

Government Relations Update

by Gene Brandi, ABF Vice President

Since the elections in early November, the “lame duck” session of Congress has been dealing primarily with the immigration issue and the President’s executive order which would grant deportation relief to nearly five million illegal residents of the United States. Other legislative issues will likely take a back seat to this one until the new Congress convenes in January.

The Presidential memorandum, of last June, called for the creation of a Federal Task Force, the purpose of which was to develop a federal strategy to promote the health of honey bees and other pollinators. Administration officials said that this was an “all hands on deck” effort that would involve many US government agencies.

Two listening sessions were held in mid-November in order to gather testimony from stakeholders and the general public to advise the Task Force about the roles various federal agencies can play in improving the health of bees and other pollinators. Many thanks go to ABF Past President Dave Hackenberg, who was able to personally testify on behalf of ABF at the first listening session. A great many of the others who testified were members of the pesticide industry who immediately tried to minimize the role that pesticides play in bee health issues. Varroa mites and poor management were mentioned as the main bee health issues by those individuals. ABF along with the American Honey Producers Association submitted joint written testimony to the listening session docket which mentioned many serious bee health problems from pesticides, as well as Varroa mites, and forage/nutrition issues that could be further addressed by federal agencies.

The USDA Honey Bee Forage and Nutrition Summit were held October 20-21 in Alexandria, Virginia. The ABF was well represented by President Tim Tucker, Zac Browning, George Hansen, and me during this two day event. Zac presented a keynote address which provided an excellent overview of the health of the beekeeping industry, including habitat losses which have negatively affected pollinators in recent years. Approximately 13 million acres of CRP lands have been converted to agricultural use, primarily corn and soybeans, since 2007 in the upper Midwest. In addition to the reduction in available bee forage, the increased corn and soy acreage has increased the risk of pesticide damage to bees. Zac’s comprehensive presentation set the tone for the summit in a very professional manner.



There were a number of excellent speakers at the summit who addressed a variety of topics pertaining to bee nutrition and forage, as well as representatives of several federal agencies who manage millions of acres of land throughout the country. We were hoping that at least some of the agency representatives would announce new “bee friendly” policies as a result of the Presidential memorandum on bee health. However, it is clear that we have a great deal of work to do with these federal agencies regarding their views about allowing honey bees on their lands. 85% of BLM offices have no experience granting apiary permits. Representatives of other Federal agencies stated that appropriate use and compatibility determinations must be approved before allowing honey bees on their lands. In many cases it is up the individual ranger or land manager to determine whether or not bees will be allowed. We would certainly like to see policy changes from the top down to the local level that would allow greater use of federal lands for apiary sites and we plan to pursue that goal in 2015.

Immediately following the Forage and Nutrition Summit, Tim, Zac, and I attended the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign annual conference. Assistant EPA Administrator Jim Jones, in his keynote address, discussed the establishment of state programs for the protection of bees which would allow for “greater space” between bees and toxic pesticides. This statement created some concern among beekeepers in the audience who viewed this to mean that bee hives would need to be moved away from pesticide applications under newly developed state programs for the protection of bees.

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