May's Ramblings of a Bee Bumbler, from your PRESIDENT

I know several places claim this saying as their own but it really hit home this year in Louisiana. “If you don’t like the weather today, wait until tomorrow.” We ran the air conditioner in January and lit the fireplace in April. Between the rains and cool nights our honey flow in northwest Louisiana has been sporadic at best. The early spring build-up and then cold weather had our bees consuming early stored nectar. Now the tallow trees are blooming and who knows how that flow will turn out. On a good note, for the Northwestern part of Louisiana, we did not flood this spring.

Now on to better things. Swarm season has been busy and so has your Board of Directors. The Field day committee will be meeting the first of June to start planning our fall field day with the USDA Research facility (Bee lab). The Annual Convention Committee has also been busy planning the 2017 convention for December and we are already making plans for 2018. This year’s convention is to be held in Pineville, Louisiana with the 2018 convention to be held in the Lake Charles area. If you have any suggestions for speakers or sessions you would like to hear, please contact one of our board members. The yearly conventions are only as successful as our members help us make them.

The LBA web site is getting a makeover so there may be some growing pains in the process. Instead of all our board members’ email information being available there will be a central contact who will then forward information on to the proper person. The reason for this change has to do with cyber security. I never thought I would ever be talking about beekeeping and cyber security together but here goes.

BEE SAFE, BEE CAREFUL, BEE SECURE.

As many of you are building up your businesses, be aware that there are those out there looking for ways to take advantage of you. Phishing is the term to describe this process on your computer. You might get an email telling you that someone wants to buy your products. All you have to do is send them your information. They will take that information and could steal your identity and/or your company’s identity and make purchases in your name. Both I and our new treasurer have been targets of phishing this past month. The individuals involved got our information from the LBA website, emailed the treasurer and asked, in my name, if she could pay an invoice. She responded yes but did not understand why I was asking so she called me. A week later she got another email asking for a check for $1950 to be sent to an address in California. Again she called me and I turned it over to our local sheriff’s department.

LAST WEEK SHE GOT ANOTHER EMAIL ASKING FOR PAYMENT. The emails appeared to be from me but the email to reply was to president@yahoo. Since no money was sent and there were three states involved it would have been up to the FBI to investigate. With limited resources, three states involved and only “attempted fraud” happening, nothing will happen with this case. According to the sheriff’s detective, this type of thing happens every day. So BEE AWARE and do not SHARE your information unless you are sure who you are dealing with.
Bayou Bee Bulletin

The LBA is your organization and the Board is here to serve you. If you have suggestions for us to make the organization better or ways to better serve our members, please feel free to contact us. Also, there are several bee clubs scattered throughout the state. Tables listing the LBA board members and the various bee clubs in the state are posted at the LBA website (www.labeekeepers.org). Join your local club and get involved. Help us help our fellow beekeepers be the best stewards of this valuable resource and produce the best honey in the world.

Clover is still blooming, tallow is starting and the harvest is nearly at hand.
I hope each of you full supers, healthy bees, a great honey crop and a safe year.

Randy Fair, randy@beebumbler.com, 1-318-588-2899

With the March BBB I mentioned that, “as far as the weather is concerned, this the best spring in the last three years that those of us in CENLA have seen”. What I didn’t expect was that CENLA’s spring floral sources started their blossoming in-or-around late March, then went on a hiatus and stopped. The blooming picked up again in late April. It wasn’t until late April that the leafing out of my fruit trees was completed! No late freezes, just cool nights with heavy rains* every week or so. The nectar returns to the hives also went on a hiatus and I never saw a major honey flow – until the last two weeks.
[*Please see photos below showing major flooding in Alexandria.]

All my colonies built up as usual and as expected, some of my queens from last season died after the initial buildup. I’d prepared for that by creating several nucs and was able to either place new queens or queen cells in the queenless hives, or combine hives to keep from losing bees.

Swarming began in March and is still going on. I’ve captured several. Two I picked up last week each had 40,000 – 50,000 bees (one weighed in at over 5#).

Here is a trick you can use to keep the swarm from building comb on the top cover when inserting them into a hive with an extra box on top for placement of feeders (jar of crystalized honey, Bee Pro patty, jar of sugar water, etc.): coat the underside of the top cover with vegetable oil. Just wipe it on. After the bees have become established, pull the extra box and feeders off the hive and wash down the cover before resetting it on the hive. If you don’t plan on using an extra box on the hive body, this technique isn’t necessary.

