

**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses**

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. Name: David Ellingson
2. BusinessAddress: Ellingson's, Inc.
39783 Apple Valley Rd.
Ortonville, MN 56278
3. Business Phone Number: 320- 760-6769
4. Organization you represent: My company and American Beekeeping Federation
5. Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualification to provide testimony before the Committee:
 - Lifetime of working in beekeeping
 - Owner and president, Ellingson's Inc., since 1981
6. Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:
 - President – Minnesota Honey Producers
 - Minnesota Director – Mid-U.S. Honey Producers
 - President – American Beekeeping Federation
 - Mayor – Ortonville
 - Board Member – Center for Small Cities
 - Member – Ortonville Fire Dept.
 - Head Coach – Local Special Olympics Team

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: DAVID ELLINGSON

Address: 39783 APPLE VALLEY RD.
ORTONVILLE, MN 56278

Telephone: 320-760-6769

Organization you represent (if any): ELLINGSON'S INC.
AMERICAN BEEKEEPING FEDERATION

- 1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: NONE Amount:

Source: Amount:

- 2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: NONE Amount:

Source: Amount:

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you:

Signature: David Ellingson

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

**TESTIMONY OF
DAVID ELLINGSON
ELLINGSON'S, INC.
ORTONVILLE, MINNESOTA**

**FOR THE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
HORTICULTURE AND ORGANIC AGRICULTURE
Hearing on Colony Collapse Disorder in Honey Bee Colonies**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 29, 2007

Chairman Cardoza and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is David Ellingson. I live in Ortonville, Minnesota, where I operate 3700 colonies of honey bees for pollination and honey production. I ship my bees to both California and Texas for parts of the year. I also operate a business that processes beeswax for beekeepers.

First, I want to express the thanks of our entire industry for the concern you are showing for our problems by holding this hearing – and my personal appreciation for being invited to tell you my story.

I have been in beekeeping all my life, having followed my father in the business. Over those years, like any other farmers, we have seen our share of ups and downs, but I am now experiencing the lowest point of my beekeeping life.

Beekeeping became considerably more difficult in the late 1980s with the arrival of parasitic mites. Keeping our bees alive over the winter and productive in the summer became more costly and required much more attention.

For many years, we have wintered a portion our bees in Texas, where the milder climate and earlier spring allows us to get a jump-start in the spring compared to Minnesota. Looking back over the years, I see we have had to increase the number of hives brought

down each year to make up our numbers for the summer. Thirty-plus years ago we could depend on having a 5-1 split. That is by hauling 800 hives to Texas, we were able to split those colonies and make 4000 hives. These days, we are hauling 2000 colonies south, but with what has become normal losses of 20-30%, we come out of winter with the same number of colonies as we went in. This shows that we are doubling our costs for the same return in numbers.

Now comes the winter of 2006-2007. We hauled 2000 hives to Texas in the fall. We went through the colonies feeding corn syrup and pollen substitute as usual. The queens were starting to lay eggs for new young bees. My observations at that time were:

1. The colonies were strong and mite counts were very low.
2. There were good amounts of food stores for the bees.
3. I felt that following the good honey crop and fall in Minnesota that my bees were looking as good as I had seen in a long time.
4. I even felt that we would have some surplus bees to sell to other beekeepers.

We went back to Texas on Jan. 5 to sort out the best colonies to ship to California to rent out for almond pollination. I found:

1. More hives than normal without bees. These hives still had food stores, meaning the colonies didn't starve to death.
2. The percentage of small clusters was higher than expected. I now know that many of those colonies also were dying.

We selected 808 hives and shipped them to California. By Jan. 25, our beekeeper-partner in California reported that one-third of those colonies were gone and another one-third were too weak to rent to fulfill our contract specifications. We then shipped out 400 more hives to fill the contract, since the others were not good enough to pass inspection. Within two weeks of delivery, 50 of these colonies had disappeared. These too left behind plenty of food stores.

My loss on pollination revenues by the bees not going into the almonds is in excess of \$60,000 plus freight that had to be paid without regard to the condition of the bees (nearly \$20,000). The second load, which should have been worth more because there were more bees in those hives, should bring in \$26,250. So, overall, I should expect to have a net profit of \$6,600. Now, to deduct the time and expense of two trips to Texas to prepare the bees for shipment, plus the wear and tear on equipment, etc., and the final question becomes: What will I have to work with when the bees come back to California?

So far, instead of having surplus bees to sell, I have been buying bees, spending approximately \$10,000 for bees to fill some of my equipment. Even so, I believe we will be running 1000 to 1500 fewer colonies this year. We will probably have a 60% loss.

That's 1500 hives with a possible 100-lb. honey crop at 85 cents/lb. gives me another \$127,500 loss of potential income.

