asked why people are selling the equipment, it's the same story again and again. "The bees have died, and we want our money back." When questioned why the bees die, they say, "We don't know." Many of these diseases are spread by spores that remain highly infectious for decades in used equipment. This kind of irresponsible beekeeping needs to stop. I propose an intensive course and licensing procedure for people who now keep bees. I think this would help the beekeeping industry as well as the health of pollinators in Connecticut. The state of Connecticut has a statutory law that requires all beekeepers to register their hives with the State Bee Inspector. This is good beekeeping because it monitors disease and quarantines diseased hives from spreading. I know of countless hobbyist beekeepers, however, who disregard this law and have never registered their hives.

“How are the bees?” The second source of honeybee mortality we repeatedly find is directly related to the increased use of insecticides and herbicides. Awareness of public health risks, like Lyme disease, transmitted by ticks, and the Zika virus, transmitted by mosquitos, as well as Gypsy Moths infestations have led to more and more spraying. We find evidence of this especially in wealthier communities that can afford repeated insecticide spray schedules by tree companies and landscapers in backyards and open spaces. Landscaping companies also apply herbicides to eradicate extremely important sources of food for honeybees like dandelions and clover. Somewhere, somehow, we need a new and healthier model for the American Lawn. Not only are people killing pollinators in this process, they are also poisoning their well water, their pets, and their children. Many of these new pesticides and herbicides do not break down over time nor when exposed to water and sunlight. We keep bees on a number of commercial orchards and vegetable farms that spray responsibly when needed, and we have found no mortality due to these pesticide applications. Our conclusion is that the homeowners and the landscapers are the ones irresponsibly applying these chemicals that are affecting pollinators. It may also be large utility or railroad companies spraying copious amounts of insecticides and herbicides along corridors used for infrastructure.

“How are the bees?” The third issue affecting the health of pollinators is the amount of food available for honeybees, butterflies, and other pollinators. Of course, the seeds and berries produced by these flowers also affect birds and other wildlife. As Connecticut has gone from an agricultural state to a now suburban state, there is less and less food available. Of great help would be for people involved in gardening and landscaping to plant things that are beneficial to honeybees and other pollinators; for example, clover, butterfly bush, sweet pepper bush, sunflowers, all of the mints, etc. Unfortunately, many of the invasive species also produce large amounts of food for honeybees as well as seeds and berries for wildlife. There is an alarming push by state agencies and utility companies to eradicate many of these flowering shrubs and plants with no commitment to replace them with anything beneficial to pollinators. What this does is briefly eradicate a microclimate of invasive species, but the same species reestablishes itself in a short amount of time. Thus, the only thing accomplished is dousing the soil with lots of chemicals, once again poisoning our soil and water. Particular examples of invasive species that are important foraging options are Autumn Olive, Japanese Knotweed, and Purple Loose Strife. I have heard no discussions of replanting areas burned out by herbicides with a valuable food resource for pollinators. The reason given – lack of monetary resources. The second part of this lack of food availability for pollinators is the mowing and pruning schedules of homeowners, landscapers, and many of the utility companies. With an ever so slight adjustment to mowing schedules, as little as a week to ten days to allow flowering plants to finish blooming, pollinators would benefit before going into winter.

So, “how are the bees?” In response, I say they are okay but not great. Most years, it is a struggle to keep them alive. We work very hard at it, but that is our job. With a little effort and good stewardship of the land, however, the health of our environment, including birds and pollinators, could be so much better. We are sending this letter out to dozens of state and local agencies with the hope that someone is listening, and we urge them to allocate monetary and educational resources to enable wildlife to thrive, including our honeybees. We also urge the common citizen to demand a cleaner environment and a new model for landscaping and the American lawn. This will benefit every person in the state of Connecticut and, hopefully, the generations to come. One of the best resources for information on organic landscaping and lawn care is the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), which has chapters in every state in New England, including Connecticut.

We send this letter out in the dead of winter, with the hope that the upcoming agricultural and gardening season will be a good one for all of us - and a healthier one for our pollinators and wildlife.

Vincent Kay
Swords Into Plowshares Honey
February 2018