With this letter, I am continuing a section that talks to “A Year in the Life of a Beekeeper – My personal view”. This BBB# 3 encompasses January – June.
Enjoy.
Articles of Interest:

- A Year in the Life of a Beekeeper – My personal view (updated with each new BBB)
- Nation’s Beekeepers Lost 44 Percent of Bees in 2015-16; Article in Bee Informed website: (https://beeinformed.org/)
- Martins, Bees and Flooding in Alexandria Louisiana

Internet Sites You Might Find Useful

Commercial Business Advertisements

Articles of Interest

A Year in the Life of a Beekeeper – My personal view – (Updated with each new BBB)

A monthly beekeeping task and management calendar of events

While visiting a CENLA Beekeeper Club member in early February, he made a recommendation that I send out monthly, a notice of what we as beekeepers should/could be doing that month with our hives and what we should be expecting/planning for in the next month. That sounded like a very good idea. Some of this can be found within the chart we’ve passed out at several of our meetings over the last few years: A year in the Life of a Beekeeper – An Annual Beekeeping Task and Management Calendar*. (*Capital Area Beekeepers Association; Baton Rouge, LA publication)

What I’m presenting with these monthly exposes is directed at the hobby beekeeper, not the commercial, queen breeder or queen rearer, though they too would carry out much of what I’m stating. In all cases, I document all my visits and what I do with a field book. Never trust your memory and this documentation becomes especially useful over time.

With that in mind, here is what I’m doing this February and what I’m expecting for March.

January
Check colony strength. Check honey stores. Repair or replace equipment. Visit the apiaries/hives at least once a month.

February
By early February I am beginning to prepare for the hive build-up, especially if I’m using Italians or hives that I’ve created from captured swarms – these are prone to early population buildup and need food to do so.
It is this month that I move out of my winter mode of checking the hives once a month, to that of every 2 weeks. Sometimes I get antsy and start looking at them every week. I check for honey stores and if lacking I initiate sugar water feeding (2:1 ratio). Whether I have decent honey reserves or not, I begin feeding pollen concentrates (I use Bee Pro patties from Mann Lake). Check for colony strength. Are the numbers low, moderate or high?

I also do a sampling for Varroa mites, using the powdered sugar shake method but you can do a sampling use sticky boards, visual, drone brood sampling (see my talk from fall of 2016), ether roll alcohol wash. If greater than 2% of the bees are infested, I fumigate with oxalic acid. This spring all of my hives came through the winter with very low mite populations so I didn’t treat them. [I’d recommend that you visit Randy Oliver’s website to become familiar with the treatment options and techniques regarding Varroa mite treatments. {http://scientificbeekeeping.com}]

Looking at my field book from last year, the earliest swarm capture I made was March 17. With that in mind I believe that swarming season would begin March 1st and that would mean that drones were/are being produced as early as mid-February (it takes about 2 weeks after a drone pupates before it is sexually mature. That would mean that the queens would be pupating out in early March as well. You should be looking for these things to be occurring.

How best to find these things out you might ask? Plan on rotating your brood boxes before the first of March. While doing that you can observe what’s going on inside the hive.

It is this time of year that I monitor the presence and development of the drone brood and drones. Through monitoring of them I will know when the queens will be produced.

If you are cognizant of queen rearing, then start preparing to do this. Check for queen productivity.

Continue with your repair or replacement equipment.

**March**

I’m into that time of year when I visit the yards every week.

Continue to check honey stores and colony strength. The bee populations will/are building and they will need plenty of pollen and honey/sugars to help create those large populations, good drones and queens.

If you are into swarm capture, then get ready now. Call and leave your name with the LSU Ag system, local fire and police departments, etc. Be ready to move quickly. Have a container handy to place the swarm in, a ladder, pruning shears, clean water &/or sugar water spray bottle, mosquito netting, nuc box at home, etc. However, before responding to calls ask a few things:

- How long has the swarm been there?
- How high is it?
- What is its size?

Get a contact person’s name and phone number and ask them to call you if the swarm leaves before you get there.
If you can’t get to it for several hours, let the caller know that and if you can’t make it, tell them that and recommend someone else, if you know anyone.
If you make an appointment to come, do so or call.
My first swarm capture this season came on Wednesday, March 1st. I captured about 30,000 bees and they are now in a hive with plenty of honey and a pollen patty.

Continue feeding up until the honey flow is on – I began placing patties in mid-February and by February 25th I’d placed a second patty as the first had been consumed. You will know that the honey flow is on when the bees stop feeding on your sugar water and/or pollen patties and you see them bringing in lots of pollen and filling the hive with honey. At that time stop feeding, remove the patties and store them in the freezer until later in the year or next spring.

Make colony increases and prepare and/or make hive splits, nucs and prepare for queen rearing.

Plan on adding honey supers as needed - when I have 7 out of 10 frames full of honey I add another.

Treat for ants and vegetation in the yards.

_One thing I didn’t mention in the last newsletter but which I do whenever I find the queens, I make sure they are marked. I do this for new or old, whether in established hives or swarms. You are there, do it and be prepared at any visit to do it. There are established color codes but use whatever suits you._

**April**

With April the honey flow in Central Louisiana is probably in full flow.

At this time of year natural hive production, queen replacements, swarming and the like are occurring. If you value your bees it behooves you to create splits, capture queen cells, build nucs, and if you choose, to sell queens, nucs, and hives that you have created.