I truly felt that we had done everything right this year. But, then you wake up at 2 in the morning and lie there wondering, what did I do wrong? And then you talk to a fellow beekeeper who doesn't seem to be having these problems even though he managed his bees the same as you; it will drive you nuts.

The causes and solutions to this Colony Collapse Disorder are elusive, but some things are becoming clear.

- We need more beekeeping research. We are having a problem keeping our bees alive, and we all need to get something done right now to solve this problem. We have appealed to USDA for redirection of funds for more immediate research, both at USDA labs and at universities. A request from the Subcommittee might encourage USDA to look harder for available funds.
- We need more research long term. The American Beekeeping Federation, where I am past president, has been asking for dramatic increases in funding for both USDA and university honey bee research. The ARS bee labs have been working on shoestring budgets for years; flat budgets coupled with inflation leave fewer dollars for actual research each year. The labs are leaving authorized positions unfilled to leave money for the remaining scientists to work with.

All the beekeeping scientists at the Universities do what they can with the limited funds. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Honey Producers sell honey at the State Fair to raise funds to help with research at the University. Beekeeping research is being carried on at a handful of other universities to help resolve some of our problems and we applaud them for that.

But more is needed! More scientists, more ways of detecting what is going on with the honey bees. This industry will not grow and be a viable part of the agricultural system if we do not get ahead of this.

- We are seeing the need for more effective and efficient technology transfer of the scientists' findings to the beekeeper in the field. Unless the knowledge is passed on, it is useless. We feel the industry could benefit from a national beekeeping extension program, operated in concert with one of the agricultural colleges.
- This crisis has shown how little we really know about honey bee biology, about interactions between honey bees and the newer pesticides, and about our industry itself.

We are appreciative of the annual USDA-NASS honey production survey, but we need more information, particularly on pollination activities – how many colonies are involved in pollination, how much revenue this produces.

- This crisis has also underscored the need for a national honey bee diseases and pests survey. If we know what is out there, that we are going to have to deal with, we can more likely be proactive instead of reactive.

- For several years, in cooperation with a couple of private companies, our industry has been exploring the development of a crop insurance program for beekeepers to help them get through the years of bad weather and other natural disasters. This development process could use a nudge.

- Of course, losses such as we are now seeing could not have been foreseen. Many beekeepers are facing financial ruin from these unprecedented losses. Perhaps the Subcommittee could explore some means of providing some form of relief that would allow those beekeepers to maintain their businesses and rebuild their colony numbers.

- We are a small industry that provides a very big service. In 2000, a Cornell University study determined that honey bees benefit the country's major crops by about \$15 billion per year. Surely this would total much more today. It has been said that the honey bee contributes one-third of the American diet.

You also have to add the pollination benefit to gardeners, ornamental plantings, and environmental plants to get the true picture of honey bees' benefit to the country. And, you have to factor in the loss of natural pollinators to urbanization, mechanized farming practices, and pesticide use to gain an appreciation of the importance of having honey bees for pollination.

Those beekeepers who rent out their colonies to pollinate are, of course, paid for their services, but there are also many bee colonies that never earn any pollination rentals, even though they provide pollination to myriad crops and other plants. Traditionally, beekeepers have looked to the honey crop and the honey price support programs to provide a safety net for their businesses. Today, though, pollination has likely eclipsed honey production in revenues to beekeepers. Perhaps the time has arrived to supplement the honey marketing loan program with a program that provides a conservation payment of some sort for beekeepers – a payment that enables them to maintain vigorous, healthy colonies ready to provide the necessary pollination services.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that others in the industry may want to offer their own perspectives on Colony Collapse Disorder and the state of the U.S. beekeeping industry. I

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hope that their written statements will be welcomed for the record.

I would like to conclude with a personal comment.

This is a tough business; one that takes you away from home a lot -- just like you here in D.C. We are a small industry, scattered across the country. If we are going to have a viable honey bee industry, we must have dedicated people who are willing to go the distance. But even dedicated people need assistance from time to time.

I have been deep in debt from when my dad died. I will not put myself in that position again. The other fact is the bank that we have been at forever has cut their lending way back because of their experience with loan defaults from beekeepers who have bad crops and bad luck.

The median age of beekeepers is over 50. A lot of them are on the brink of hanging it up. If there is a glimmer of hope that we could, in some manner, improve the lot of beekeepers, the atmosphere of this industry would and could be greatly improved and we would see new, younger beekeepers moving in.

I would certainly have chosen a better way to celebrate our company's 60th anniversary in the honey bee business.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to give my views of the Colony Collapse Disorder and what effect it is having on my beekeeping business and those of my fellow beekeepers.

David Ellingson

President, Ellingson's Inc.

Past President, American Beekeeping Federation

Past President, Minnesota Honey Producers

Ortonville, Minnesota