

OPINION

Hive activity shapes future

THIS is the year bees got noticed. Defra increased funding research on pollinators from £200,000 to £10 million over five years, Farming Today got its own hive, there were TV programmes, magazine articles and the Co-operative Group launched its Plan Bee.

There is not enough understanding of these amazing creatures. We know they are important to pollination, and a figure of £200m has been bandied about as a measure of their worth in the UK alone: I wonder if this is the cost of having people with paint brushes replicating their effect?

There are few wild bees left in the countryside, so most of the ones which pollinate our crops are looked after by beekeepers, the majority of whom do it as a hobby. As a result, we have a population of bees focused on varieties which produce lots of honey and are less likely to sting.

In the Co-operative Farms, we need about 50 hives on our fruit farm in Herefordshire.

Fruit farm hives

We wanted to expand the range of products 'Grown by Us' to sell in our food stores, so decided to segregate the honey from the hives on the farm. We then increased the number of hives considerably in 2008 but only got about 50 per cent of expectations – not through colony collapse – but bees produced less in the extremely wet weather.

This year, not wanting a repeat of last, we increased the number of hives to 500. So far we have



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not got any issues with bee health and we are controlling the parasitic varroa mite with chemicals and oxalic acid.

The good news is around the country, we are now seeing burgeoning bee populations and good yields of honey.

About 15 per cent of our winter crops didn't get planted last autumn due to wet weather and, as a result, there are many more flowering spring crops, such as spring beans and rape, which is spreading the foraging period for bees. I am sure this is having a big impact on the health of bees.

As part of Plan Bee, the Co-operative Farms has massively re-

duced the use of neo-nicotinoids on our crops: we will be comparing results with local beekeepers to see if the reduction has made a difference, too. We are also testing wildflower mixes on two farms, with a view to planting large areas with the best in future.

If more spring cropping is making a significant difference to bee health and numbers, Defra would do well to consider this as an alternative to set-aside: there are more flowers in a spring crop than in set-aside.

There are some advantages to the farmer in establishing spring crops: spread of workload, improved black-grass control and maintenance of soil quality, if conditions are far from perfect in the autumn. But the spring crop won't yield as much as a winter crop and is far more susceptible to extreme weather conditions.

Every farmer's instinct is to maximise yield and reduce risk, especially as the climate is becoming less predictable, so it would need an incentive to stop sowing a winter crop and wait for spring.

I am hopeful this year will be an excellent one for bees, but if autumn 2009 has wall-to-wall winter crops and 2010 is very wet, we could be back to last year – worrying about the bees.

■ *Christine Tacon is general manager of the 24,300-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. Awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004, among her other roles is membership of the Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group.*