Honey Bee Colony Assessment Workshop
Colony Strength Evaluation

Shannon Mueller, Ph.D.
Agronomy Farm Advisor
UC Cooperative Extension
Fresno County
Learning Objectives

Following this presentation, you will be able to:

• Understand how the pollination contract relates to the colony strength inspection.
• Understand how to evaluate the elements that contribute to colony strength.
  • Worker Population
  • Brood
  • Queen
• Understand both methods of colony strength evaluation.
  • Frame Inspection
  • Cluster Count
Pollination success is dependent upon a number of factors, but in terms of the pollinator, it is a function of both the number of colonies and the average strength of the individual colonies.

- Strength of a colony is evaluated by estimating the adult honey bee population and, in some cases, the amount of brood in a hive.
- Colony strength can vary with time of the year and management by the beekeeper.
Colony Strength Evaluation

When colony strength is important, the grower and the beekeeper agree on the strength of the colonies to be delivered.

A signed contract spells out each person’s expectations, which may help avoid misunderstandings and possible legal action later.

Independent confirmation that bees are present in the number and strength promised is frequently desired.
Colony Strength Evaluation

Conducted at the request of the grower or the beekeeper.

The person requesting the certification typically pays for the inspection.

Apiary inspectors

- independent contractors
- work for bee brokers
- employed by County Ag Commissioners

Using consistent procedures and definitions for inspection criteria helps insure consistency.
Colony Strength Evaluation

Make every attempt to notify the beekeeper of the inspection and he or she can observe the process or assist in handling the hives if the inspector desires.

The beekeeper is in no way involved in the selection or evaluation of the hives, but the process will move more quickly if there is an additional person to help.
Any or all of the following factors might be considered in colony strength evaluation:

- Presence and quality of the queen
- Size of the worker population (frames of bees)
- Amount of brood (i.e. alfalfa seed pollination)
Growers and beekeepers should agree on the standards for colony strength and that forms the basis for the contract.

Agree on **average** and **minimum** strength requirements

- 8-frame average and a 4-frame minimum

Define what will be considered a **frame of bees**

Specify **outside temperature at the field site** for inspection

Inspector is a neutral third party and gives an impartial evaluation of what is observed.
Visual inspection of the colony is required. All hives must be accessible. Hives can’t be double stacked, banded, or presented in such a fashion as to prevent inspection.

Growers should provide a location for beekeepers to place the bees to they remain accessible during the pollination period.
Colony Strength Evaluation

• Generally the inspection includes only a **representative sample** of the hives in the apiary
• Random or Systematic selection
• Report percentage of hives inspected
  • Ag Commissioners – 15%
Supplies to Bring to Inspection

Required
- Bee Suit, Pant Clips, Veil, and Gloves
- Hive Tools
- Smoker, Fuel, & Matches
- Clipboard with data sheet listing hives to be inspected
- Thermometer

Recommended
- Toothpicks/Matchsticks
- Sample Jars/Bags
- Marker to label samples
- Lumber Marking Crayon (red)
- Camera
Presence and quality of the queen

“Actively laying queen”

• Presence of eggs will indicate queen activity within last 3 days.
• Examine the brood. Look for a solid, good-sized brood pattern.
• Be careful not to injure the queen during the inspection!
Definition of **Frame of Bees** should be specified in the contract.

- *Two sides of standard Hoffman frame of comb or equivalent comb area at least 75% covered by bees at a density of 4 bees/in² or more.*
  
  - Area of frames with less than 75% coverage should be combined and counted toward the standard of an active frame of bees.
  
  - Non-standard frames should be converted to the equivalent of a standard frame.
Size of the Worker Population

Frames of Bees

>75%  

50%
Evaluating Brood Area

- Open or uncapped larvae require constant feeding which stimulates pollen collection.
  - For that reason, some pollination contracts may specify a requirement for brood area.

