Community Field Tour of Clark Honey Farm

By: Sudha Petluri

On Friday, September 29th, Madison Conservation District hosted a community field tour of Clark Honey Farm in Sheridan, MT. Nick Clark, a third-generation honey farmer, operates the farm alongside his family and just 5 employees. Nick's grandfather, Gary Clark, started the operation in the 1960s. Since then, their business has grown to include over 7,000 hives that travel over 33,000 miles a year pollinating canola in Harrison, apples, cherries, and pears in Washington, and almonds in California. From Spring through Fall, however, they're right here in Sheridan making honey.

Nick and his wife Jamie demonstrated the process of a honey extraction. it begins by loading the frames of honey onto equipment that uses a hot blade to cut off the wax caps sealing the cells. The uncapped frames are then transferred to the extractor which rapidly spins out the honey. The honey is stored in barrels. The wax is melted and filtered, leaving a burnt honey byproduct, while the wax can be used to make candles, lip care, and other products. Honey and beeswax are two of Earth's natural products that will never spoil. The different colors and flavors of honey depend on the flowers the honeybees pollinated. It takes pollen from 2 million flowers for bees to create 1 pound of honey.

Nick and Jamie explained the life cycle of honeybees and roles of the queen bee, worker bees, and drones. They also discussed the maintenance involved in caring for the bees. Managing a honey farm is not without its challenges. Bees and beekeepers face threats from wildfires, floods, parasites and disease, thieves, and even bears that can open doors. In 2022, 300 of the Clarks' hives were eaten by bears. The Clarks have installed electric fences around their hives to deter bears, and even have traps set up. Extreme weather can also contribute to losses in bees through starvation and making them more susceptible to disease. During an average year, Clark Honey Farm may experience a 10-15% loss in bees. In 2022 however, due to an early snowstorm, they experienced a more severe 25% loss. Nick also showed us an example of a cell containing a varroa mite. Varroa mites, scientifically and appropriately named Varroa destructor, are parasites that feed and reproduce on honeybee larvae and pupae. Once established, varroa mites can devastate colonies, so it is important to catch infestations early and manage them. With so many colonies being transported across the country, this can be critical, and that's why the next presenter's role is so important.

Alyssa Piccolomini is the State Entomologist with the Montana Department of Agriculture. Alyssa's job is to inspect bees and their hives in state for parasites and disease, insects, and noxious weeds. These inspections ensure the hives are healthy and nothing unwanted will be spread. In Montana, honey bees and alfalfa leafcutting bees are used in agricultural production. In 2022 there were 6,755 apiary locations and 244,376 registered bee colonies in Montana which produced 7.5 million pounds of honey. Montana is consistently one of the top 5 honey-producing states. Commercial beekeepers make up the largest percentage of beekeepers in the state, with 90 commercial companies comprising 90% of apiaries. Alyssa is responsible for inspecting apiaries across the state, and inspects about 2,000 colonies per year. Montana law also uniquely supports preventing the spread of diseases and pests by requiring commercial apiaries to be at least 3 miles from another registered site. This also helps limit the over-exploitation of pollen and nectar resources. To further bolster spread prevention efforts and the protection of honeybees, there is consideration by Montana to follow in the footsteps of North Dakota and Idaho in implementing a Pre-Inspection Program for bees heading to California's annual almond pollination. Trucks waiting to be inspected at the border face the risk of bees flying away or becoming distressed, reducing the bee population, and negatively impacting both beekeepers and almond growers. A pre-inspection would eliminate the need for trucks to wait at the border.

There are plenty of ways everyone can take action to protect honeybees, and all pollinators. Abiya Saeed is the Extension Horticulture Associate Specialist with Montana State University, and has a background in entomology and pollinator conservation. Abi emphasized the significance and impact of creating pollinator habitat. There are over 500 native bee species in Montana. Many are on the decline due to pests, disease, habitat loss, and pesticide use. Abi explained that habitat loss is the largest contributing factor in pollinator decline, so providing beneficial habitat to pollinators can help improve their chances of success. Having a diverse habitat with a variety of flower shapes, colors, and sizes will attract a diversity of pollinators. Pollinators need food all season, so planting mixed-season varieties provides a food source for a longer duration. Native plants are ideal, but nonnative varieties can also be a high-quality food source, just be sure not to plant anything noxious or invasive. 70% of bees nest in the ground, and 30% nest in above ground cavities, so leaving some mulch-free bare ground, leaf litter, and woody debris can provide habitat to bees. Bee hotels can also provide habitat, just be sure the cavities are an appropriate size and that the hotel is cleaned to prevent the spread of pests and disease. Placing nests in locations that receive sunlight and are sheltered from harsh weather can make the habitat more suitable.

If you are interested in becoming a beekeeper, you might reach out to Nick, Alyssa, Abi, and your local conservation district. Clark Honey Farm sells hives for hobbyist beekeepers to get started. Montana Department of Agriculture and MSU Extension have great resources about bees, beekeeping, and pollinator gardens. And the Madison Conservation District offers free pollinator seed and support to Madison County residents, and rents out a 4-frame hand extractor through their equipment rental program. For more information, contact info@madisoncd.org or visit https://madisoncd.net/. You can reach Clark Honey Farm at (406) 842-5130.