

## Beekeepers reporting heavy losses following harsh winter season



By Jasen Obermeyer

This past winter was one for the record books, with extreme cold and warm temperatures that seemed to happen on the fly, which for beekeepers in Ontario proved to be a real stinger, experiencing severe losses in honey bees.

A recent study from the Ontario Beekeepers Association (OBA) indicates that about 70 per cent of beekeepers in the province suffered "unsustainable losses" over the winter. A survey of 900 beekeepers indicates that almost one in three, or 32 per cent of beekeepers reported colony losses of 70 per cent or more.

"I've been getting calls from beekeepers around the province," reports Jim Coneybeare, OBA president. "The number of dead or weak colonies is astounding. These could be the worst winter losses on record."

"It's been a tough year," described Shannon Coleclough, president of Bee Natural Caretakers, a hobbyist group associated with the OBA, and with members from Mono, Mulmur, Orangeville, and other areas.

She said the Queens were not laying well, "which set up rough conditions going into the winter already," and are behind their season by four to six weeks due to the late ice storm in April, when the bees should have been out looking for new pollen sources.

Kevin Catania, a resident of Adjala-Tosorontio and member of Bee Natural Caretakers, explained to the Citizen that he started off beekeeping last year with 3,000 bees across two hives, and collected roughly 30 pounds of honey at the end of the season. By late February this year, he lost one whole hive. "It seems like we had a particularly bad winter."

Mr. Catania, 22, says another reason for his loss is most likely dysentery or Nosema Apis, a fungus that affects honeybees.

Ms. Coleclough commented that although the organization has smaller numbers of beehives, she lost 75 per cent of her own, and heard from some commercial beekeepers that lost even more.

"What I believe was most troubling was the amount of intense freeze and thaw cycles," added Mr. Catania. "It would be snow all one day, and then it would be back to the grass one day."

He attributes these losses to global warming, and can't recall a more polarizing winter. "Every winter seems to be getting worse in its own unique ways. They're never the same anymore like they use to be."

He added that when he recently went to buy three new hives at Innisfil Creek Honey in Cookstown, they were only processing one-third of orders, due to the lower bee population.

To help commercial beekeepers stay in business, the OBA has asked the Ontario government for financial assistance to allow beekeepers to recover and rebuild their colony numbers back to last year's numbers.

Ms. Coleclough hopes that this summer will have a right balance of rain and sun, after 2016 and 2017's extreme heat and wet weather respectively, and believes there will be a shortage of honey this year, making it more expensive. "It's going to be another tricky year."