

The Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme

Have you heard of the WIIS scheme? It is the scheme to which people report unexplained wildlife deaths – fish found dead in rivers, badgers poisoned or swans shot. Beekeepers who find a lot of dead bees, or a dead hive should report such incidents if they think they are unnatural, but they don't. Why?

1. Very few beekeepers know how to distinguish between chemical poisoning and natural death even though it is straightforward to spot the signs. The basic beekeeping course is supposed to make a brief mention of it, but will not train you how to spot poisoning. The BBKA leaflet "Bees and Pesticides" went out of print a decade ago and the new replacement leaflet has been worked on for over two years, but has still not been published (the latest publication date is the end of 2011). The standard beekeeping textbooks do not describe how to detect chemical poisoning.
2. Beekeepers just don't know about the scheme. In the April 2011 issue of BeeCraft the NBU¹ had a two page article about the WIIS scheme in order to publicise it. The flowchart describing the scheme had 15 boxes and 21 arrows which is illustrative of the over-complexity which puts many people off using it once they have found out about it.
3. The BBKA² Spray Liaison network is dysfunctional. This statement has been repeated throughout the years by several experienced beekeepers and authors of bee books. The BBKA offer no training or advice for the volunteers who run the scheme. The only guide about the scheme was written by an Essex beekeeper in 1988 and it is now out of print (this author is writing a new version which will be published later this year³).
4. Reporting an incident takes time, effort and a little money. The benefits to the beekeeper of reporting an incident are zero. There is no compensation for chemically poisoned bees – they are not covered by BDI⁴/BBKA insurance. The source of poisoning is rarely established with sufficient certainty to bring a prosecution and when the source is found the usual consequence is that the sprayer gets a warning.

When one adds to this the knowledge that sprays that the HSE⁵ categorise as "Harmful to Bees" are in widespread use in the UK, and that sprayers and farmers almost always ignore their legal obligation to warn local beekeepers of their spraying plans, the lack of records of bee poisoning on the WIIS should not provide comfort that the bees are safe, but instead should raise warning bells that the scheme is not being used. Certainly anyone basing their argument that bees are safe from pesticides on the low level of incidents reported to the WIIS does not understand how the scheme works, or perhaps more accurately, how it doesn't work.

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Cornwall 2011

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¹ The National Bee Unit at York

² The British Bee Keepers Association

³ "The Spray Liaison Handbook" by Dr BA Doerer will be available from Northern Bee Books in the Autumn.

⁴ Bee Disease Insurance

⁵ The Health and Safety Executive