

# THE BUZZ ABOUT BEES

Steven Coffman, 30, of Independence has been a beekeeper since he was 15. The Central High School graduate worked with other animals while in FFA, but found his groove when it came to bees. Now the bees of Coffman Farms help pollinate crops throughout the Willamette Valley, as well as the almond production in California, where they join 1.6 million other hives to work on the 800,000 acres of almond trees — the largest pollination event in the world, Coffman said. Look for Coffman Farms honey at the Independence Riverview Market on Saturdays.

EMILY MENTZER/  
Itemizer-Observer



*Steven Coffman finds his calling in commercial honey production, pollination services*

**By Emily Mentzer**  
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — Bees buzz around the hive, moving in and out of the Langstroth box that serves as their home, working away.

Some check on the newly laid eggs. Others feed larva with a nectar-water mixture. Still others clean out cocoons from a wax cell of honeycomb where a full-grown bee has just emerged.

The rhythm and sound of the insects is soothing in its own way.

"They work in harmony," said Steven Coffman, owner of Coffman Farms. "They can't survive on their own, so they prosper by working together. If you get a bunch of lazy bees, the whole hive will die. If you get a bunch of hard-working bees, the hive will flourish and do really well."

Coffman, 30, started working with bees when he was 15. The Central High graduate was active in the FFA and tried his hand at pigs, goats and chickens before he found his true calling as a beekeeper.

His grandfather and uncle both kept bees when Coffman was a young boy. He said he got started because of them.

His grandparents owned a slaughter house in Independence and used honey in their hams and bacon.

"But by the time I actually got started producing honey, they had retired," Coffman said. "So my honey never actually went there."

He still makes honey and sells it mostly wholesale in 55-gallon drums for use in making mead, or to be bottled and sold under someone else's label, or for baking.

The honey is just one product of the bees. Really,

their most important work is pollinating.

"There's always been a demand for bee pollination," Coffman said. "We have a network of farmers here in the valley that I work with."

As crops get close to blooming, they call Coffman and arrange a time for hives to be placed in the fields.

"We move all the bees at night, that way all the field bees are in and we're not leaving anyone behind," Coffman said.

The largest pollination event is in California. From February until mid to late March, beekeepers from around the nation swarm on the 800,000 acres of almond fields.

"It takes two hives per acre," Coffman said. "So they (almond growers) need 1.6 million hives."

When the news reports a big bee loss, it's usually be-

cause they don't have enough hives to pollinate these almonds.

"There's only a little over 2.5 million (commercial) hives in the nation right now," Coffman explained. "With the winter losses, they can get down to about 1.6 million, sometimes lower."

Unlike news reports, Coffman said it isn't the mysterious bee colony collapse disorder that causes the most problems for bee populations, but rather parasites, bad queens and chemicals used.

Ensuring a good queen bee is tricky.

"There's one queen per hive," Coffman said. "That's kind of a lot of weight to put on her shoulders to keep that colony going. If you don't have a good queen, usually the colony declines and is more susceptible to diseases."

Whether or not a queen is good depends partly on the weather. If it is rainy and cold on the days she has to mate with drones, she is less likely to gather enough of their semen to sustain her requirement of 1,200 eggs per day for the rest of her life.

"If she doesn't have good genetics to lay good eggs, then her daughters — the worker bees — can't do what they need to do to sustain a healthy hive," Coffman said.

The other major challenge is the varroa mite, which has been around a lot longer than colony collapse disorder, he said.

"It's killed way more hives than colony collapse disorder," Coffman added.

The varroa mite punctures the bees' exoskeleton and feeds off its hemolymph — the bees' version of blood.

"When they're feeding on it, not only are they weakening the bee's immune system, ... but it leaves an open wound and other things can get in there," Coffman said. "It makes them more susceptible to

those diseases."

The third challenge for beekeepers is chemicals used on crops. Some effects of pesticides are known, but others, like that of fungicides, are just being discovered.

"When big chemical companies want to register a product, they only test it on adult honey bees," Coffman said. "But we see a lot of side effects in the developing brood."

The last several years with news about colony losses have brought about a

surge in beekeepers, but there's not enough flowers to go around, Coffman said.

"Sometimes there actually can be too many bees in an area," he said. "There's just not enough forage for all the bees to make enough honey to go into winter. If people really want to help honey bees, support the local beekeeper that's already doing it, and try to plant things around their yard that are bee friendly, usually something that blooms in late August to September."



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Steven Coffman uses a breed of bee called "Italian," which he finds to be more docile than darker bees. The honey bees are calm — as long as you are, too.



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Worker bees check on the brood, or eggs.



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Bees gather pollen to make honey to feed the colony.

Come to Me all of you  
who are weary and carry heavy burdens  
and I will give you rest  
— Matthew 11:28

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