Many queens that overwintered and spent their best creating large populations of bees for this spring’s honey flow have become overextended and many die and/or need replacing. This is where the nucs and/or queens you’ve been creating come in handy. I usually replace the queens in those hives that look like the brood pattern is suffering with new queens. Sometimes, I just replace the queens anyway, rather than wait for a possible failure – it can happen quickly and one week the hive looks great and the next it’s being overrun with wax moths. Whenever you replace the queen(s) be sure to monitor that hive for the next few weeks to be sure she’s been accepted and brood production is coming on line.

Continue adding honey supers as needed.

Treat for ants and vegetation in the yards.
May
In May I continue with weekly hive maintenance by treating for small hive beetles (I use SHB traps on the top frames and a West trap with powdered lime in the bottom, below a screen), ant and vegetation management, adding supers as needed and most importantly: monitoring the individual hives for brood production and possible pest/diseases. This latter point will entail breaking open the hives to look at the brood pattern/condition. I don’t do this every week but I do it at least twice a month. With strong hives that I’d checked once or twice in mid-March that are full of bees and putting on supers every week or so, I usually break into their brood chambers and check them once this month. Back in February when I’d rotated the brood boxes I was able to examine my hives in depth. Now I do a quick perusal of the frames looking for possible signs of swarming (queen cells), brood production, poor brood production, eggs, uncapped larvae, drone brood, etc.

Though all my hives came through the winter with low varroa mite populations, I have sampled for the mites and have treated all my hives with oxalic acid via fumigation. I do this with all swarms and nucs – once I’ve got them established. As the bee populations’ increase and the drones come on line, so the mite populations tend to increase. Sample, monitor and treat as necessary. This season, I chose not to use drone brood frames to control varroa mites, but if you choose to do so, be sure to pull them once the cells are capped. It’s always a good idea to break open some of your drone brood and take an inventory as to how many mites you see. I opened 20 random cells in three out of five hives in one yard and counted two mites. That indicates a low count – in those hives. As stated above: [I’d recommend that you visit Randy Oliver’s website to become familiar with the treatment options and techniques regarding Varroa mite treatments.


This last April I did lose some queens but was able to save all the hives’ bees by either requeening or hive combinations. The nice thing about combining hives is that you can always come back and split those hives and add a new queen – if you have them (queen cells/nucs). I never combine a hive with obvious disease or heavy mite issues with a strong colony. As I treat for mites regularly and requeen often, I usually don’t see hives with major disease/mite issues.

As I do my spring honey harvesting the first week of June, I start documenting how many supers I’m going to pull in June, about two weeks prior to harvest.

June
Depending upon the weather, I usually harvest the first week of June. During the harvest I pull those wooden-ware items that need repair or servicing and replace them. I should mention that I try and utilize the efforts of new beekeepers during the season not only to train them but to assist with maintenance in the yards. They often ask for that service and I enjoy their company and help. It may take longer to complete a field check and sometimes they kill a queen or drop a box but that’s part of the journey to becoming a beekeeper (once a few summers back they managed to wipe out three queens and several queen cells – all in one visit!) At honey harvest their assistance is greatly appreciated and I give each of them a gallon of honey when we finish. I should make note here that I “really dislike harvesting and processing honey!” Whenever I can get help and get this part of the business completed I never say “no thanks”.

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June generally is the tail end of the honey flow for CENLA – though this season I’m not so sure. The floral sources are changing with the weather heating up and the rains slacking off. Weekly field checks and maintenance continue. Supers are still added when needed.

Swarm season is or has come to an end by this month. In your hives, a good indication of this is the lack of drone production. When the bees stop making drones then they aren’t making queen cells either. If you are trying to raise queens then you will need drones to mate with them.

July and August – See BBB#4

Nation’s Beekeepers Lost 44 Percent of Bees in 2015-16; Article in Bee Informed website: (https://beeinformed.org/) – May 10, 2016 Blog

Summer losses rival winter losses for the second year running

Beekeepers across the United States lost 44 percent of their honey bee colonies during the year spanning April 2015 to April 2016, according to the latest preliminary results of an annual nationwide survey. Rates of both winter loss and summer loss—and consequently, total annual losses—worsened compared with last year. This marks the second consecutive survey year that summer loss rates rivaled winter loss rates.

The survey, which asks both commercial and small-scale beekeepers to track the health and survival rates of their honey bee colonies, is conducted each year by the Bee Informed Partnership in collaboration with the Apiary Inspectors of America, with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Survey results for this year and all previous years are publicly available on the Bee Informed website.

“We’re now in the second year of high rates of summer loss, which is cause for serious concern,” said Dennis vanEngelsdorp, an assistant professor of entomology at the University of Maryland and project director for the Bee Informed Partnership. “Some winter losses are normal and expected. But the fact that beekeepers are losing bees in the summer, when bees should be at their healthiest, is quite alarming.”

Beekeepers who responded to the survey lost a total of 44.1 percent of their colonies over the course of the year. This marks an increase of 3.5 percent over the previous study year (2014-15), when loss rates were found to be 40.6 percent. Winter loss rates increased from 22.3 percent in the previous winter to 28.1 percent this past winter, while summer loss rates increased from 25.3 percent to 28.1 percent.

