



REMARKS

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Remarks as Prepared for Associate Administrator Kevin Shea American Bee Research Conference

(RIVERDALE, MD, Feb. 7, 2012) Good morning. It's my pleasure to welcome members of the Apiary Inspectors of America and the American Association of Professional Apiculturists to APHIS for the American Bee Research Conference.

USDA Legacy

Seven score and 10 years ago, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law an act of Congress that created the Department of Agriculture. Lincoln called USDA "the People's Department," because half the population lived in rural areas and 58 percent of the people worked on the country's 2 million farms.

Lincoln, of course, also was a product of small farms in Kentucky. As a child, he reportedly was fond of eating honey. He also recognized, as all of you here know, how critical bees are to the foods we eat and how much they add to the Nation's economy.

Lincoln liked to use bee metaphors. "A drop of honey," he said, "catches more flies than a gallon of gall." He also told of his preference for speeches that were demonstrative and enthusiastic by saying: "When I hear a man preach," Lincoln said, "I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees."

Bee Health

Of course we're not here this week to fight bees, but to help save them. The challenges we face are a lot different than what President Lincoln imagined. We still have about 2 million farms in the United States, but farmers now make up not 58 percent of the workforce, but only 2 or 3 percent.

Honey bee health has declined over the past three decades; bees have been bombarded by pests, domestic and exotic diseases, and colony collapse disorder. The growing demand for pollination-based agriculture puts even more stress on bees as they are transported around the Nation by trucks to temporarily fill pollination gaps. We at USDA know that we must do something to help bees. In fact, USDA has been studying honey bees almost from its beginning.

The first Commissioner of Agriculture was Isaac Newton – the Pennsylvania dairy farmer, not the English physicist. In one of his first acts as head of the department, Newton established a professorship of botany and entomology.

Even after 150 years, we're still learning about these fascinating insects. Working with you—our partners and stakeholders—we are committed to improving bee health. These amazing creatures are critical for the success of pollination-based agriculture, which makes up about a third of our diets here in the United States.

Three USDA agencies—APHIS, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and National Institute of Food and Agriculture—have joined with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to form a working group to study colony collapse disorder. That group is trying to determine how best to minimize the impact on the beekeeping industry.

In addition, APHIS and ARS have funded and coordinated a national survey of honey bee pests. This survey is helping us determine the prevalence of parasites and diseases that may be contributing to the decline of U.S. honey bee colonies.

In the next 2 days, you're going to hear about a number of other USDA efforts on behalf of bees. Here's one more small but symbolic effort:

Three years ago this month, on Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, USDA began a People's Garden initiative. USDA employees planted hundreds of gardens throughout the country, demonstrating how to take better care of our natural resources and producing fruits and vegetables for food banks and other charities. USDA also added two beehives on the roof of the Whitten Building that houses the Secretary's office. We now have two hives, each with a queen and about 20,000 bees, that facilitate pollination of The People's Garden at USDA headquarters as well as gardens at various Smithsonian museums on the National Mall.

Through this and many other initiatives, we hope to improve the outlook for bees in our area, and throughout the Nation. Ultimately, we hope to create a brighter future for these insects. They are truly the "farmer's friend." [Kevin referenced Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food—no bees, no food.]

Conclusion

Much has changed in USDA's 150 years. However, we're still the People's Department. And as part of that charge, we must also be the Pollinator's Department.

Thank you for working so hard on behalf of the bees. I want you to know that APHIS and other USDA agencies are committed to working with you to preserve and protect this vital resource.

Thank you.