

BULLISH ON BEES

Beekeeping industry struggles with drought and other obstacles along with overall agriculture sector

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Becoming a beekeeper wasn't something Chad Holbrook dreamed about back when he worked as a farm loan officer in Texas.

But he decided it might be an interesting hobby, so about 10 years ago he bought himself a hive just for the fun of it.

As things sometimes tend to go, one hive led to two, two hives led to four and before he knew it, Holbrook was giving his day job the boot. Goodbye business suit, hello beekeeping suit.

These days, Holbrook manages about 3,000 hives out of his main headquarters in Fairfax, MN, although he still has some hives back in Texas. A member of Renville-

Sibley Co-op Power, he ships his hives for pollination purposes all across the Midwest and to other regions as well to help growers gain higher crop yields.

"After I got my first bee hive I just really enjoyed doing it, and it snowballed and just kept increasing every year," Holbrook said. "I finally quit my day job to run the business in January of 2017, which is something I never thought I'd do."

That's a move that took some courage because Holbrook knew from his brief experience that while bees can be tough buggers, they also have plenty of obstacles threatening their place in nature and their very existence.

After all, some of the boxes, frames, pallets and extraction equipment he purchased to start

his own operation were acquired from beekeepers making a bee-line straight out of the business.

The list of real and potential apiary antagonists is long. Apiculturists are constantly trying to protect their colonies from various types of threats including several species of mites, insecticides, pesticides, extreme weather and destruction of their habitat.

One pitfall not often discussed in the public discourse is the attrition that takes place from merely moving colonies from one patch of farmland to the next, and in some cases, moving hives from one spot to another to protect them during the inclement non-pollinating months.

Holbrook figures the attrition rate can be up to 10 percent anytime hives are loaded onto a truck and hauled to different locations. It's a significant loss considering an estimated one-third of the world's food supply depends on the pollination work performed by



Honey bees pollinate roughly one-third of the world's agriculture crops.

honey bees. Since 2010, beekeepers in South Dakota, Minnesota and across the country have experienced historically high colony loss rates of nearly 30 percent a year impacting roughly 90 different agricultural crops ranging from almonds and apples on the West Coast to cotton and cranberries in the East.

"Keeping them alive is the hardest thing," Holbrook said. "There are substances farmers use to manage vegetation and help their crops, but it's causing a reduction in the forage area for bees. But everybody has to make a living and I don't fault the farmers...if I were them I'd probably be doing the same thing. But we can all look for ways to be more environmentally friendly because we're all making a living off nature."

Holbrook, who describes himself as a migratory commercial beekeeper, typically transports bees to California every January to pollinate that state's almond crop and then heads to his facility in Texas to extract honey. July is the slowest month of the year, then there's a short fall season before the bees head to an indoor storage facility in Idaho for protection against the cold.

Despite the drought conditions that have caused stress for farmers, ranchers and apiculturists across the region, Holbrook is bullish on the beekeeping industry. He noted that the city of Sioux Falls recently approved an ordinance that allows residents to maintain hives on their property. Would-be beekeepers must

apply for a permit, take an online class, inform their neighbors of their intentions and adhere to other prescribed guidelines.

Holbrook reports that through the spring and summer seasons - and despite the drought - honey prices have seen an upward shift. For instance, he said the price for honey in the region last year was about \$1.70 per pound but has climbed to more than \$2.25. The international market is expected to expand from \$9.2 billion to \$19 billion by 2028.

"We were fortunate that we've had some timely rains and the hot, dry weather hasn't caused problems for my business. It has been an average crop for me. But you don't ever really know for sure until the honey is extracted," he said.



According to owner Kiah Crowley, Sunrise Hives in Spearfish maintains about 400 bee colonies. *Photo by Sunrise Hives*