

LA Takes Step Toward Urban Beekeeping

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — For three years, Rob McFarland has kept 25,000 illegal bees on the roof of his West Los Angeles home — but his hive might not have to fly under the radar much longer.

The City Council voted unanimously Wednesday to begin the process of granting [bees](#) [1] like McFarland's legal status and also supported a motion to relocate wild hives when possible instead of destroying them.

The votes bolstered beekeepers who have tended bees in the shadows, but it also raised concerns that legalizing urban hives would sanction wild hives with Africanized "killer bee" genes.

Critics of the controversial practice fear an ordinance that doesn't distinguish between keeping tamer European honeybees and Africanized colonies would allow self-styled "ethical bee removal specialists" to expand their efforts unimpeded amid a growing demand for do-it-yourself hives.

A volunteer group that removed wild hives and relocated them recently disbanded after a customer's neighbor got stung and threatened to sue.

Currently, most hives discovered in the city's public right of ways or reported by concerned citizens are wiped out because of worries about their aggressive genetics.

"To just haul them (feral bees) out of the fences and stick them in the backyard, that's not a good idea," said Eric Mussen, a bee expert at the University of California, Davis.

Killer bees arrived in Los Angeles County in the mid-1990s and almost completely pushed out the existing wild bee population 15 years ago. They can attack when an intruder gets closer than 100 feet, can chase a person up to a half-mile and will remain aggressive up to an hour after an attack, according to the county.

Those who work with these wild hives insist that the concerns are overblown.

Bees in Los Angeles do have some African genes, they say, but the danger has been diluted from years of interbreeding with local, non-Africanized bees. The resulting hybrid hives can be managed easily with proper training, common sense about hive placement and good communication with neighbors.

There are already around 10 hives per square mile in Los Angeles, so moving them to backyards where beekeepers can monitor them makes sense, said Ruth Askren, who maintains hives for 22 clients and has relocated wild hives to backyards all

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over the city.

Beekeepers like Askren estimate that 10 percent or fewer of the feral hives they relocate are so aggressive they must be destroyed.

"If we really had serious Africanized bees in LA, people would be chased down the street every day," she said.

Africanized bees are also hardier than their European counterparts, which are used for commercial pollination, and could help counter colony collapse, said McFarland, the rooftop beekeeper. He and others who work with them say that unlike European bees, their hives don't need any chemical treatments to keep them healthy.

"We need them. We need to preserve what's clearly a superior bee. They're the ones that are surviving," he said. "My opinion is that they're a blessing in disguise."

Feral bees have also sweetened the pot for an emerging niche business: Some beekeepers-turned-entrepreneurs have recently started companies to remove unwanted wild hives, relocating them to backyard bee boxes and then harvesting rich honey that can sell for \$110 a gallon to wealthy foodies obsessed with local ingredients.

Some customers even want honey made by bees in their specific neighborhood because they believe that eating honey made from local pollens will combat allergies.

Tyson Kaiser's business, Sweet Bee Removal, charges \$125 an hour for a hive extraction and once made \$5,000 over three days removing a massive feral hive from a tile rooftop in one of LA's ritzier addresses.

On a recent sunny day, Kaiser checked on a feral hive he put on a resident's roof last fall. Dressed in a full-body white bee suit and a zippered hood with a mesh face mask, Kaiser carefully opened the hive as bees buzzed around him and traffic whizzed by two stories below.

When he was done, about a dozen agitated bees followed him from the roof, down a ladder and into the residents' house before they gave up the chase.

"There are people who think we're crazy for what we're doing," said Kaiser, who has been keeping bees for three years. "But they're afraid that new beekeepers dealing with feral hives are going to tarnish the image of the established beekeepers."

Those more traditional beekeepers keep European honeybees, which rarely become aggressive.

Groups like the Beekeepers Association of Southern California support urban beekeeping, they say, but only with European hives.

Keeping Africanized hives "gives beekeepers in general a bad name," said Richard

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Heryford, vice president of the association and beekeeper. "If people are caught with those bees in their backyard, they should be subject to penalties."

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