

Ulster Beekeepers' Association

Importing Bees into Northern Ireland – advice to members

Summary

- *Honeybees are imported to replace losses or improve existing stocks.*
- *Varroa is frequently implicated as a major factor in colony losses – therefore we need to improve our control of Varroa.*
- *Importing bees into either part of the island of Ireland carries risks to beekeepers in both parts – some known and others unknown.*
- *The case for imports must not be driven by unsubstantiated claims, fashion and/or personal financial gain which might jeopardise future beekeeping in Ireland.*
- *Those who import, or support the import through the purchase of imported bees, therefore take on the responsibility for factual evaluation of both the benefits and the risks of importing bees.*
- *UBKA advocates a step change in the amount of queen rearing carried out locally and that beekeepers take the opportunity to improve their competence at queen rearing to meet the demand for replacement queens.*

The Ulster Beekeepers' Association (UBKA) urges that more factual evaluation be carried out by those responsible for the recent surge in imports and by those who support them by purchasing those imports. They are taking to themselves a heavy responsibility for the future of beekeeping in Ireland and must be prepared to justify their actions to the entire beekeeping community when the risks materialize, as they inevitably will.

Introduction

When our varroa-free status was breached in April 2002, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) advised UBKA that under European regulations the ban on all imports of bees into Northern Ireland had to be lifted to allow imports of queen bees and attendant workers. Imports are permissible subject to conditions from all European Union States, and presently from four "third" countries, Hawaii, New Zealand, Argentina and Australia.

The bees must be accompanied by an appropriate Health Certificate and be notified to DARD at least 24 hours in advance of being imported. In the case of third country imports they must be presented at a designated port so that they can be checked on arrival.

Since then legal Imports have been increasing and in recent years from at least five European countries and some further afield.

The key issues around importation

1. Varroosis has dramatically changed the management of beekeeping.

Varroa will itself kill colonies, acts as a vector for viruses and creates a general debility that allows other diseases to flourish. Colonies die through a combination of disease challenges and the final cause of death is often not clear.

Varroosis frequently remains the key underlying cause of losses.

Maintaining colonies with a minimum of management and “let alone” beekeeping is no longer a viable option.

Varroa infestations must be actively managed and controlled. There are a number of well-researched control methods together with a proliferation of “quack” remedies and methods. Often the latter are chosen because they are cheap, available and apparently simple.

But research shows they cannot be relied on to be sufficiently effective and that the poor effectiveness may not be immediately apparent.

Beekeepers’ failure to control Varroa effectively places their own and neighbouring apiaries at risk.

It would be much better to reduce the losses and risks through more effective control of Varroa than rely on imported replacements that will again be exposed to varroosis.

2. The fallacy that our Gene Pool is too small

It has been suggested that continual imports are a necessity because the gene pool of the existing population of honey bees in the island of Ireland is too narrow to enable our bees to adapt and thrive in an ever more challenging disease environment. Everyone who thinks logically about the mixture of types of honey bee already here will recognise that this is a point of view that has absolutely no basis in scientific fact. When taken along with the associated health risks, it is a view that must be strongly challenged as justification for imports.

Specialist bee breeders making a case for limited imports to introduce **specifically identified genes** that they consider **necessary** to add to our existing population of bees should be aware of the information given at the FIBKA Gormanston Conference in Co. Dublin in July 2008. Professor Susan Cobey repeatedly said that we were taking unjustifiable risks by importing live bees into Ireland. If there is a **justified** need to introduce **specific** genes, she recommended restricting to the import of washed semen or eggs.

Professor Cobey is an acknowledged world leader in bee breeding, specialising in Carniolan bees and is located at Davis University in California. She has intimate knowledge of the disastrous effect of some American practices.

3. Bee Improvement

Two prime objectives of the UBKA Constitution are to support and encourage the improvement of the Honey Bee and to improve the standard of beekeeping.

Importing theoretically offers opportunities to benefit from improved strains deemed superior to what is available locally. Claims such as more docile bees, less prone to swarming, better foragers, and greater disease resistances are often quoted as evidence of superiority. Beekeepers aiming to support the above two UBKA objectives and thus benefit from their beekeeping need to ask:

- Are the claims for imports valid and closely linked to the imported sample?
- Are they evidence-based and is the evidence independent, valid and available to the beekeeper taking final receipt of the import?
- Can the same benefits be obtained from particular strains of bees already here?
- What evidence is there that they can impart these benefits to our existing stocks?
- What are the risks of accompanying pests and diseases and how strong is the proof that they are absent?

