



History of Modern Beekeeping in West Virginia

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In 1969, West Virginia honeybee colonies were primarily being kept in log gums or non-movable frame box hives. These methods had a very low economic return for the farmer and posed an impossible situation for disease control. Conversion to legal, - movable-frame equipment was instituted by the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) under the leadership of Earl Cochran, and continued under the supervision of Bard Montgomery, Matt Cochran and current State Apiarist George Clutter. Today most colonies are kept in legal movable frame hives which are five times more profitable for farmers and can be monitored for disease control purposes.

In 1977, the WVDA purchased a fumigator which utilized the pesticide etholone oxide to help control the outbreaks of American Foul Brood (AFB). This proved to be expensive and dangerous for apiary staff to use. In 1991, apiary staff converted this device into a portable, steam autoclave that could do in one hour what previously took eight hours with less expense. To date, this is the only such unit in the country built entirely by apiary staff.

In the late 1980s two parasitic mites - the tracheal mite and the varroa mite - decimated the country's honeybee population, reducing pollination and threatening the food supply. Today, honeybees cannot survive in the wild for any great length of time as in the past. Therefore the majority of honey bees in West Virginia are maintained by beekeepers.

In 1991, the apiary law was amended to mandate that apiary staff provide educational programs. WVDA's apiary staff teaches an average of 70 educational seminars for beekeeping and master gardening clubs each year. These classes have helped state beekeepers to achieve one of the lowest incidences of disease and winter kill on the east coast, and have helped increase their per-colony productivity.

The high expense of the necessary medications to combat bee pests and the lack of knowledge on how to safely use them prompted the state legislature in 1995 to institute the beekeeper assistance program. This program also provided extra colony inspection in an effort to bring rampant bee diseases and parasites under control and to increase beekeeper success and profitability. At that time the state had fewer than 200 beekeepers maintaining fewer than 2,000 colonies. Ten years later the state has 1,200 beekeepers maintaining more than 15,600 colonies. In years past, beekeeping in West Virginia was considered primarily a hobby, but today many commercial and sideline beekeeping operations flourish. During this time of growth, beekeeper assistance funding has decreased from \$70,000 to \$32,000, and a part-time inspector position had to be eliminated. Apiary

staff has tried to keep up with the increasing workload and have ranked for the last three seasons at the top of the country for number of colonies inspected per inspector.

In 2001, WVDA assisted state beekeepers in starting a non-profit beekeeping cooperative in Weston with \$50,000 in funds from the state legislature and a USDA specialty crop grant of \$42,000. This facility has provided a place where beekeepers have been able to purchase their supplies at a wholesale price, saving thousands of dollars in shipping charges. To date, co-op sales have exceeded \$118,000. This facility also offers a custom extracting facility where farmers can have their crop extracted in a Health Department-approved facility. Extracting equipment is an expensive obstacle for most beekeepers. This facility gives producers time to grow until they can set up their own honey houses.

In 2002, the West Virginia Legislature adopted the honeybee as the state insect. During this same year, apiary staff reared honeybee queens for both the USDA and Cornell University that exhibited useful traits.

In 2003 WVDA apiary staff cooperated with the USDA in testing the usefulness of new antibiotics, which has contributed to apiculture on the national level. In addition to this efficacy study, the apiary staff assisted with honeybee research at West Virginia University, Penn State, University of Delaware and Cornell University.

In 2004, apiary staff wrote a book entitled "Beekeeping in West Virginia" that is distributed to state beekeepers free of charge, courtesy of the beekeeper assistance program. This booklet covers every basic topic of beekeeping, including those unique to our state. A second booklet containing beekeeping equipment patterns was also published. WVDA has helped bring beekeeping in the southwest part of the state to the point where over 20 tons of honey worth \$44,000 was produced and marketed to an out-of-state packer in 2004. This shipment of honey left Charleston with the assistance of the WVDA and the beekeeper assistance program. Another load, primarily from the Ohio River basin, was transported in March of 2005.

The WVDA is working with growers and beekeepers to facilitate quality pollination of crops, such as apples, blueberries, cranberries and various melon crops on the eastern shore. The WVDA also works with state orchards that are concerned about the quality of pollination they are receiving from out-of-state bee colonies. For the last two seasons apiary staff has certified pollination for any group of colonies in question.