

The EU's beekeeping sector

Every year, the EU's 600 000 beekeepers and their 16 million beehives produce 200 000 tonnes of honey. This is not however sufficient to cover demand on the EU market, and the shortfall is made up by imports, above all from China. Threats to bee health and market competition make the economic viability of apiculture a critical matter. EU policies aim therefore to address these issues and promote beekeeping, an activity that is of vital importance to the environment.

EU beekeeping in numbers

Beekeepers and hives in the EU

The EU numbers approximately 600 000 beekeepers and 16 million hives according to 2016 [data](#) reported by the Member States. Only **4 %** of EU beekeepers have over 150 hives, [commonly](#) considered the minimum for professional producers. However, this figure gives only an average indication of the number of hives that could provide a viable revenue, as the boundary between professionals and amateurs can vary across countries depending for example on differing profitability or income levels. Beekeepers are present in all EU countries, with big differences in terms of numbers and size (see Table 1). Germany accounts for about one in every six EU beekeepers, while there are only a few hundred in Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta. In Italy, beekeepers with more than 150 hives manage **60 %** of all bee colonies.

While **72 %** of EU apiculturists are members of a beekeepers' association, differences across the EU show fewer affiliates in France, Italy, Poland and Spain. National figures show a drop in the number of beekeepers but an overall stable number of beehives over recent years. EU [farm statistics](#) confirm this trend as regards farms with beehives.

EU honey production and trade

Honey is the best-known product of beekeeping, although other apiculture products (royal jelly, propolis, pollen and beeswax) and services (e.g. renting out bees for pollination) can represent a source of income for beekeepers. EU beekeepers produce an average of 200 000 tonnes of honey a year, which makes the EU the second world producer after China, with respectively **12 % and 28 %** of world production. However, the EU is not self-sufficient and China is the main source of [EU honey imports](#). EU beekeepers have relatively high [production costs](#) compared with world competitors, and the limited EU exports of honey are [priced higher](#) than imports to the EU.

Main challenges facing beekeepers

Profitability is crucial for the sustainability of the apiculture sector. Like other agricultural producers, beekeepers must cope with production and market challenges. When it comes to production, various factors can affect productivity in a beekeeping enterprise. Outbreaks of animal diseases, exposure to chemicals, losses in plant diversity, adverse climatic conditions or the deterioration of bees' natural habitats owing to natural or human factors can all threaten the productive capacity of beehives. These factors can also be among the causes of the [bee health problems](#) and high bee mortality rates registered in recent decades. Not only do [bee](#)

Table 1 – Number of beekeepers in selected EU countries

EU countries with more than 20 000 beekeepers	Total number of beekeepers	Beekeepers with >150 hives	
		Number	Average No of hives
Germany	116 000	81	587
Poland	62 575	324	272
Italy	50 000	2 000	413
Czech Republic	49 486	107	260
France	41 560	1 717	366
United Kingdom	37 888	50	443
Austria	25 277	380	233
Greece	24 582	7 288	165
Spain	23 816	5 361	406
Romania	22 930	1 545	194
Hungary	21 565	1 546	218

Data source: EU countries [National apiculture programmes](#), 2016.



[colony losses](#) affect the economic viability of apiculture, but threats to bee health are a source of much wider concern, well beyond beekeepers, given bees' role in the natural pollination of cultivated crops and wild plants and therefore in the preservation of the environment and the production of food.

As for the market, world competitors with lower production costs and cheaper prices represent a threat to EU producers' market share. Furthermore, a '[control plan](#)' organised recently by the European Commission has highlighted illicit practices (e.g. adulteration of honey with sugar) carried out both in and outside the EU. Non-compliance with EU rules on [production standards](#), labelling, etc. affects beekeeper income and has triggered a call from producers for [broader checks](#) to secure fair competition on the EU market.

EU policies addressing apiculture issues

Agricultural market

Agricultural policy measures always impact on beekeeping, whether directly or indirectly. Indirectly, they can help to improve the impact of farming practices on the environment (and thus on bees), for example by promoting the maintenance of permanent grassland or the adoption of environmentally friendly techniques. As for direct measures, apiculture products are part of the EU's agricultural markets and, in this context, EU funds are available to support bee health, hive management, technical assistance, analysis and research, market monitoring and product quality. To benefit from these funds, which cover up to 50 % of total expenses, EU Member States draw up three-year national apiculture programmes in cooperation with beekeeping organisations (Article 55 of [Regulation \(EU\) No 1308/2013](#)). Every Member State has a programme in place, for an overall 2017-2019 budget of €216 million (half from the EU budget) [allocated](#) according to the number of beehives in each country. Previous programmes used [over 90 %](#) of available EU funds. In defining measures to promote beekeeping, the European Commission can consult stakeholders in the [civil dialogue group on animal products](#), whose [strategic agenda](#) seeks to promote beekeeping needs in EU agricultural policy making.

Promotion and quality

Beekeeping products can also benefit from [promotion](#) measures co-financed by the EU with a budget of [over €100 million](#) a year ([Regulation \(EU\) No 1144/2014](#)). Honey is included in several multi-product promotion [campaigns](#) in and outside the EU, while a [Slovenian campaign](#) is aimed at increasing public and beekeeper awareness of EU quality schemes. In this respect, [more than 30 types of honey](#) produced across the EU have received [EU quality labels](#) denoting protected designation of origin (PDO) or protected geographical indication (PGI), which can help to increase their economic potential.

Plant health, food security, research and innovation

EU policies covering [areas other than agriculture](#) can also help to address apiculture-related issues. On the plant protection side, for instance, decisions as to whether or not to authorise the use of a particular substance can have a significant impact on apiculture, as research has provided [scientific evidence](#) of the effects of certain [pesticides](#) on bees. On the food security side, the recently adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/625](#) on checks and penalties related to marketing rules in the EU food industry could benefit apiculture given the differences in production practices across the world and the high quantity of imported honey in the EU. This legislation contains [measures](#) that could help to fight honey adulteration fraud by producers both in and outside the EU. Various EU-funded [research projects](#) have studied bee health, honeybee colony losses, beehive management, etc. A recent €9 million [project](#) financed by the EU research and innovation programme Horizon 2020 is investigating hazard identification for bees, focusing on exposure to chemicals, the presence of pathogens, and bee nutrition. The European Food Safety Authority is, meanwhile, [setting up](#) an EU Bee Partnership (expected to be up and running in 2018), a platform for sharing data on bee health.

European Parliament

In its role as co-legislator, Parliament has adopted a number of measures promoting EU beekeeping. The 2013 reform of the CAP addressed concerns expressed in a number of Parliament resolutions on bee health and the situation of beekeeping ([20 November 2008](#), [25 November 2010](#), [15 November 2011](#)), while an own-initiative report ([2017/2115\(INI\)](#)) tabled by the rapporteur Norbert Erdős (EPP, Hungary) on prospects and challenges for EU beekeeping is currently under deliberation. Alongside its legislative contribution, Parliament recently hosted a [hearing](#) on the apiculture sector, while the sixth annual edition of [Beeweek](#) took place earlier this year. Stakeholders used these opportunities to share their views on the challenges facing beekeeping and the need to support its vital role for the environment, agriculture and rural areas, and have put forward a [position paper](#) on the future of EU agricultural policy, calling for concrete action to promote bee-friendly farming.