For example, there are claims that Carnica bees from Slovenia are gentle pure-bred bees that have been improved with State help for over 50 years, much longer than other bee improvement plans in Europe.

They may well be suitable for Eastern Europe or Continental USA but coming to a very different climate such as Ireland, which is wetter and has milder winters, will they succumb more to diseases of stress like Nosema and chalk brood as was the case with Italian queens imported from New Zealand before the ban here on such imports?

Although the pure Carnica bees are often docile, it is likely that their crosses will show more defensiveness than either of their parents, as found with Buckfast imports. Aggressive bees are a nuisance for the beekeeper, a danger to the public and damage the reputation of beekeeping as an acceptable feature of community life.

Cross breeding can produce advantages through hybrid vigour and disadvantages of mongrelisation. Beekeepers have little practical control over the male input in mating their queens, a critical part of any breed improvement programme. Mongrelisation occurs in two ways as a result of imports; daughters of imported queens mate with local drones and local virgins mate with sons of imported queens. The open mating means that a beekeeper who wants to retain his local strain cannot do so. Pockets of locally adapted bees are in danger as a result. Not only will the importer lose the docility (for example) that may have been the objective of the exercise, but the local beekeeper has his local strain completely destroyed. Everybody loses!

Some beekeepers believe that they will improve the general hardiness of their stock by importing bees from other regions. Varroa resistant strains would certainly be of major interest but they are not currently commercially available. Even if they became available, it would be better to incorporate the Varroa resistant genes into locally adapted bees rather than use exotic strains of bees that are not adapted to our cool wet climate. Currently, there is no research evidence that local bees are more susceptible to Varroa than those being imported.

4. Risk of Introducing more Pests and Diseases

The spread of the Varroa mite resulted in changes and challenges towards better beekeeping and a valuable realization that “biosecurity”, a term now in everyday use in food production, is equally important to beekeepers. Controlling imports as a biosecurity measure in our island situation should be the preferred option.

Although Varroa is no longer listed as notifiable under The Bee Diseases and Pest Control Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, the new Varroa threat is now from Pyrethroid resistant mites and as such retains the need for strict Varroa checks on imports. Irish beekeepers have scored an “own goal” by importing Varroa in the first place. Do we really want to score a second?

The Small Hive Beetle (*Aethina tumida*) and *Tropilaelaps* mite, now listed as notifiable pests, cause considerable damage to beekeeping elsewhere in commercial beekeeping. To arrive here through queen or colony imports would be a major setback for beekeeping and the reputation of beekeepers. Restricting the country of origin for legal imports is a key part of the control measures and as such needs to be respected and enforced.

Sudden and serious loss of bees or Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) has had widespread publicity with growing evidence of a complex of viral causes highlighting the

need to be certain that imports are certified disease free. Known threats include the Kashmir Bee Virus in imports from many places and the Israeli strain of Bee Paralysis virus.

Both European and American Foul Brood and Acarine have long been recognized as serious disease threats and there now seems to be a degree of resistance in some local bee strains which should be valued. Ireland may still be free from *Nosema cerana* but it is all around us. Importing further problems would represent a tragic own goal for local beekeepers and the public, whose support is important in the long-term, would not understand.

It is worth noting that the very well informed British Beekeepers' Association, as a matter of policy, does not support the import of queens or package bees from outside the UK. In fact it is urging the Westminster Government to impose limitations. The Federation of Irish Beekeepers Associations has exactly the same policy in relation to the Dublin Government.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the main driver for the recent increase in imports is the need for replacement queens and colonies. The arrival of Varroa (itself caused by imports!) has increased mortality through its role as a vector of viruses, as a general debilitating agent and as a killer in its own right. UBKA is committed to better management to maintain health in this much more challenging environment, the dissemination of such knowledge and to keeping up with research progress.

The most important alternative to imports is to improve the ability and willingness of beekeepers to rear queens from selected strains so as to produce their own replacement stocks. It is surprising how few members do it routinely. It is not a new or particularly difficult aspect, now more than ever vital to successful beekeeping.

UBKA recognizes that demanding a blanket ban on honeybee imports is unrealistic and impractical in today's political climate.

UBKA recognizes that knowledge based beekeeping is the key to better beekeeping and in removing the emotion in deciding the benefits of importing bees.

UBKA and Affiliated Association members have a vital role to play in identifying and "benchmarking" the desirable value of local bee strains, improving the local queen breeding and rearing resources and scrutinizing the merits claimed for imports.

The case for imports must not be driven by false claims (whether deliberate or through ignorance) and personal financial gain which jeopardizes, both in the short and long term, the quality of the local honey bee colonies for future generations of beekeepers.

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