

AGRICULTURE: 'Organic' honey? USDA rules say 'no way'

By Kelly Stone, Agweek Staff Writer

When you think of honey, you probably think of words such as "healthy," "pure" or "natural."

But you might be surprised to hear that, currently, it's impossible for U.S. honey producers to get their product certified as organic.

Dr. Marla Spivak, a University of Minnesota entomologist, said while Europe and Canada have standards in place for certifying organic honey, there are no such standards yet in the United States.

Spivak said under existing USDA guidelines, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to create honey certification standards.

Bees as livestock

Right now, USDA classifies bees as livestock.

To certify livestock as organic, producers must prove that the animals have not come into contact with certain chemicals or genetically modified material.

While cattle ranchers can confine their herd with fences, bees fly freely miles from their hive in search of pollen and nectar. Spivak said it's unrealistic to expect beekeepers to control so much surrounding farmland.

"Instead of using the template they use for all other livestock, they need to think outside the box," Spivak said.

She believes it may be necessary to combine some certification rules, creating unique standards that make sense for the honey industry.

For instance, rather than looking at an individual bee as an animal, it might be better to classify the colony as an organism. Under that standard, most beekeepers could accurately certify that the colony's home had not been exposed to chemicals or pollutants. Yet Spivak has some concerns about the certification process itself.

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"It opens the gates for fraud," she said, "because producers can still falsify documents."

Residue testing

Another option is residue testing, where the product itself is screened for contaminants.

Spivak said, "I've been told that will never happen (with honey), because as testing equipment improves, it will always find something."

If certain tolerance levels are set, the question becomes, who will set them? European producers test their honey for residues, which works well for chemical exposure, but doesn't detect contact with genetically modified plants.

Northern Plains beekeepers have another unique factor to consider. Most ship their colonies south for winter, protecting them from the cold and putting them to work pollinating fruit crops for out-of-state growers. This makes it even more difficult for beekeepers to control exposure and maintain accurate records.

Regional impact

While the actual number of commercial beekeepers in the Upper Midwest is fairly small, the honey industry is big business in the region. North Dakota is the nation's leading producer of honey. Combined with Minnesota, Montana and South Dakota, the four states account for one-third of the honey produced in the United States.

While no one knows for sure if there will be U.S. organic certification standards for honey, it's certainly an issue that's generating a lot of talk. Spivak said there was heated discussion

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