

Summary of the 2011 National Bee Unit Apiary Inspections Programme

This season has been an average year for beekeeping, with mixed reports of honey yields, however, many beekeepers reported making an increase in colony numbers. It has also been a good year for the National Bee Unit inspectors who visited more beekeepers (5781), more apiaries (8920) and more colonies (37,785) than last year. Despite having fewer inspectors on the ground in 2011 due to retirements and unfilled posts, these inspection figures represent 12% increase on the total number of colonies inspected last season. Hand-in-hand with increases in the number of inspections was an increase in the amount of disease discovered, and increase in diagnostic support required from the NBU diagnostic laboratory at York. There were three times more cases of American foulbrood in 2011 (104 cases) and one third more European foulbrood in 2011 (695 cases) compared to 2010. Therefore as a beekeeping community we need to remain vigilant to these damaging brood diseases, and remind everyone to report suspicions of disease to their local Bee Inspector (see below for contact details).

The NBU visit apiaries based on the risk of finding disease, or finding exotic pests, and conduct so called priority inspections. The risk of an apiary having disease is derived from the proximity of each apiary to known disease outbreaks, so the closer an apiary is to known disease, the higher the priority of inspecting that apiary. The Random Apiary Survey was commissioned by Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government to help the NBU obtain an accurate estimate of disease prevalence by visiting apiaries in all areas, rather than concentrating on high risk areas. Over the last 2 seasons the NBU have checked for disease at over 4700 apiaries selected at random from across England and Wales. We know from this massive surveillance exercise that the priority inspection programme, routinely used by the NBU, detected significantly more American and European foulbrood than the inspection of apiaries selected at random. Also, the apiary risk classifications used by the NBU to prioritise inspections, were confirmed as being very useful for targeting disease. The final part of this exercise was to look at 13 pathogens in adult bee samples collected from each visit, including viruses, fungi and bacteria. We can confirm that every one of these pathogens was detected across England and Wales, but the prevalence of each ranged from being very common, to a single finding in the survey! Some good news is that the viruses linked to Colony Collapse Disorder in the United States were of very low prevalence, and none of the 19,615 colonies assessed in the survey, were suffering from this condition. The final report for this surveillance exercise will be shared with beekeepers in spring next year, so look out for updates in magazines, on BeeBase (see www.nationalbeeunit.com) and presentations at the WBKA and BBKA Spring conventions. NBU staff will also throughout the year be giving presentations across the country as well which will include these details.

This season was also another successful year for providing training and advice building on what has gone before. To date, NBU staff have given 833 training events with 25,200 attendees. Also seasonal husbandry advice was sent to 4500 beekeepers who had registered on BeeBase and provided their email addresses, and 105 disease alerts were sent to 2076 registered beekeepers who own bees within 5 km of foulbrood disease. If you wish to receive seasonal advice and updates or be informed when foulbrood has been found in your area, please provide us with your email address (see contact details below).

The NBU can only provide training and advice, and effectively control disease when we are in a position to contact you! This might seem like an obvious statement, but if we do not know you are a beekeeper, we cannot warn of disease threats near you or provide timely husbandry advice. A large number beekeepers that remain unknown to the NBU seriously compromises our ability to control notifiable disease and to contain any future incursion of an exotic pests like the Small Hive Beetle. Many beekeepers presume that by registering with a local association, NBU inspectors will know automatically where beekeepers are. However, this is not always the case. For example a survey in 2011 revealed that 45 of 64 county level associations do not share such information with the NBU, leaving large gaps in our ability to control disease and future exotic pest incursions. Recent efforts by the NBU inspectors has resulted in an estimated additional 2291 beekeepers becoming registered, and therefore becoming part of a responsible community of beekeepers who are serious about improving honey bee health. If you want to register with the NBU as a beekeeper, and help us to help you, then please contact us.

National Bee Unit

Contact us on 01904 462510, by emailing nbu@fera.gsi.gov.uk, or find more information by visiting our website (www.nationalbeeunit.com).