Coyote Ridge Bee Program 2025 Update

Greetings from the CRCC hive mind,

Our Beekeeping Program has improved by leaps and bounds from its inception. What once started as a two-hive apiary currently has six thriving hives. There are at this time two paid bee conservation technicians, and they double as instructors for the beekeeping classes. We have graduated a total of 41 from the beginner and 13 from the apprentice WASBA classes, and are drafting a proposal for a bee club to facilitate earning journeyman service points. One of our graduates has even been published in the October 2024 issue of *Bee Culture* magazine, talking about our program and our struggles. Because of this, we have received multiple donation inquiries, including the donation of four full sets of woodware and four late season packages of bees to imbue them with life. A big thank you to Rob Wright of Mann Lake Ltd. for that.

We have also faced a long list of challenges to keep our bees and our program alive. I'm sure all facilities share in the difficulties caused by the limitations of prison; difficulty getting equipment funded and approved, location of the apiary, and consistent time to inspect hives. Here at CRCC, we have very limited forage for the bees. To call our landscape "grim" would be a complement to the gravelly, barren wasteland that is our compound. The few meager plants we are allowed to have are mainly of the salvia family, including purple and Russian sages. This gives us a small nectar flow from May-August. For pollen we have Indian blanket flowers and green rabbit brush. The former gives continuous blooms with continuous deadheading. All of these food sources are of course contingent on the plants getting enough water. This is done by way of filling a cart up with a few hundred pounds of water, pushing it a few hundred yards and then carrying watering cans across the gravel to our thirsty plants. Because the soil is mostly sand, there is no moisture retention, combined with the high temperatures and scorching sun, watering is required daily. The apiary is located in the middle of a central gravel lot. Thankfully, we have access every day, at any time, outside of regular lockdowns. The open gravel area does get quite hot on a sunny midsummer day, and some supplemental shade would do them a lot of good. While we don't have the humidity of the west side to contend with, this area has high winds at times, especially in the fall and winter months. Without a shelter, or any kind of wind break, our bees struggle to keep warm and usually perish with plenty of food stores inches away from the cluster.

2024 was an especially hard year for us, both our hives exhibited American Foulbrood-like symptoms without the telltale smell. They dwindled and died in the winter and we had a sample sent to the USDA lab in Beltsville, Maine. The diagnosis was a high Varroa count and a high Nosema spore count. The symptoms noticed in fall were most likely due to Varroa-transmitted viruses, and the Nosema took hold because of the lowered immunity. Due to the

uncertainty of transmitting this to our bees in 2025, we opted to only reuse woodware after a thorough scrubbing with soapy water, and we did not reuse any frames. Our bees in 2025 started from scratch, building from plastic foundation, and getting a regular feed of 1:1 sugar syrup.

Despite the many challenges we have faced, we remain determined to improvise, adapt and overcome. In 2024 our bees were using the toilets at yard for their water source. Because of this, we jokingly branded our label "Ur In Prison Honey" ... We have since created a bucket drinking system that they like and use exclusively, hence, the rebrand to "Second Chance Sweetness." We currently have 30 deep frames and 20 supper frames full of honey, waiting for extraction. Big thanks to SPP for funding the purchase of a two-frame, hand-crank extractor. We are figuring out the logistics of extracting, specifically how to warm up the frames of liquid gold, so they will flow properly. Previously, we "hand extracted", using cheesecloth to squeeze the honey through. Although tedious, we were able to extract enough to have a field day honey judging competition between CRCC, WCCW, Woods Apiary, and store bought (Food Express "honey"). The results were in our favor, out of 107 inmates and staff that participated, 54 ranked Second Chance Sweetness number one.

Our goals for 2026 are to get at least one hive through the winter. This may seem like a low bar, but without some kind of a windbreak, our bees don't really stand a chance. Having a three sided, covered shelter of some kind would be ideal. We also envision a more wholistic apiary, including soil amendments created from composted kitchen scraps, biochar from our religious grounds firepits, and worm castings. This will allow the soil to hold moisture for less water usage and allow us to plant more food sources for the bees. Please work with our environmental specialist to find some compromise to the barren desert at present.

To say that we are proud of our program, staff, and graduates, is an understatement. This environment is harsh, the politics are deeply ingrained, and what we can do and have is limited. For us, beekeeping is deeper than delicious honey, deeper than earning a certificate, and deeper than the differences between us. The CRCC beekeeping program is the only link we have to interacting with nature, and in this parched setting, people are thirsty for it. Students and staff alike from diverse backgrounds don a bee suit, and suddenly we are all the same, here to learn, here to work together, here to steward thousands of tiny, but vastly important, lives. In prison, beekeeping gives us purpose, and purpose is the greatest game-changer around. The beekeeping community has been a shining ray of hope for us in this dark place. As justice-involved individuals, we are accustomed to a certain stigma that commonly results in being ignored or minimized. To have organizations like WASBA and SPP doing everything within their power to bring us this opportunity is heartwarming. To write to *Bee Culture* and get published makes us feel like we have a voice. And to get donations from the community makes us feel like we are welcomed into that community. This impact extends beyond prison, to reentry and employment. Beekeeping is a huge industry, and in most cases, a felony will not disqualify us from a job in the field. From all of us at CRCC, thank you for your support, and we look forward to working with you to build this community.