

## Fair all abuzz about the 'Year of the Honey Bee'

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JEFFERSON — Things were all abuzz at the Jefferson County Fair Park on Wednesday as the 2016 Jefferson County Fair kicked off the Year of the Honey Bee.

While the fair's theme might not have been inspired by the Wisconsin state insect — yes, Wisconsin's is the honey bee — it raises the question: How much do we know about the honey bee?

“Honey bees are not wasps. They're not hornets,” fair vendor Scott Offord, co-owner of Beepods, said. “They do sting, but usually they only sting when they're trying to protect their hive. Whereas, with a wasp and hornet, they're going to chase you for miles.”

Tracy Malterer, president of the Dodge-Jefferson Beekeepers Association, another vendor at the fair, agreed.

“They can only sting once,” she said. “When they sting, their stinger stays in the skin of the person they stung and (the bee) will die immediately after the sting. That's their only method of defense. They defend their colony, they defend their queen, they defend their brood by that sting.”

Even though their colonies can reach between 50,000 and 60,000 bees in the peak of summer, honey bees are managed insects, Malterer explained.

“The Italian honey bee is primarily what beekeepers work with,” she said. “There are different breeds of honey bees, much the same way there's different breeds of cows. They all pollinate, so they're all important.”

According to Matt LaForge, vice president of the Wisconsin Honey Producers, pollination is the most important thing honey bees provide.



### 'BEE' NICE

'BEE' NICE — It's the Year of the Honey Bee at the 2016 Jefferson County Fair. This year includes multiple bee-related vendors, including the Dodge-Jefferson Beekeepers Association and Beepods. Shown above, Scott Offord, co-owner of Beepods, talks to a fair-goer about one of the styles of bee hives his company sells. — Daily Union photo by Alexa Zoellner.

“People always think of the honey,” he said in a telephone interview with the Daily Union. “The honey is probably one of the least important things bees do. One in every three bites of food come either directly or indirectly from honey bee pollination.

“The ones that people think of all the time are the crops that we have directly pollinated by bees, like our apples, our cherries,” LaForge indicated. “Basically all our fruits and a lot of vegetables — those directly depend on honey bee pollination, but a lot of other things do too.

“Dairy, for instance — the cattle are fed a lot on alfalfa, and that alfalfa requires honey bee pollination,” he continued. “So without honey bees, there’s a huge cascading effect through the food system that would leave us pretty much with grain.”

As it is, the honey bee population is in danger.

“The losses for the past five or six years have been very high,” LaForge said. “Probably going back six years or more, the losses would be maybe 30 percent (of hives) over winter. That’s kind of what the industry had adapted to.

“It wasn’t an easy thing to do, but with the pest situation and other things that have developed, that was kind of what people were used to,” he added. “Then, all of a sudden after the arrival of colony collapse and a whole bunch of other issues, that number has jumped up to about 50 percent or more the past five or six years.”

Colony collapse disorder isn’t any one thing, LaForge explained. That’s what makes it so difficult to address.

“There’s really three big things that play into it,” he said. “There’s some new pests and diseases. We’ve been dealing with (Varroa) mites, which are probably the most serious pests to the honey bees for a couple decades now. Over the past few years, the viruses that those mites carry around, there’s been a few new strains of that and they’ve been much more aggressive.”

The second issue is new classes of pesticides and insecticides.

“The third problem is adequate forage — (having) enough pollinator-friendly plants and flowers that honey bees can gather their nectar and pollen from,” Malterer said. “We need lots of healthy pollinator habitat.”

Beekeeping is a hobby that can take anywhere from one to 10 hours a month, Offord said. It all depends on how involved a person wants to be.