

California Package Bee Supply

For those of you that have not been following the beekeeping journals or monitoring the Internet discussion groups on beekeeping I thought that I would take time to let the group know of any factors that might effect our supply of bees for the summer.

Perhaps the most significant factor facing the beekeepers in the lower 48 is the increased resistance of the Varoa mite. The problem of fighting chemical wars with small bugs is that they can fairly quickly develop a resistance to the chemical. This is because the lifespan of the Varoa is relatively short. Generally the shorter the life cycle the easier it is to breed resistance from the survivors of the population that has been exposed to a given chemical. I remember a class in college in which we proved this by selecting higher and higher doses of Lysol and we were able to grow cultures in pure Lysol after a period of a few weeks. In this case the breeding cycle was about half an hour or so for a new generation to come along. The Varoa breeding cycle is much slower that that of a simple bacteria that has been cultured out of the dirt and this is the reason why it has taken a number of years for the traits of resistance to show up. But show up it has. When we developed this super Lysol bug in college we easily killed it with another chemical. This is what beekeepers have done with the addition of other varoa control chemicals. Eventually the varoa will (and has) develop resistance to this chemical as well but by this time it will have lost much of its resistance to the original chemical. This will hold true if the varoa has not seen the chemical for a number of generations. long enough for the varoa body to normalize to the environment in which it lives. The problem exists if the Varoa is still exposed to the original chemical during the treatment of the second chemical and this is what has happened all across the country. The beekeeper can kill the varoa that are sensitive to chemical A and there are survivors that are resistant to chemical A. The beekeeper then has to treat with chemical B because there are too many that have resistance to chemical A. Some mites will survive and be resistant to both treatments and even a third or fourth control measure. This is the current situation with beekeepers all across the country. The result is that many hives are failing because varoa has become resistant to chemical combinations as well.

What this means to us Alaskan beekeepers is that there is fierce competition for replacement bees on a nationwide scale.

The good news is that Canada has yet to enter the picture, Their boarder is still closed to package bees from the United States.

I talked to our supplier in late November and have reserved 600 packages for us for delivery in the first and third week of April.

I also called a number of other suppliers in northern California to see what their situation was. Without exception they stated that Varoa control was a big problem this year. Without exception they stated that they were being booked up earlier than ever for spring orders, some said that they were booked full, and all of them stated that they had increased prices because of the increased demand and the extra difficulty in controlling Varoa. Our supplier said that he has spent 16,000 dollars this year to get varoa under control but did accomplish this and said that his bees are in good shape now. I suspect that wintering will become more popular with southcentral beekeepers as price and availability of packages fully impacts us. Part of our advanced class may be devoted to this aspect of beekeeping. For those beekeepers that are thinking along the lines of queen selection for wintering I will likely be ordering a quantity of Canadian queens for requeening during the summer nectar flow. I will keep you all posted on this subject in early March. At this point we have a selection of Italian and Carniolan queens with our packages. I will be traveling to a Canadian beekeeping conference during late February where I hope to expand my contacts with Canadian queen producers.

Steve Victors