

Importing Honey Bees into Great Britain

A major new risk to the health of the bee population

Purpose of this briefing note

This note, which is supported by those listed at the foot of the document, is to draw to the attention of the UK government and the devolved administrations, an imminent and serious risk that an exotic pest, Small Hive Beetle (SHB), could be introduced into the British Isles.

Introduction

From 1st January 2021, the EU has been regarded as a '3rd Country' and this has meant that imports of packages of honey bees have not been allowed. Prior to 31st December 2020, packages of bees were allowed from EU member states into Great Britain. The bees, accompanied by a bee health certificate, were then available to be inspected on arrival by experienced bee inspectors from the National Bee Unit before being allowed into general circulation.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has remained in the EU single market and packages of bees therefore continue to be allowed to enter Northern Ireland. In turn, as Northern Ireland is part of the UK, bees can then be transferred to Great Britain without restriction.

Small Hive Beetle (SHB)

Historically, most packages of bees have come from Southern Italy.² These were largely imported and subsequently distributed around the UK by a small number of companies which are based in England and Scotland. The SHB has been endemic in Southern Italy since 2014, and although there are restrictions on the export of bees from the infested regions, those regions where the package bees are sourced are relatively close to these infested areas. All imports are recognised by the UK government as presenting a risk to the health of bees within Great Britain which is why there was a rigorous inspection routine until December 2020.

Loophole to import bees into Great Britain via Northern Ireland

As historically, bee imports into Northern Ireland were minimal, there is not a strong inspection service available. If honey bees are imported to Great Britain via Northern Ireland, the NI inspection service would therefore be challenged to inspect the high numbers of packages and the risk is that uninspected colonies will then be shipped via various routes into Great Britain.

Risks to bee health

Were SHB to be imported into Great Britain, the risks to the bee population would be very great. As Defra states ¹: *The beetle can multiply to huge numbers within infested colonies, where it eats brood, honey and pollen, destroys combs and causes fermentation and spoiling of the honey. If beetle infestations are uncontrolled, they ultimately destroy the colony. Economic impact on the beekeeping industry in the USA has been severe. Within two years of its discovery at least 20,000 colonies were destroyed by the beetle, costing many millions of dollars.*

What can be done

There is clear evidence that the proposed transfer of bees from Northern Ireland to Great Britain is not part of a legitimate trade, but rather is a way to get around the law that prevents bees being imported into Great Britain. As such it is a breach of the law. Ultimately this will need to be tested in court, but in the meantime, bees that are going to be sourced in the EU and supplied to Great Britain via Northern Ireland are being openly offered for sale on the internet. We call on the UK government to uphold its anti-avoidance legislation to prevent this trade commencing in the next two months when the bees become available.

If we allow the bees to be imported, then the risks are, that a single package of bees that could not be inspected in Northern Ireland, and which contains SHB, is introduced into Great Britain. Again, a grave threat, as stated in the DEFRA leaflet outlining the serious risks to bee health from this pest ¹.

Could we eradicate the Small Hive Beetle from the UK? - Probably not. Unless the Small Hive Beetle is detected very soon after its arrival, it will rapidly spread into the surrounding honey bee population, making eradication very difficult. A major limiting factor to eradication would be the unknown distribution of managed bee hives and the potential for populations of the beetle to survive in wild hosts (e.g. feral bees and bumble bees).

Notes

1. Imports of Queen Bees

Queen bees accompanied by a small retinue of worker bees can still be imported into Great Britain from certain countries. The cages that the queens and the workers arrive in, together with the workers themselves, are then sent to the National Bee Unit for inspection and confirmation that no disease or pest has been imported. Whilst people have differing views on this practice, from a bee health perspective the risks are thus minimised.

2. Packaged Bees

A 'package' of bees comprises perhaps 1.5kgs of worker bees in a small box with a piece of cloth impregnated with queen substance and a feeder. The bees are not on any comb. Inspection of these packages is much more difficult and requires some time and a degree of experience to be confident that no exotic pest has accompanied the honey bees. The risk is therefore much higher than with queens.

References

¹ [DEFRA – The small hive beetle a serious threat to European apiculture](#)

² [National Bee Unit - Statistics on bee imports by year](#)

Signed and supported by the following organisations

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