Apis APHIS - A New Species Of Exotic, Highly Undesirable Honey Bee

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The End of Beekeeping in the USA?
Perhaps. But not if everyone stops posturing and playing "World Trade" games. We must think clearly, and act less like adversaries. All of us.

The Threat? It's the "next *Varroa*", the disease or pest that gets those still keeping bees after so many gave up.

The Carrier? Call it "*Apis APHIS*" to honor the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, who feels that bees from New Zealand or Australia can be sent direct to USA beekeepers with only the unverified claim that they are "free of diseases and pests".

Apis APHIS is any uninspected bee from far away. If you're not sure what it is, then it's *Apis APHIS*. It may be too late to stop it's spread without Congressional action. Check the web site listed at the end of this article for the full updated story.

Why Only Tell Us Now? Sorry, we all dropped the ball. You did, too. In August, the USDA put out a notice in their unique dialect of English called *administrivia*. No one understood it.

Because it mentioned "New Zealand", "Australia" and "World Trade", it looked like more paperwork for countries who feel somehow entitled to "market access" simply because they spent years trying to "trade" without first trying to earn our confidence.

But this time, APHIS was somehow intimidated into acting as a World Trade cheerleader, rather than the health inspection service they are.

The Documents Are Complex No one really knows what it all means. And the "public comment period" may end on November 18, 2002. I say "may end" since it is Halloween as I type this. It might be extended to Jan 31, 2003, as we asked. But the basic problem is that the proposal is based upon *blind trust* in the ethics of for-profit companies to NOT ship bees with diseases or pests. Regardless of the details, we are asked to trust strangers to do things, do them right, and tell the truth.

"Trust Me" Is Not Biosecurity. Such things need to be *independent* of trust. Objective metrics and assured checks and balances are all anyone can trust.

But There Is No Check-And-Balance, no controls at all. APHIS won't do any inspections under this proposal. Worse, both New Zealand and Australia have recently lost much credibility in biosecurity. They let large and obvious external pests into their apiaries – *Varroa* and small hive beetle. (See the website for details.)

But these countries insist, and APHIS is having its arm twisted to agree, that we have no right to control their imports at all, because we "already have" all the diseases and pests that they *know about* and *admit to having*. We do have pests, but not *everywhere*. And we don't need more. Including the ones no one has yet identified. But look at how these two countries do business with the UK...

It Is Different There. They have reasonable controls. They have licensed importers. They replace all imported worker bees with "local" workers, sending the imported workers in for tests, and keeping records. They won't import *Apis APHIS*, they will *know* what they have. Anyone can see that by replacing workers, you reduce risk by orders of magnitude.

So 10 imported bees, one or all perhaps carrying something nasty is suddenly only one bee (the queen). They can even do a visual inspection on the queen. One assumes that the import attendants go right into a vial, empty queen cages go right into the incinerator, and records are kept.

If tests find a disease or problem, the lab reports it. And that's control.

It Is A Real SYSTEM. A system we can copy, rely upon, and improve, so no one has to depend solely upon fallible human individuals who might get greedy, or lazy, or make a mistake.

And it appears to work. In fact, this exact set of controls was able to settle a recent *Varroa* issue without any shouting, and without fingers being pointed. A miracle in World Trade.

What About Packages? Packages are a more difficult issue, given the poor track record of all countries in controlling even a single outbreak of an exotic disease or pest.

But after a few seasons of queens with no problems, confidence would be better, and a basis for trust would exist. Perhaps one could sample a few bees from each package, and run them through the same tests as the workers. This needs discussion.

Will World Traders Listen? Is anyone going to let mere beekeepers help negotiate a "disease control protocol"? That would just be too rational and obvious. So we may have to convince APHIS, the prospective exporters, and the WTO trade reps to agree that objective metrics and checks and balances are good business for all.

But New Zealand and Australia must first realize that *everyone* has the right to guard against importing a pest or disease, even one we already "have". No one's perfect, and we admit we aren't. Maybe they can too, and realize that it is the first step in doing business with integrity.

These Are Just My Ideas. You certainly have your own ideas. I just hope that the comment period is extended so you can express them yourself, rather than having to "write your Congressman". So, go find a computer, and pull up this website **www.beeculture.com/imports** to find out what's happening. We will have lots more sorted out by the time you read this.

But I can't say if you will find a page asking you to write your Congressman, or if you will find a tidy list of issues to consider and comment upon in a thoughtful manner.

I guess it will be a Christmas surprise for all. Go ahead, push the button, and Merry Christmas!

I hope.

Thanks to both *Bee Culture* and the *American Bee Journal* for yelling "stop the press!" and running the same article at the same time. They never did that before. That's how serious *everyone* is about this.