AMERICAN FOULBROOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Despite strict controls, non-irradiated honey or honey bee products found a way into South Africa. On 25 February 2009 the Agricultural Research Council Plant Protection Research Institute (ARC-PPRI) confirmed an outbreak of American foulbrood (AFB) in certain Western Cape honey bee colonies. Mike Allsopp, Head of the Honey Bee Research Section of the ARC-PPRI, became aware of the disease when a local beekeeper experienced problems with unhealthy colonies. The disease was first thought to be European foulbrood, which affected Western Cape apiaries in 2008, but atypical samples were sent to PPRI’s laboratory in Pretoria and tested positive for AFB.

John Moodie, the South African Bee Industry Organisation (SABIO) Chairperson, said that four beekeeping operations in the Western Cape had confirmed AFB in their colonies. The extent of the infestation is still unknown as the symptoms are slow to appear and further surveys are needed. The Department of Agriculture (DoA) urged all beekeepers to act with extreme caution, keep colonies and apiaries apart, not to move honey bees from apiary to apiary, and to treat all beekeeping equipment as contaminated. Although the four contaminated apiaries are co-operating with authorities - the only way to eradicate the disease is to burn the entire hive and contents and bury the ashes - infected apiaries could face standstill orders of up to 18 months and will need help and compensation to ensure their continued viability and co-operation.

Allsopp said commercial beekeepers are more likely to comply with rigorous elimination of infected hives, but smaller hobbyists may be reluctant to report outbreaks and the issue could go underground. The solution will depend largely on the action of beekeepers and the DoA. If all beekeepers adhere to DoA advice until the disease has been effectively quarantined and destroyed, they could prevent its spread and a permanent battle. The disease could destroy thousands of colonies, lead to poor pollination of crops and orchards, and ruin beekeepers.

As South African bees are classified under ‘plant health’ there is need to amend current legislation to allow for containment of the disease. The DoA has established a management team and initiated an interim plan which could see infected apiaries issued with an initial standstill period of up to three months. “The outbreak is being reported to the World Organisation for Animal Health and draft regulations have been forwarded for ministerial approval”, said DoA spokesperson Priscilla Tsotso Seholele.

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More information www.sabio.org.za