The researchers note that many factors are contributing to colony losses. A clear culprit is the varroa mite, a lethal parasite that can easily spread between colonies. Pesticides and malnutrition caused by changing land use patterns are also likely taking a toll, especially among commercial beekeepers.
A recent study, published online in the journal *Apidologie* on April 20, 2016, provided the first multi-year assessment of honey bee parasites and disease in both commercial and backyard beekeeping operations. Among other findings (summarized in a recent University of Maryland press release) study, found that the varroa mite is far more abundant than previous estimates indicate and is closely linked to several damaging viruses. Varroa is a particularly challenging problem among backyard beekeepers (defined as those who manage fewer than 50 colonies).

“Many backyard beekeepers don’t have any varroa control strategies in place. We think this results in colonies collapsing and spreading mites to neighboring colonies that are otherwise well-managed for mites,” said Nathalie Steinhauer, a graduate student in the UMD Department of Entomology who leads the data collection efforts for the annual survey. “We are seeing more evidence to suggest that good beekeepers who take the right steps to control mites are losing colonies in this way, through no fault of their own.”

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**Figure 1: Summary of the total overwinter colony losses (October 1 – April 1) of managed honey bee colonies in the United States across nine annual national surveys. The acceptable range is the average percentage of acceptable colony losses declared by the survey participants in each year of the survey.**
This is the tenth year of the winter loss survey, and the sixth year to include summer and annual losses in addition to winter loss data. More than 5,700 beekeepers from 48 states responded to this year’s survey. All told, these beekeepers are responsible for about 15 percent of the nation’s estimated 2.66 million managed honey bee colonies.

The survey is part of a larger research effort to understand why honey bee colonies are in such poor health, and what can be done to manage the situation. Some crops, such as almonds, depend entirely on honey bees for pollination. Estimates of the total economic value of honey bee pollination services range between $10 billion and $15 billion annually.

“The high rate of loss over the entire year means that beekeepers are working overtime to constantly replace their losses,” said Jeffery Pettis, a senior entomologist at the USDA and a co-coordinator of the survey. “These losses cost the beekeeper time and money. More importantly, the industry needs these bees to meet the growing demand for pollination services. We urgently need solutions to slow the rate of both winter and summer colony losses.”

This survey was conducted by the Bee Informed Partnership, which receives a majority of its funding from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Award No. 2011-67007-20017). The content of this article does not necessarily reflect the views of the USDA.

A summary of the 2015-2016 survey results is available upon request prior to May 10, 2016; thereafter the results will be added to previous years’ results publicly available on the Bee Informed Partnership’s website.

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Written By: The Bee Informed Team which has written 41 posts in this blog.
Martins, Bees and Flooding in Alexandria Louisiana – Thursday, March 30th, 2017

On March 30th I was contacted by a homeowner in an area of western Alexandria who had recently built and mounted a martin box 16 feet in the air in his back yard the week before. On Monday, March 27 a pair of martins took up residency. Thursday morning, the homeowner, his wife and cat were in the back yard admiring his handiwork and watching the martins flying in and out of their new home. As the homeowner put it, suddenly, a maelstrom of bees filled the sky swirling about the martin box. The bees flew into the martin house and the martins quickly vacated the premises (the neighborhood had become unlivable). The owner, his wife and cat vacated the yard. I was finishing up a bee removal job in the area when I received his call. Normally I don’t go after such jobs but I’d never extracted a hive from a martin house and I was close by anyway so I decided to have a look. I arrived just before a major storm front moved into the area, and was able to climb up, take down the bird house, open it at home that night, capture the swarm and install them in a hive. The storm front that moved into the area dropped 12 inches of precipitation in CENLA in a period of 12 hours (beginning Sunday, April 2nd at 3 pm and lasting till 3 am Monday, April 3rd). On Wednesday April 5th, I returned the martin house to him. What I found was the entire area was under 1-2 feet of water. His house and dozens more were inundated. His shop/garage door was open and his hot water heater had been lifted up, separated and washed out of his garage and was floating in the yard by the street corner. Here are some photos of the event.
These bees were so docile I was able to scoop them up and place them into a hive that night.

The owner’s home and all of the surrounding area just west of McKeithan Drive in Alexandria flooded. A few homes were above water but not many. Many, if not all of the houses had their sewer systems backing up. Not a pretty sight.

The lone post in the back yard (pond) is where the martin bird house was located. At that time I arrived there is about 1-2 feet of water.
More than three-fourths of the honey sold in U.S. grocery stores isn’t exactly what the bees produce, according to testing done exclusively for Food Safety News.

The results show that the pollen frequently has been filtered out of products labeled “honey.”

Ultra-filtering is a high-tech procedure where honey is heated, sometimes watered down and then forced at high pressure through extremely small filters to remove pollen, which is the only foolproof sign identifying the source of the honey. It is a spin-off of a technique refined by the Chinese, who have illegally dumped tons of their honey – some containing illegal antibiotics – on the U.S. market for years.

