

Washington beekeeping faces hurdles

Beekeepers look for agricultural designation, tax exempt

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When Harvard Robbins, 82, first started beekeeping in Lakewood 40 years ago, he had the land all to himself.

“There wasn’t this school here. There weren’t all these houses around here. ... This is where I gathered a lot of honey,” Robbins said.

The beekeeping economy has changed a lot since the old days, and not just at his place. These days, he has to worry about varroa mites and colony collapse disorder (CCD) decimating his colonies, sometimes over 50 percent at a time. And between having to buy expensive medications for CCD (which averages \$100 a year per colony), surviving six gray and gloomy months without any meaningful production, having to rent land for his bees to use and having to pay business and occupation taxes, the cost of business has skyrocketed.

But, he jokes, he doesn’t know how to do anything else. So while he knows two dozen people who have gotten out of the business in recent years, he plans to keep buzzing along just like before. At Robbins Honey Farm, which sits snug in a slice of property between the Woodbrook Middle School and Joint Base Lewis-McChord, he sells honey, beeswax, pollen and beekeeping equipment.

Robbins gets along just fine, but he says times have been tougher. He only manages about 100 colonies now. In the past, he’s managed up to 750.

In December, the Washington State Legislature Honey Bee Work Group, convened by department of agriculture, published a report outlining the needs of beekeepers across Washington state and what can be done to improve the current state of affairs.

No. 1 on the list is to define beekeeping as an agriculture. Senate Bill 5017 hopes to do just that.

While the name change seems fairly inconsequential on the face of it, without an agriculture designation, beekeepers have to pay a B&O tax that most farmers don’t. This opens up the floodgates for out-of-state beekeepers who are able to avoid the B&O tax and offer a lower fee.

“In Washington state there’s more need for pollination than we have bee colonies right now. When tree fruits get ready to bloom here, there are more colonies coming into the state to pollinate tree fruits than are needed,” said Franclyn Heineke, who owns a beekeeping business in Puyallup and was part of the Honey Bee Work Group.

As of 2012, there are over 96,000 reported honey bee colonies in Washington. Nearly 500,000 honey bee colonies are needed to pollinate key Washington crops (at a rate of two colonies per acre).

Writers of the Honey Bee Working Group Report, which was published in December for the Washington State Legislature, said that a level playing field was necessary for a healthy beekeeping economy.

“If there is even the perception that some beekeepers have an unfair advantage through tax avoidance, there will be less incentive for hobbyists to turn their hobby into a business or for small commercial operators to grow into larger ones. Beekeeping must be seen as a viable business venture in Washington, or it will not attract the next generation of beekeepers needed to support Washington agricultural production in the future,” the report stated.

Hopefully, Robbins said, the tax exemption would provide an opportunity for younger beekeepers.

“For some people it would give them a chance to get in more. Most of the beekeepers now are old people,” he said.

Work group members also believe that the tax exemption would lead to more beekeepers registering

“Right now, because of taxes, there is a disincentive for people to register their hives, even though it’s required by law. ... (When I looked at how many were registered in the state of Washington) I thought, there’s more beekeepers in Pierce County than what is registered statewide,” Heineke said.

The report states that registering would help in a number of ways. First and foremost, the lack of registrations limits the “already scarce resources available for research opportunities dedicated to the industry.” In 2014, registration fees contributed less than \$14,000 to research.

“I think very few people realize that most of those funds go straight to research. We would really like to see a better funded bee lab at Washington State University, they’re leaders in the nation on queen bee genetics,” Heineke said.

Though there are no bills currently in the legislature to address it, beekeepers also want to tackle the problem of a forage shortage in Washington.

“The most important nectar plant west of the cascades is Himalayan blackberry, hands down. A few years ago it was designated as a noxious weed, primarily for development purposes in King County. In Pierce County, especially, huge tracts of blackberries are being taken out,” Heineke said. “Those are the kinds of issues for us to raise awareness about. If it’s not critical to remove it, can you keep some? Or, if you choose to remove it, can you replace it with a comparable food source?”

The Honey Bee Work Group report outlines steps to address this issue with the Noxious Weed Control Board. Proposed actions include putting a pollinator expert on the Noxious Weed Committee, provide a weed-removal risk assessment as part of the advisory process and providing training to counties for site-specific risk assessments, which would include bee habitat as a key variable.

Heineke said that the working group has already had promising discussions and that the board has agreed to advise people what to plant after taking noxious weeds out.

“The problem that we have here,” Robbins said, “is the bee pasture is going away and the demand for more bees increases. We have more crops now that need bees and the price of everything is up to the point that a little beekeeper, a little person that wants to be a beekeeper, can’t do it.”