Bee disease threatens honey and fruit production

Millions of bees have caught a highly infectious disease, which is threatening fruit export markets and honey production in the Western Cape. People, however, are not under threat of catching the bacteria.

"Most infected colonies have to be destroyed ... this is sort of the equivalent to swine fever or horse sickness," said John Moodie, chairman of the SA Bee Industry Organisation.

"There are no regulations in place to contain it," he told *Sapa* on Monday, 4 May 2009.

The outbreak of American Foulbrood (AFB) was fast spreading through the Western Cape since the disease was first spotted in February, he warned.

"It started as a very limited outbreak but now it has spread."

The notifiable disease is caused by the spore-forming bacterium Paenibacillus larvae and is the most serious infectious disease of honey bees.

"It spreads through spores which invade beehives. It is a disease which affects the babies in the beehives and then the bees can't hatch as normal," said Moodie.

The outbreak is likely to affect honey production and, more importantly, the deciduous fruit export market which relies on bees for the pollination of its fruit, said Moodie.

"The biggest worry is the effect on agriculture."

The disease, which was last seen in South Africa 150 years ago, was probably brought to the country through illegally imported honey contaminated with the spores, he said.

Moodie said the government needed to act fast to contain the disease.

"There are complexities, there's been an election, but really, this is an outbreak of significance. This is terribly important."

He said emergency legislation needed to be passed in order to place infected beehives under quarantine and to test beehives and honey for the spores.

"The cost of controlling the disease is increasing exponentially every day that we don't have regulations to control it," said

Moodie.

So far, he knew of about 200 infected beehives and with between 40,000 and 60,000 bees in a hive, that amounts to between eight million and 12 million infected bees.

But Moodie said there were probably many more beehives infected that had not yet been reported to the authorities.

"A comprehensive survey would be part of the control measures ... but the logistical problems are enormous."

There is an antibiotic available to treat infected bees, but it does not destroy the spores, which means that the insects get re-infected, he said.

Humans cannot contract the disease, even if they eat honey infected with the spores.

"But there will probably be a reduction in the quality of honey on our shelves," said Moodie.

The department of agriculture was not immediately available for comment.

Source: Sapa