Food Safety News decided to test honey sold in various outlets after its earlier investigation found U.S. groceries flooded with Indian honey banned in Europe as unsafe because of contamination with antibiotics, heavy metal and a total lack of pollen which prevented tracking its origin.

Food Safety News purchased more than 60 jars, jugs and plastic bears of honey in 10 states and the District of Columbia.

The contents were analyzed for pollen by Vaughn Bryant, a professor at Texas A&M University and one of the nation’s premier melissopalynologists, or investigators of pollen in honey.
HONEY WITHOUT POLLEN

Here is a list of the honey tested by Food Safety News that showed no traces of pollen. Analysis showed that the absence of pollen was consistent regardless of the size of the jar. In some cases, the stores where the honey was purchased are not listed because the same brands can be found in many different outlets.

- American Choice Clover Honey
- Archer Farms Orange Blossom Honey
- Archer Farms Organic Classic Honey
- Busy Bee Organic Honey
- Busy Bee, Pure Clover Honey
- CVS Honey
- Fred Meyer Clover Honey
- Full Circle Pure Honey
- Giant Eagle Clover Honey
- GE Clover Honey
- Great Value, Clover Honey
- Haggen Honey, Natural & Pure
- HT Traders Tupelo Honey
- Kroger Pure Clover Honey
- Market Pantry Pure Honey
- Mel-o 100 % Pure Honey
- Naturally Sue Bee Clover Honey
- Naturally Preferred Fireweed Honey
- Rite Aid Honey
- Safeway Clover Honey
- Silver Bow Pure Honey
- Stop and Shop Clover Honey
- Sue Bee Clover Honey
- Thrifty Bee Honey
- Valutime Honey
- Walgreen MEL-O honey
- Western Family Clover Honey
- Wegman Clover Honey
- Winnie the Pooh, Pure Clover
Bryant, who is director of the Palynology Research Laboratory, found that among the containers of honey provided by Food Safety News:

• 76 percent of samples bought at groceries had all the pollen removed. These were stores like TOP Food, Safeway, Giant Eagle, QFC, Kroger, Metro Market, Harris Teeter, A&P, Stop & Shop and King Soopers.

• 100 percent of the honey sampled from drugstores like Walgreens, Rite-Aid and CVS Pharmacy had no pollen.

• 77 percent of the honey sampled from big box stores like Costco, Sam’s Club, Walmart, Target and H-E-B had the pollen filtered out.

• 100 percent of the honey packaged in the small individual service portions from Smucker, McDonald’s and KFC had the pollen removed.

• Bryant found that every one of the samples Food Safety News bought at farmers markets, co-ops and “natural” stores like PCC and Trader Joe’s had the full, anticipated, amount of pollen.

And if you have to buy at major grocery chains, the analysis found that your odds are somewhat better of getting honey that wasn’t ultra-filtered if you buy brands labeled as organic. Out of seven samples tested, five (71 percent) were heavily with pollen. All of the organic honey was produced in Brazil, according to the labels.

The National Honey Board, a federal research and promotion organization under USDA oversight, says the bulk of foreign honey (at least 60 percent or more) is sold to the food industry for use in baked goods, beverages, sauces and processed foods. Food Safety News did not examine these products for this story.

Some U.S. honey packers didn’t want to talk about how they process their merchandise.

One who did was Bob Olney, of Honey Tree Inc., in Michigan, who sells its Winnie the Pooh honey in Walmart stores. Bryant’s analysis of the contents of the container made in Winnie’s image found that the pollen had been removed.

Olney says that his honey came from suppliers in Montana, North Dakota and Alberta. “It was filtered in processing because North American shoppers want their honey crystal clear,” he said.

The packers of Silverbow Honey added: “The grocery stores want processed honey as it lasts longer on the shelves.”

However, most beekeepers say traditional filtering used by most will catch bee parts, wax, debris from the hives and other visible contaminants but will leave the pollen in place.
Ernie Groeb, the president and CEO of Groeb Farms Inc., which calls itself “the world’s largest packer of honey,” says he makes no specific requirement to the pollen content of the 85 million pounds of honey his company buys.

Groeb sells retail under the Miller’s brand and says he buys 100 percent pure honey, but does not “specify nor do we require that the pollen be left in or be removed.”

He says that there are many different filtering methods used by beekeepers and honey packers.

“We buy basically what’s considered raw honey. We trust good suppliers. That’s what we rely on,” said Groeb, whose headquarters is in Onsted, Mich.

**Why Remove the Pollen?**

Removal of all pollen from honey “makes no sense” and is completely contrary to marketing the highest quality product possible, Mark Jensen, president of the American Honey Producers Association, told Food Safety News.

“This is how good honey looks under a microscope. A “local raw honey” packed by Wessels Honey near Portland, Ore. has pollen grains visible from several type of clover and wildflowers. The fuzzy looking item is a special spore that Prof. Vaughn Bryant adds to ensure that the complex, multi-step analysis to identify pollen is properly done. Microphoto by V. Bryant. © V. Bryant

“I don’t know of any U.S. producer that would want to do that. Elimination of all pollen can only be achieved by ultra-filtering and this filtration process does nothing but cost money and diminish the quality of the honey,” Jensen said.

