

# To bee or not to bee

*Beekeepers vs. invasive species rules on federal lands*

BY GLORIA DICKIE

Every 10 days, Paul Limbach loads teetering beehives onto his white flatbed truck and follows dusty roads through the White River National Forest up to the alpine meadows of the sprawling Flat Tops Wilderness Area.

It's a long drive from his home in Silt, Colorado, but the Flat Tops are one of his favorite places to work. Here, rolling fields of purple lupine, yellow coneflowers and wild geranium abut thick aspen forests. In a good year, the days are just long enough to transform a honey trickle into a golden flow.

Limbach, a 68-year-old second-generation beekeeper, has been running bees in the Flat Tops since the early 1970s, when a Forest Service friend let him stack a few experimental hives in exchange for a jar of honey. Since then, he's expanded to six locations in the White River, paying roughly \$100 a year per location in permit fees. Though Limbach typically gets less than 30 pounds of honey here, his bees have been able to evade colony collapse disorder, the syndrome that has decimated hives nationwide.

Getting more bees into such pristine habitat is a central part of the Obama administration's new pollinator strategy, released this past May, which promotes beekeeping on federal land as a means to help the honeybee. For the growing number of local hobbyists as well as the shrinking number of commercial keepers, this could be a sweet deal after years of wading through bureaucratic miasma to get a permit. But there's just one problem: Honeybees, or *Apis mellifera*, aren't native to the United States. That means they're subject to federal invasive species rules, which could take precedence over the pollinator strategy.

Prior to the new plan, getting a permit to place hives on federal land was lengthy, frustrating and costly. Limbach is the only national forest permittee in his state; he was grandfathered in when beekeeping rules were formalized in White River in 1979. There are just 126 active permits on Western national forests, 102 of them in California, and 63 authorized permits on BLM land in the West. Those numbers could increase under the new strategy



Paul Limbach checks one of his beehives in Colorado's White River National Forest, where he has been keeping bees since the 1970s.

GLORIA DICKIE; BEE CLOSE-UP RGBSTOCK, CC VIA FLICKR

— good news for the beleaguered and beloved honeybees, though perhaps not for native pollinators.

A growing body of research blames honeybees for transmitting diseases, such as deformed wing virus, to increasingly rare native bumblebees. Such pathogen transmission is compounded when bees are moved from stable summer sites to California's Central Valley, where beekeepers are paid for pollinating crops. Much like airplane travelers, the bees can easily pick up and transmit diseases to new colonies.

There's also speculation that under harsh environmental conditions, such as drought, honeybees will outcompete native bees.

"There is so much enthusiasm right now among wildlife conservation professionals," says Sarina Jepsen, endangered species program director at the Xerces Society, a native invertebrate conservation organization. "But honeybees are exotic; they're like livestock. You're not conserving wild colonies, and you may be doing damage."

But beekeepers argue other livestock, like cattle, do just as much damage to ecosystems — and they aren't barred from public lands.

Dov Sax, a researcher at Brown University who studies non-natives, says the line dividing natives from non-natives is fuzzy. Honeybees were imported from Africa and Europe in the 1600s for their utilitarian purpose, and have since spread across the continent, leading many people to believe they were always here.

"There are naturalized honeybees, and it's unclear whether they're invasive," Sax says. "But the ones managed in hives, I wouldn't call those invasive, I would call that domesticated."

Regardless of honeybees' status, with more and more beekeepers driven from pesticide-doused farmland, the demand

to put hives on public lands is increasing, says Darren Cox, president of the American Honey Producers Association. Whether they'll be rebuffed by invasive species rules, or welcomed under the new strategy, will depend on individual environmental and infrastructure assessments.

Up at 9,300 feet in the Flat Tops, Limbach is busy adding more hives to his teeming pallet piles. He wears a veil but not a beekeeping suit; after a lifetime of bee handling, his tanned skin is hardened against stings.

"In a normal year, we just about break even up here," he says. "But this year we're gonna make some money."

Bees swarm the hillside, where there are more flowers than grass. The red columbine flowers, so abundant at lower elevations, are largely absent here, however. Honeybees, Limbach noted earlier, can't see red.

"Between me and the livestock, we've probably changed the ecology up here a bit," he says. The cows that crowd the access road eat mostly grass, and the bees pollinate whatever remains. Pretty soon, you're walking through little more than a soft bed of petals.

"Whether that's a good or bad thing, I guess that depends who you are," Limbach adds as an afterthought. "But I don't think there are as many bumblebees as there used to be." □

## Apiary permits in Western national forests



**SCALE**  
Number of permits  
33  
10  
1

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