Counterfeit Honey Costs Consumers

(Newswise) — Consumers buying honey might not be getting what they pay for according to a Texas A&M University professor and one of the world's leading honey experts.

Vaughn Bryant, an anthropology professor at Texas A&M and a melissopalynologist — someone who studies the pollen in honey — tested honey samples from grocery and big box stores, farmers markets, and natural food and drug stores around the country and found more than 75 percent of the honey being sold has all of the pollen filtered out, according to Food Safety News, which sponsored the study.

"Large importing companies take all the pollen out of honey because they claim it makes the honey clearer and prevents crystallization, therefore making it easier to sell," Bryant explains. "However, by removing the pollen, you also remove clues needed to verify where the honey was produced and what nectar sources are dominant. This means that with no traces of pollen, honey sellers can take cheap honey and claim it's a type that sells for a premium price."

Certain types of premium honey can sell for upwards of $50 a jar, and this high price has opened the door for honey fraud [1].

The FDA doesn't require pollen in honey sold in the U.S., Bryant says, so importers are free to remove it. "This makes it possible for some companies to buy cheap honey with no pollen and there are no clues to know where it comes from," he asserts.

Bryant, who has a modern pollen reference collection of 20,000 types from all over the world (worth, he estimates, between $4-5 million), uses it and his microscope to identify hundreds of pollen types found in honey samples from around the world.

By identifying the type of pollen in a honey sample, he can tell where the honey came from and what nectar sources were used.

"There are about 350,000 different species of plants and each species produces a unique pollen type," the professor explains. "Plants are best suited to specific ecological conditions. You don't find mesquite trees growing in Canada and you don't find spruce or fir trees growing in Texas. If I find mesquite pollen in a honey sample, I know it didn't come from Canada, or if I find spruce or fir pollen in a honey sample, I know it's not from Texas."

Knowing where honey comes from is important not only for accurate pricing, says Bryant, but also because different countries have different standards about pesticides and using antibiotics in hives to keep the bees disease-free. To help regulate honey safety, "We have strict import laws that apply to honey coming from certain countries," he says.

The U.S. also has high tariffs or taxes on the honey from some countries, such as China.

“China is the world’s leading producer of honey,” Bryant points out. “They need to export a lot of it and in the past they were accused of ‘dumping’ their excess honey on the market at prices below the world price. This was hurting the U.S. beekeeping industry, so the U.S. put a high tariff on Chinese honey. After that, Chinese honey was too expensive to import, so one solution was to sell it to other countries. Some of those other countries then resold the Chinese honey to the U.S. claiming the honey was produced in the second country. This is called ‘transshipping’ and it is illegal and has been a big problem.”

Bryant has come out in support of Senate bill S-662, a customs reauthorization bill. One of the bill’s provisions will require that appropriate U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency resources exist to address concerns that honey, as well as contraband archaeological or ethnological material, is not being imported into the U.S. in violation of U.S. customs laws. That provision is designed to help stop honey transshipments by requiring CBP to compile a database of the individual characteristics of imported honey to verify country of origin and engage foreign governments for assistance in creating the database. The CBP would also be required to consult with the honey industry to develop industry standards for honey identification and report to Congress on testing capabilities, including recommendations for improvements. Also the FDA would be required to establish a national standard for honey identification.

“If this bill is passed, it would require sellers to be accurate in terms of what they put on honey labels,” notes Bryant. “There is no law now that requires that type of ‘truth in labeling’ for honey. This new Senate bill would ensure that consumers get what they’re paying for and it will help the honest beekeepers sell their honey.”

Preventing the importation of cheap, bogus honey is vital to ensuring the survival of U.S. beekeepers, says the professor. “Without them and without the bees they raise, many of our food crops would not get pollinated and produce the fruits and nuts we consume.

“If beekeeping becomes a money-losing business in the U.S., there will soon be fewer bees and hives,” Bryant contends. “That, in turn, will greatly increase the cost of food. The result might be oranges or apples, both pollinated by bees, costing $5 each because so few are produced without adequate pollination.”

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