“In my judgment, it is pretty safe to assume that any ultra-filtered honey on store shelves is Chinese honey and it’s even safer to assume that it entered the country uninspected and in violation of federal law,” he added.
Richard Adee, whose 80,000 hives in multiple states produce 7 million pounds of honey each year, told Food Safety News that “honey has been valued by millions for centuries for its flavor and nutritional value and that is precisely what is completely removed by the ultra-filtration process.”

“There is only one reason to ultra-filter honey and there’s nothing good about it,” he says.

“It’s no secret to anyone in the business that the only reason all the pollen is filtered out is to hide where it initially came from and the fact is that in almost all cases, that is China,” Adee added.

The Sioux Honey Association, who says its America’s largest supplier, declined repeated requests for comments on ultra-filtration, what Sue Bee does with its foreign honey and whether it’s ultra-filtered when they buy it. The co-op markets retail under Sue Bee, Clover Maid, Aunt Sue, Natural Pure and many store brands.

Eric Wenger, director of quality services for Golden Heritage Foods, the nation’s third largest packer, said his company takes every precaution not to buy laundered Chinese honey.

“We are well aware of the tricks being used by some brokers to sell honey that originated in China and laundering it in a second country by filtering out the pollen and other adulterants,” said Wenger, whose firm markets 55 million pounds of honey annually under its Busy Bee brand, store brands, club stores and food service.

“The brokers know that if there’s an absence of all pollen in the raw honey we won’t buy it, we won’t touch it, because without pollen we have no way to verify its origin.”

He said his company uses “extreme care” including pollen analysis when purchasing foreign honey, especially from countries like India, Vietnam and others that have or have had “business arrangements” with Chinese honey producers.

Golden Heritage, Wenger said, then carefully removes all pollen from the raw honey when it’s processed to extend shelf life, but says, “as we see it, that is not ultra-filtration.

“There is a significant difference between filtration, which is a standard industry practice intended to create a shelf-stable honey, and ultra-filtration, which is a deceptive, illegal, unethical practice.”

Some of the foreign and state standards that are being instituted can be read to mean different things, Wenger said “but the confusion can be eliminated and we can all be held to the same appropriate standards for quality if FDA finally establishes the standards we’ve all wanted for so long.”

Groeb says he has urged FDA to take action as he also “totally supports a standard of Identity for honey. It will help everyone have common ground as to what pure honey truly is!”
What’s wrong with Chinese Honey?

Chinese honey has long had a poor reputation in the U.S., where—in 2001—the Federal Trade Commission imposed stiff import tariffs or taxes to stop the Chinese from flooding the marketplace with dirt-cheap, heavily subsidized honey, which was forcing American beekeepers out of business.

To avoid the dumping tariffs, the Chinese quickly began transshipping honey to several other countries, then laundering it by switching the color of the shipping drums, the documents and labels to indicate a bogus but tariff-free country of origin for the honey.

Most U.S. honey buyers knew about the Chinese actions because of the sudden availability of lower cost honey, and little was said.

The FDA—either because of lack of interest or resources—devoted little effort to inspecting imported honey. Nevertheless, the agency had occasionally either been told of, or had stumbled upon, Chinese honey contaminated with chloramphenicol and other illegal animal antibiotics which are dangerous, even fatal, to a very small percentage of the population.

Mostly, the adulteration went undetected. Sometimes FDA caught it.

In one instance 10 years ago, contaminated Chinese honey was shipped to Canada and then on to a warehouse in Houston where it was sold to jelly maker J.M. Smuckers and the national baker Sara Lee.

By the time the FDA said it realized the Chinese honey was tainted, Smuckers had sold 12,040 cases of individually packed honey to Ritz-Carlton Hotels and Sara Lee said it may have been used in a half-million loaves of bread that were on store shelves.

Eventually, some honey packers became worried about what they were pumping into the plastic bears and jars they were selling. They began using in-house or private labs to test for honey diluted with inexpensive high fructose corn syrup or 13 other illegal sweeteners or for the presence of illegal antibiotics. But even the most sophisticated of these tests would not pinpoint the geographic source of the honey.

Food scientists and honey specialists say pollen is the only foolproof fingerprint to a honey’s source.

Federal investigators working on criminal indictments and a very few conscientious packers were willing to pay stiff fees to have the pollen in their honey analyzed for country of origin. That complex, multi-step analysis is done by fewer than five commercial laboratories in the world.

But, Customs and Justice Department investigators told Food Safety News that whenever U.S. food safety or criminal experts verify a method to identify potentially illegal honey—such as analyzing the pollen—the laundering operators find a way to thwart it, such as ultra-filtration.
The U.S. imported 208 million pounds of honey over the past 18 months. Almost 60 percent came from Asian countries – traditional laundering points for Chinese honey. This included 45 million pounds from India alone.

