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Hot summer leaves honey bees lethargic

By Blake Nicholson

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Dry, hot weather soured honey production in the nation's top two beekeeping states last year, leading to one of the smallest U.S. honey crops in at least 35 years.

North Dakota and California typically vie for the honor of top honey state. In North Dakota, production in 2006 fell 23 percent from the previous year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said. The state held onto its top ranking, however, because production in California plummeted 34 percent.

Orin Johnson, president of the California State Beekeepers Association, blamed a midsummer heat wave for shortcomings of the state's beehives.

"Bees don't work. They just shut down," he said.

The 2006 California honey crop was just under 20 million pounds. North Dakota beekeepers produced about 26 million pounds.

Most production areas were below average, said Bonnie Woodworth, past-president of the North Dakota Beekeepers Association.

"The Bismarck area was very, very dry, and production ... in that area was way down," she said.

Nationwide, production totaled about 155 million pounds last year, down 11 percent from 2005, USDA said.

"It's one of the smallest honey crops in history," Johnson said. "It was just an off year."

Aside from California, much of the country's production comes from the Upper Midwest. North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Montana, which produced more than a third of the nation's honey crop last year, all struggled with dry weather.

Though a bee ailment known as colony collapse disorder was spotted in several states, it wasn't a major factor in last year's decline in the honey crop, Johnson said.

Some scientists believe the problem might have been around as early as a couple of years ago. Woodworth said she also believes that the ailment is not new.

"We've all had our turn at it in the last five, six years," she said.

Johnson said some speculate that colony collapse disorder might be the same thing as a bee ailment in Southern states in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The cause of that ailment was never determined, he said.

Johnson said he does not worry that the disorder will affect this year's honey production. Bees are pollinating California's almond crop now, and "nothing makes a beehive healthier than good pollen flow," he said.

Though they might have less honey to market, beekeepers are enjoying stronger prices. Nationwide, honey prices last year rose to an average of more than \$1.04 per pound, up 14 percent from 2005.

Woodworth said the price increase is more a reflection of an increase in the price of imported Argentine honey than the drop in U.S. production. The costlier imported honey helped drive up the price of domestic honey, as well, she said.