



"Honey, the bees are shrinking!"

Albert Einstein once apparently warned, "if bees disappear, mankind will follow shortly after". But farming and environmental changes are threatening our hard-working winged companions who have been making honey and pollinating our fields for millennia. On Wednesday night MEPs will discuss measures to protect bees and beekeepers.

A report in National Geographic a few years ago quoted scientists as saying that bee numbers had dropped by up to 50%.

This is alarming, as three quarters of food production is dependent on bees and 4 out of 5 vegetables grown in Europe depend on pollination. Bees play a vital role in guaranteeing biodiversity in the floral kingdom. If there are no more bees, the entire food chain will break into separate links.

Chair of the Agriculture Committee, British Conservative Neil Parish stressed the urgency ahead of Wednesday's debate: "If we continue to neglect the global bee population, then this will have a dramatic effect on our already strained world food supplies."

Why are bees disappearing?

The significant reduction in pollen and nectar – partly due to the use of modified and treated seed – is one of the main causes of the decline in bee numbers. In addition, extensive farming of a single crop in large areas makes it difficult for the bees to find enough nectar, a staple of their diet.

The reduction in these food sources weakens their immune systems, which makes them vulnerable to parasites, viruses and other diseases. Other culprits include pesticides, lack of genetic diversity, climate and environmental change and even electronic magnetic fields from power pylons or mobile telephones.

According to the original parliamentary question in October, some beekeepers are losing up to 50 or even 80 hives each winter.

What can be done?

"We need to invest more into bee research to establish the exact causes of the shrinking bee population so that we can urgently put measures in place to combat the decline. A failure to act now could have catastrophic consequences," said Mr Parish.

To counteract malnutrition in bees, MEPs propose the setting up of "ecological recovery zones" especially in major arable crop regions.

The zones, where nectar-rich plants would grow might be created in those parts of fields which are difficult to cultivate, says a proposal from the Agriculture Committee.

MEPs busy debating the issue

Wednesday's debate is based on an oral question and will be followed up by a parliamentary resolution on beekeeping. This will then be sent to all 27 EU governments urging action. It will also be sent to the European Commission, which administers Europe's Common Agriculture Policy. Watch the debate live on-line from Strasbourg after 2100 CET.

Finally, the last word should go to Winnie the Pooh: "The only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey. And the only reason for making honey is so as I can eat it."