And websites still openly offer brokers who will illegally transship honey and scores of other tariff-protected goods from China to the U.S.

**FDA’s Lack of Action**

The Food and Drug Administration weighed into the filtration issue years ago.

“The FDA has sent a letter to industry stating that the FDA does not consider ‘ultra-filtered’ honey to be honey,” agency press officer Tamara Ward told Food Safety News.

She went on to explain: “We have not halted any importation of honey because we have yet to detect ‘ultra-filtered’ honey. If we do detect ‘ultra-filtered’ honey we will refuse entry.”
Many in the honey industry and some in FDA’s import office say they doubt that FDA checks more than 5 percent of all foreign honey shipments.

For three months, the FDA promised Food Safety News to make its “honey expert” available to explain what that statement meant. It never happened. Further, the federal food safety authorities refused offers to examine Bryant’s analysis and explain what it plans to do about the selling of honey it says is adulterated because of the removal of pollen, a key ingredient.

Major food safety standard-setting organizations such as the United Nations’ Codex Alimentarius, the European Union and the European Food Safety Authority say the intentional removal of pollen is dangerous because it eliminates the ability of consumers and law enforcement to determine the actual origin of the honey.

“The removal of pollen will make the determination of botanical and geographic origin of honey impossible and circumvents the ability to trace and identify the actual source of the honey,” says the European Union Directive on Honey.

The Codex commission’s Standard for Honey, which sets principles for the international trade in food, has ruled that “No pollen or constituent particular to honey may be removed except where this is unavoidable in the removal of foreign matter. . .” It even suggested what size mesh to use (not smaller than 0.2mm or 200 micron) to filter out unwanted debris — bits of wax and wood from the frames, and parts of bees — but retain 95 percent of all the pollen.

Food Safety News asked Bryant to analyze foreign honey packaged in Italy, Hungary, Greece, Tasmania and New Zealand to try to get a feeling for whether the Codex standards for pollen were being heeded overseas. The samples from every country but Greece were loaded with various types and amounts of pollen. Honey from Greece had none.

You’ll Never Know

In many cases, consumers would have an easier time deciphering state secrets than pinning down where the honey they’re buying in groceries actually came from.

The majority of the honey that Bryant’s analysis found to have no pollen was packaged as store brands by outside companies but carried a label unique to the food chain. For example, Giant Eagle has a ValuTime label on some of its honey. In Target it’s called Market Pantry, Naturally Preferred and others. Walmart uses Great Value and Safeway just says Safeway. Wegmans also uses its own name.

Who actually bottled these store brands is often a mystery.

A noteworthy exception is Golden Heritage of Hillsboro, Kan. The company either puts its name or decipherable initials on the back of store brands it fills.

“We’re never bashful about discussing the products we put out” said Wenger, the company’s quality director. “We want people to know who to contact if they have questions.”
The big grocery chains were no help in identifying the sources of the honey they package in their store brands.

For example, when Food Safety News was hunting the source of nine samples that came back as ultra-filtered from QFC, Fred Myer and King Sooper, the various customer service numbers all led to representatives of Kroger, which owns them all. The replies were identical: “We can’t release that information. It is proprietary.”

One of the customer service representatives said the contact address on two of the honeys being questioned was in Sioux City, Iowa, which is where Sioux Bee’s corporate office is located.

Jessica Carlson, a public relations person for Target, waved the proprietary banner and also refused to say whether it was Target management or the honey suppliers that wanted the source of the honey kept from the public.

Similar non-answers came from representatives of Safeway, Walmart and Giant Eagle.

The drugstores weren’t any more open with the sources of their house brands of honey. A Rite Aid representative said “if it’s not marked made in China, than it’s made in the United States.” She didn’t know who made it but said “I’ll ask someone.”

Rite Aid, Walgreen and CVS have yet to supply the information.

Only two smaller Pacific Northwest grocery chains – Haggen and Metropolitan Market – both selling honey without pollen, weren’t bashful about the source of their honey. Haggen said right off that its brand comes from Golden Heritage. Metropolitan Market said its honey – Western Family – is packed by Bee Maid Honey, a co-op of beekeepers from the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.
Pollen? Who Cares?

Why should consumers care if their honey has had its pollen removed?

“Raw honey is thought to have many medicinal properties,” says Kathy Egan, dietitian at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. “Stomach ailments, anemia and allergies are just a few of the conditions that may be improved by consumption of unprocessed honey.”

But beyond pollen’s reported enzymes, antioxidants and well documented anti-allergenic benefits, a growing population of natural food advocates just doesn’t want their honey messed with.

There is enormous variety among honeys. They range in color from glass-clear to a dark mahogany and in consistency from watery to chunky to a crystallized solid. It’s the plants and flowers where the bees forage for nectar that will determine the significant difference in the taste, aroma and color of what the bees produce. It is the processing that controls the texture.

