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Restored prairie rescues famished bees living on the farm



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by UPI | 26 Nov 2019

Nov. 26 (UPI) — Life on the farm is feast or famine for honey bees, but a new study suggests access to restored prairie can help bees remain well-fed and prepare for winter.

There are many risks that come with life on the farm, including exposure to harmful insecticides and a lack of biodiversity, but in the middle of summer, if pesticide exposure is limited, life can be pretty good.

The problem is, new research shows, the bounty that is peak season on a soybean farm in Iowa ends rather abruptly.

Throughout the summer, bee colonies living adjacent to large soybean farms gained weight and grew their honey stores, but by late August, the health of the farm-side bee colonies began to decline. By mid-October, many of the bees had abandoned the hives. Those that were left were malnourished.

“We saw a feast-or-famine kind of dynamic happening, where in the middle of the summer they were doing great. In fact, the hives in highly agricultural areas outcompeted hives in areas with less soybean production,” lead researcher Amy Toth, a professor of ecology, evolution and organismal biology at Iowa State University, said in a news release. “But then they all just crashed and burned at the end of the year.”

But in followup experiments, Toth and her colleagues were able to rescue some of the imperiled bee hives by relocating them to restored prairie. The late-flowering plants common among prairie habitat helped the bees continue to forage into the fall and build the honey supply for the winter.

Hives relocated to prairie sites stabilized and gained weight. The result, detailed this week in the journal PNAS,

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The latest findings don't paint a simple picture of the relationship between bees and commercial agriculture. Contrary to the conclusions of previous studies, the latest data suggests bees rely on the clover that lines the edges of many commercial crop fields.

But the advantages offered by life on the farm dissipate after midsummer, and bees are left breaking into their fat stores before winter has even arrived. When scientists relocated struggling hives to the prairie, their fat stores rebounded.

"This suggests that the rebound the hives experienced when we put them in the prairie also trickled down to the individual bees," Toth said. "Their nutritional health had also improved by being in that prairie habitat."

Though the research suggests farms aren't all bad for bees, the findings complement the conclusions of previous studies that showed plant diversity is important for sustainable bee health.

Authors of the new study don't want beekeepers to start relocating hives. Instead, in followup experiments, researchers plan to test the benefits provided by small strips of prairie habitat cultivated next to agricultural fields.

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