- Total area containing healthy brood *in any stage of development*, including eggs or larvae in open cells and capped brood.
Evaluating Brood Area

Evaluate each side of the frame

*Healthy brood has a single egg in the bottom of the cell, glistening white larvae, smooth cappings.*

Record the in² or % coverage of the frame

Total the area for all frames in the hive.
Evaluating Brood Area

Frame with comb:
- 8 inches x 16.75 inches = 134 \text{ in}^2 \text{ (on each side)}
Reference templates are highly recommended

- It is very difficult to estimate square inches without a template.
Colony Strength Evaluation Methods

Frame Inspection
• Judging individual frames

Cluster Count Method
• Viewing the cluster from above and below without removing frames from the hive
• Based on frames of bees only, not brood.
Frame Inspection

Takes more time
Requires greater experience in handling the hive
Can cause substantial colony disturbance, especially during cold, early spring days
May injure or kill the queen as a result of the extra handling and prolonged exposure
Frame Inspection Method – Step 1

Single story hive
- Smoke the entrance and under the lid
- Remove lid

Two-story hive
- Smoke the entrance
- Separate the two stories using your hive tool
During spring inspections, in a two-story hive, the top box is typically examined first followed by evaluation of the bottom box.

– The bottom box may be ½ to totally empty if the bees have worked their way up into food stores above the brood.
Mid-season, the brood chamber is likely to fill two boxes and some beekeepers prefer to work from the bottom up if there are a lot of bees.

Set the top box aside, evaluate the bottom box, then return the top box to position and evaluate it.
Frame Inspection – Step 2

Top story set aside

Carefully remove an outside frame.
Frame Inspection

Assess both sides of each frame while holding it over the open hive.
Frames of Bees – definition

• Add partial frames to make a whole.

Whole comb, including the frame, densely covered by a layer of bees = 1000 bees per side
Remove Frame 1, set it outside of the hive.
Remove Frame 2, replace in hive in position of frame 1
Remove Frame 3, replace in hive in position of Frame 2
Remove Frame 4, replace in hive in position of Frame 3
Remove Frame 5, replace in hive in position of Frame 4, etc.
Push everything back into its original position and replace the first frame.
Frame Inspection

Single story hive

- Replace lid
- Complete evaluation notes

Two story hive

- Replace top story and inspect it
- Replace the lid
- Make sure everything is squared
Summarize Results

Four estimates per frame
  Adult worker bees (both sides of frame)
  Brood (both sides of frame)

9-18 estimates per hive (single vs. two-story)

Average Colony Strength
  Total individual hive results / # colonies in the sample
Cluster Count Method

Rapid
Easier, moderate experience required once inspector develops a feel for the technique
Not excessively disruptive to the colony
May crush the queen if she is on the top or bottom bars when hives are repositioned
Cluster Count Method

Identify the hive to be inspected. *Random* or *Systematic* selection
Open the hive in the middle and tilt the upper box onto the edge or the cleat of the lower box.
Cluster Count Method

Frames in top box + Frames in bottom box = Colony Strength
Don’t just look at bees on the top and bottom bars. Look down, between the frames.
Cluster Count Method

View from top bars

View from bottom bars
Cluster Count Method

Extremely strong colonies – 15 to 18 frame hives.

When a colony is strong, sometimes it is easier to count the *missing* frames and subtract from the total.
Frames per box

Number of frames may vary *within* & *between* hives

7-10 frames per box

- 10 frames in top and bottom
- 9 frames in top and 10 in bottom
- 7 frames + feeder in top
  - 9 frames in bottom
Colony Strength Evaluation

All deadout colonies included in the random sample are recorded as part of the official inspection.

- If the hive is in the orchard, it is part of the population. If the beekeeper doesn’t want it to be counted, it should be taken OUT of the apiary.

Colonies found with symptoms of AFB must be marked and the beekeeper or regulatory agency will make sure they are abated as required by law.
After inspecting each hive, it is put back the way it was found and the inspector moves on to the next hive to be inspected.

When finished, the report is completed and a copy is provided to the grower and to the beekeeper.
Understanding the evaluation process helps make contract expectations clear.

Colony strength evaluations help almond producers make sure they are getting what they pay for in terms of numbers of colonies at a strength specified in the pollination contract.

The inspections also help ensure that beekeepers are appropriately compensated for their additional expense in providing quality hives for spring pollination.
Online Training

Link to the Online Training

http://ucanr.edu/colonystrength