Food historians say that in the 1950s the typical grocery might have offered three or four different brands of honey. Today, a fair-sized store will offer 40 to 50 different types, flavors and sources of honey out of the estimated 300 different honeys made in the U.S. And with the attractiveness of natural food and the locavore movement, honey’s popularity is burgeoning. Unfortunately, with it comes the potential for fraud.

Concocting a sweet-tasting syrup out of cane, corn or beet sugar, rice syrup or any of more than a dozen sweetening agents is a great deal easier, quicker and far less expensive than dealing with the natural brew of bees.

However, even the most dedicated beekeeper can unknowingly put incorrect information on a honey jar’s label.

Bryant has examined nearly 2,000 samples of honey sent in by beekeepers, honey importers, and ag officials checking commercial brands off store shelves. Types include premium honey such as “buckwheat, tupelo, sage, orange blossom, and sourwood” produced in Florida, North Carolina, California, New York and Virginia and “fireweed” from Alaska.

“Almost all were incorrectly labeled based on their pollen and nectar contents,” he said.

Out of the 60 plus samples that Bryant tested for Food Safety News, the absolute most flavorful said “blackberry” on the label. When Bryant concluded his examination of the pollen in this sample he found clover and wildflowers clearly outnumbering a smattering of grains of blackberry pollen.

For the most part we are not talking about intentional fraud here. Contrary to their most fervent wishes, beekeepers can’t control where their bees actually forage any more than they can keep the tides from changing. They offer their best guess on the predominant foliage within flying distance of the hives.
“I think we need a truth in labeling law in the U.S. as they have in other countries,” Bryant added.

**FDA Ignores Pleas**

No one can say for sure why the FDA has ignored repeated pleas from Congress, beekeepers and the honey industry to develop a U.S. standard for identification for honey.

Nancy Gentry owns the small Cross Creek Honey Company in Interlachen, Fla., and she isn’t worried about the quality of the honey she sells.

“I harvest my own honey. We put the frames in an extractor, spin it out, strain it, and it goes into a jar. Its honey the way bees intended,” Gentry said.

But the negative stories on the discovery of tainted and bogus honey raised her fears for the public’s perception of honey.

She spent months of studying what the rest of the world was doing to protect consumers from tainted honey and questioning beekeepers and industry on what was needed here. Gentry became the leading force in crafting language for Florida to develop the nation’s first standard for identification for honey.

In July 2009, Florida adopted the standard and placed its Division of Food Safety in the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in charge of enforcing it. It’s since been followed by California, Wisconsin and North Carolina and is somewhere in the state legislative or regulatory maze in Georgia, Virginia, Maryland, Ohio, New York, Texas, Kansas, Oregon, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia and others.

John Ambrose’s battle for a national definition goes back 36 years. He said the issue is of great importance to North Carolina because it has more beekeepers than any other state in the country.
He and others tried to convince FDA that a single national standard for honey to help prevent adulterated honey from being sold was needed. The agency promised him it would be on the books within two years.

“But that never happened,” said Ambrose, a professor and entomologist at North Carolina State University and apiculturist, or bee expert. North Carolina followed Florida’s lead and passed its own identification standards last year.

Ambrose, who was co-chair of the team that drafted the state beekeeper association’s honey standards, says the language is very simple, “Our standard says that nothing can be added or removed from the honey. So in other words, if somebody removes the pollen, or adds moisture or corn syrup or table sugar, that’s adulteration,” Ambrose told Food Safety News.

But still, he says he’s asked all the time how to ensure that you’re buying quality honey. “The fact is, unless you’re buying from a beekeeper, you’re at risk,” was his uncomfortably blunt reply.

Eric Silva, counsel for the American Honey Producers Association said the standard is a simple but essential tool in ensuring the quality and safety of honey consumed by millions of Americans each year.

“Without it, the FDA and their trade enforcement counterparts are severely limited in their ability to combat the flow of illicit and potentially dangerous honey into this country,” Silva told Food Safety News.

It’s not just beekeepers, consumers and the industry that FDA officials either ignore or slough off with comments that they’re too busy.

New York Sen. Charles Schumer is one of more than 20 U.S. senators and members of Congress of both parties who have asked the FDA repeatedly to create a federal “pure honey” standard, similar to what the rest of the world has established.

They get the same answer that Ambrose got in 1975: “Any day now.”

See “Top Pollen Detective Finds Honey a Sticky Business” on Food Safety News.
Internet Sites You Might Find Useful

- Plants that feed bees, butterflies, and humming birds: Bee balm (Monarda): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZtG0MIso-E
- Ever wonder how the honeybee views the world - How Bees Can See the Invisible: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CpEV9_JOv8&feature=youtu.be
- The Beehive Journal - A depository of over 300 different beehive designs with photos, 93+ plans for beekeeping equipment and bee hives, beekeeping information and links from around the world. Submissions of photos and related information welcome. To post a comment click on the Beehive title, component title or the comment icon. Help us grow by linking to us, telling others, becoming a follower or a guest author. : http://beehivejournal.blogspot.com/2009/01/build-it-yourself.html
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