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national farmers union
In Union Is Strength

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OPENING BORDER TO US BEE IMPORTS POSES DANGERS, SAYS NFU

OTTAWA, Ontario – Opening the border to imports of US queen bees poses serious economic consequences for beekeepers and creates the potential for long-term public health risks, according to the National Farmers Union (NFU).

In a brief to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) this week, NFU Women's President Karen Pedersen said while the Canadian beekeeping sector is generally economically viable and relatively disease-free, a proposal to change the federal Honeybee Importation Prohibition Regulations could reverse those trends virtually overnight.

The CFIA has put forward a proposal to allow importation of queen bees and their attendants from the continental United States as early as this spring. A ban on queen bee imports, their attendants, and all "packaged bees" has been in place since 1987.

The import restriction was put in place at that time because the varroa mite was widespread in US honeybee stocks and posed a significant threat to Canadian hives. Despite a slight decline in the number of beekeepers and hives in the years immediately following the border closure, the Canadian honey sector has rebounded strongly to the point where it is in better shape than its counterpart in the continental United States.

Not only has the US honey industry been hurt by the ongoing presence of treatment-resistant varroa mite strains and other diseases, it is also burdened by the spread of Africanized or "killer" bees in the southern states. Lifting the ban on imported queens increases the risk of Africanized bees coming into Canada, according to Pedersen. "By opening the border to this problem, the Canadian Government is opening itself, and Canadian beekeepers, to very serious potential liabilities," she said.

Africanized bees are descendents of a strain which was accidentally released from test hives in Brazil in 1956, and which have been steadily expanding their range over the last 49 years. The Africanized bee is known for its extremely aggressive behaviour. Accounts of people dying from bee stings as a result of unprovoked attacks are well-documented. While Africanized bees cannot survive the cold Canadian winter, the annual importation of continental US queen bees which are descended from or have mated with Africanized bees, or the future movement of entire colonies by migratory operators, poses a very real health threat to Canadian beekeepers and others in their vicinity.

The CFIA claims opening the border would improve Canadian beekeepers' access to queen bee stocks, boosting the number of colonies and increasing honey production. The NFU, however, notes that opening the border to queen bees will not guarantee an increase in production, or even an increase in the number of colonies. It will, however, lead to the spread of diseases and pests in Canada. While the CFIA proposal would not immediately lift the ban on packaged bees, it could open the door to wholesale imports in the future, according to the NFU.

Canadian beekeepers have found that raising and breeding their own queen bees gradually improved the genetic quality of Canadian bee stocks over the past 17 years. These home-grown

queens improved average honey yield and are achieving widespread market acceptance in both Canada and the United States.

The NFU concluded that Canadian bee stocks are relatively healthy, with an abundant supply of queens from breeders in Canada. "There is no need at this time to lift the restrictions on queens and attendants from the continental US," concluded Pedersen. "Any economic benefits to producers will be more than offset by the costs."

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