

Agriculture

Crops at risk as coronavirus lockdown grounds bees

Movement restrictions limit pollination, threatening food production



A bee sucks pollen and nectar from mustard flowers in Bangladesh © Mehedi Hasan/NurPhoto/Getty

Emiko Terazono in London and **Benjamin Parkin** in New Delhi APRIL 18 2020

Lockdowns, quarantine requirements and border closures introduced in recent weeks around the world to slow the coronavirus pandemic are threatening to hit food production by limiting the movement of bees, agriculturalists have warned.

Farmers around the world growing fruits, vegetables and nuts rely on bees to pollinate their crops. In many cases bees are trucked through agricultural areas, rather than staying local to one area — but now they cannot travel.

“A third of our food depends on the pollination by bees. The production of those crops could be affected,” said Norberto Garcia of Apimondia, the international federation of beekeepers.

In the US, honey bees gather pollen and nectar from plants including berries, melons, broccoli and [almonds](#), pollinating \$15bn worth of crops every year, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

Kelvin Adee, a leading US beekeeper with 75,000 hives, said visa and travel restrictions meant the sector was having a hard time securing workers, most of whom come from Latin America. While he managed to hire labour ahead of the Californian almond pollination season, they have to self-quarantine every time they move to a different location around the country, leading to a delay in pollination.

“We’re behind [schedule] and it’s going to be a real challenge,” said Mr Adee, who is also the president of the American Honey Producers Association, adding that many beekeepers were also facing problems with haulage as there was a sharp decline in available truck drivers to move hives around the country.

Both the US and Canada, which need a large number of bees, import queen bees and other bees from Australia, New Zealand, Mexico and Chile. However, since many flights have been cancelled and airports closed, bee purchases have become impossible for some beekeepers, said Apimondia.

In Europe, many beekeepers have been able to move around within state borders, but in some countries like Greece, beekeepers have been banned from travelling long distances to allow the bees to pollinate.

“In some cases bees will starve,” said Fani Hatjina at the Hellenic Institute of Apiculture.

Farmers in the UK rely on replenishing their colonies with bees from southern Europe, but imports have become difficult, said Luke Dixon at Urban Beekeeping, which looks after hives in and around London including at the Bank of England.

Logistical issues and the inability to obtain paperwork are causing a bottleneck. He said: “The next couple of weeks are crucial [for farmers needing bee pollination].”

In India, a national lockdown has hit Narpinder Singh, a beekeeper with bee colonies in Punjab and a number of surrounding states. His business mostly produces honey from mustard plants for export to the US, and also pollinates apples, lychees and walnuts. He and his workers cannot travel across state lines to move the hives around and feed them.

“As the temperature increases, we have to shift the bee boxes to the shade” otherwise they will die from the heat, he said.

Farooq Ahmad Lone and his workers migrate across large swaths of India from Kashmir to Gujarat pollinating mustard crops and apple orchards. Travel restrictions have meant that they have had to abandon their normal routine of travelling at night to avoid the daytime heat.

“If we [travel] in the day the bees will die because of the heat . . . This is the first time we have witnessed such hardships,” he said.

Additional reporting by Andrea Rodrigues