

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL BEE PROTECTION PROGRAMME LAUNCHED

March 8, 2011: Kingston, Jamaica

The notorious American Foulbrood Disease (AFB), the most lethal enemy of the apiculture industry with its exponential propensity to infect and wipe out whole bee colonies in a short time is not being given much room to spread in Jamaica.

Local farmers through the two leading apiculture associations, the All Island Bee Farmers Association (AIBFA) and the Jamaica Federation of Commercial Apiculturalists (JFCA) have partnered with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), The Apiculture Unit in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, (MOAF), the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) and the European Union (EU) to launch a national inspection and eradication programme to minimize its risks to the sector.

With funding from the European Union Banana Support Programme, (EUBSP), the one-year project dubbed, *“Strengthening the Capacity of Stakeholders in the Apiculture Sector to Control and Manage the American Foul Brood Disease (AFB) and Enhance Production”*, was officially launched in Kingston, March 08 at the Agriculture Ministry.



Head of the Government's Apiculture Unit, Mr. Reginald Peddy and Agriculture Minister Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton listen to IICA Rural Development Specialist Ms. Shauna Brandon at the project launch.

It will seek to not only identify and destroy AFB infected colonies island-wide between March and December 2011, but in a more sustainable way, will provide capacity building among producer organizations to monitor the disease with the MOAF. This level of expertise is of tremendous value and will increase by about 12 times the island's inspection capacity to continue monitoring of the AFB over time and ensure compliance with government established protocols.

An additional effort is also being made by the project to increase the capacities of approximately 120 existing bee farmers, specifically in the six parishes (St Mary, St Catherine, Portland, St Thomas, St James and Clarendon) affected by the downturn in the export banana industry. They will be trained and certified in Apiary Management and Business Management.

Robust Disease

The AFB though not at any crisis proportions currently, was first found in Jamaica in 1918, and has been kept in check since said Minister of Agriculture Dr. the Hon Christopher Tufton.

“It’s not that we now have an outbreak or an epidemic,” Shauna Brandon Rural Development Specialist at IICA reiterated. “In fact, we are being preemptive to identify and destroy all contaminated colonies to ensure this disease does not reach that level,” she explained. As such, approximately 30,000 hives island-wide will be inspected.

The AFB disease is considered the most lethal disease affecting the apiculture sector because it is highly contagious and incurable.

Once a colony or piece of equipment is infected the disease rapidly spreads. Over 2.5 million spores for example are formed in one single bee cell and they feast on the bee larvae thus eradicating any proliferation of the bee population. Further, while a hive may not show obvious signs of the disease, farmers need to be aware that the spores can remain dormant for over 40 years in old combs, honey, bees wax or in derelict hives and can contaminate honey, pollen and combs.

The often microscopic spores also easily transfer unto the body parts of adult bees and spread as the bees travel. The proximity of local apiaries and the fact that a bee forages within 3-5 miles of its home further increases the risk of the disease spread across Jamaica. Moreover, the AFB disease is highly resistant to heat and cold and has proven non responsive to chemical treatment. As a result, the most effective method of control is early detection coupled with eradication of infected equipment and colonies through burning.

A recent eradication programme implemented in one parish (St Thomas) collaboratively by RADA, MOAF Apiculture Unit and the St Thomas Bee Farmers Association in late 2010 indicated an approximate 4% infection rate among all the apiaries inspected. Close to 100 percent of all apiaries in that parish participated in that eradication exercise. Based on that level of incidence, the national eradication programme is determined to ensure the infection rate does not exceed 1% of all colonies.

Perfect Timing

The timing of the programme is impeccable as the apiculture industry has grown steadily since it was established in 1987. The industry provides J\$1.25 billion annually to the economy and is trending to further growth especially with the opportunities for export provided by existing trade agreements with Europe and North America.

In light of its economic value and potential, the Agriculture Minister urged that every effort be made to manage the disease and other risks that could undermine production levels, that bee farmers cooperate

with the inspection programme and that they seek to maximize the opportunities for much greater expansion in the export market through a diversity of branded products such as Jamaican pollen and Propolis, two by-products of the honey bee used in the pharmaceutical and natural health industries respectively.

Pointing to the fact that local apiaries are averaging 6 - 7.5 gallons of honey per annum when the ideal output is 10-12 gallons per year, the Minister said that the capacity building component of the project will empower farmers in best practices to fortify their production activities to reach optimum production levels.

Farmers Hold the Key to the Programme Success

The success of the eradication programme lies heavily in cooperation from the farmers. Head of the Government’s Apiculture Unit, Reginald Peddy acknowledged that the eradication exercise will coincide with the honey production period in some parishes and therefore anticipates some apprehension from farmers who for fear of immediate loss of income may be uncooperative. But he cautioned the farmers to consider the greater good of the sector and give their full support and compliance to the exercise.



Bee Farmer Delroy McNish encourages his colleagues island wide to support the AFB inspection programme.

A beneficiary farmer of the St Thomas AFB eradication programme, Mr. Delroy McNish urged his fellow bee farmers across the island to cooperate using this analogy, “if one finger on your hand is infected it is better to lose the one finger [and gain the use of the hand] than risk losing the entire hand through the spread of the infection... it is the same with the bees and this disease”.

Mr. McNish said the bee farmers from his parish have not only eradicated AFB from their hives but many of them have been schooled in the identification and inspection of the AFB, a skill they previously did not have and one that is invaluable to them preserving their livelihood.

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