



FALL COLOURS — A farmer swathed a field at Sturgeon Lake, Alta., earlier this month while brightly coloured leaves formed a background. Farmers are busy in a race against the weather to get crops harvested. (Randy Vanderveen photo)

Bees play big role in food

By Robert Arnason
Brandon bureau

It's hard to understand how important bees are to food production in Canada, but Peter Kevan, a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Guelph, has a nice way of summarizing their role.

"One bite in three that we actually eat comes to us through insect pollination and honeybees are particularly important," said Kevan. "So the beekeepers are a linchpin in all of production agriculture."

However, varroa mites and colony collapse disorder have hammered bee numbers across the country.

During the winter of 2008, roughly 36 percent of Canada's honeybees died, more than double the normal mortality rate of 15 percent, according to a news release by the Central Beekeepers Alliance in New Brunswick.

The threat this presents to agriculture is one of the reasons the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council announced Sept. 24 that it would provide \$5 million to establish a network of researchers to study problems with pollination in Canada over five years.

However, the Canadian Pollination Initiative (Canpolin) will have a much broader scope than honeybees.

"The mandate is really to lay the foundations for our understanding of pollination in the Canadian environment," said Kevan, who is the scientific director of the project.

He said scientists involved in the project will study everything from leafcutter bees to the economics of pollination.

The initiative will involve nearly 50 researchers from 26 universities and research labs across Canada.

Experts specializing in plant reproductive biology, wind pollination, ag-

ricultural economics and entomology will be arranged in teams called crop hit squads, he said.

A squad will go to a site and work together in a mobile trailer to study a particular pollination challenge.

One of the team leaders will be Elizabeth Elle, a plant evolutionary biologist at Simon Fraser University.

Elle is interested in determining whether bees native to Canada could serve the same purpose as honeybees, which were brought over from Europe.

Elle said Canada has more than 700 species of native bees that might be able to perform the work of honeybees, pollinating fruit and oilseed crops, if colony collapse disorder cannot be solved.

Tackling such a question with a team is essential, Elle said, because few researchers have comprehensive knowledge of both insects and plants.

Research network

Using a network of pollination researchers is better than the previous system, Kevan added.

"It was just a whole bunch of independent people, doing independent projects. As a result, nobody was able to do anything particularly comprehensive," he said.

Although Canpolin was officially launched in late September, the network has been up and running for a year.

So far, the hit squads have looked at the blueberry industry in Eastern Canada, where lower bee populations have adversely affected berry production.

"The first crop we've tackled has been lowbush blueberries in Atlantic Canada. But canola will likely be the next one that's going to receive a lot of attention," Kevan said.



These two really know farming. But only one of them works at the bank.

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Saskatoon newsroom

Saskatchewan Pulse Growers is accepting registration for Pulse Days 2010, which runs Jan. 11-12 in Saskatoon.

Topics will include a look at the future of genomics in Saskatchewan pulses, fertility benefits of pulses in crop rotations, how to stay competi-

tive in global markets, an integrated approach for post-harvest quality of red lentils and how green lentils are used in traditional Indian foods.

To register call 306-664-9109 or visit www.saskpulse.com. Registration is \$20 for Saskatchewan residents who register before Dec. 18, 2009 and \$40 for out-of-province guests.