

August 25, 2014

Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As officers of the American Honey Producers Association (AHPA) and the American Beekeeping Federation (ABF), we are writing on behalf of America's beekeepers, ranging from hobbyists on up to the very largest commercial producers and pollinators. While we typically write in the spirit of constructive and grateful engagement, we feel compelled today to write this letter out of a sense of concern about the state of honey bee and pollinator research at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

As beekeepers, our challenges have been well highlighted throughout the media, including in a 2013 Time Magazine cover story as well as in thousands of other magazines, newspapers, government reports, and independent research studies. Each has documented the scourge of what has come to be known as "Colony Collapse Disorder" (CCD), a perhaps too limiting but nonetheless enticing title for the newest and most serious of challenges facing our industry. Unfortunately, despite all of the attention, nearly ten years has passed and we seem only incrementally closer to a solution. Still lacking a definitive understanding of the causes, the scientific, agricultural and consumer communities have grown increasingly concerned that more than \$20 billion of pollinator-dependent U.S. agricultural output and a full one-third of our nation's food supply is at serious risk. In fact, as USDA knows well, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) estimates around 1/3rd of America's bee colonies are not surviving the winter season, and even greater losses are realized year over year by most commercial beekeepers. While science has yet to determine a definitive cause, the challenges to honey bee health are clearly multi-faceted, requiring resource intensive and high priority study.

This is not to lay the blame at the feet of USDA. Quite the contrary. We applaud USDA for the research it has conducted on honey bees across the country – research conducted by its own scientists at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) as well as research conducted by the best of America's university scientists through competitive USDA grants. Without USDA's efforts, we would be nowhere. It is not lost on us that despite chronic congressional underfunding of USDA research, the Department has chosen each year to expand – not reduce – the honey bee research agenda. Doing more with less has been the hallmark of the USDA scientists over the last decade, and this could not be more true than with Dr. Jeffrey Pettis, one of the world's most renowned honey bee researchers.

It is because of Dr. Pettis's deep commitment to honey bee science that we must express concern about USDA's decision to relieve him of his duties as Laboratory Leader at the Beltsville Area Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland. As we trust you are well aware, Dr. Pettis has led the charge against CCD and honey bee health decline for many years. He has been called on

continuously to provide testimony, whether before the world's scientific community or its legislators. He has spent countless hours and sacrificed professional and personal time to speak to our industry and to related industry stakeholders about the state of science and promising new discoveries. He has worked in the field to monitor our bees, track their performance over time, and ensure that our best management practices are, in fact, best practices. Put succinctly, Dr. Pettis has advanced research on honey bees like few others in the world can claim. And he has done so at the helm of the Beltsville laboratory at a time when the challenges associated with honey bee research cannot be understated and while our country, and in turn USDA, have simultaneously faced the tightest of resource constraints.

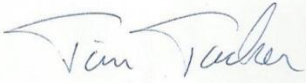
While Dr. Pettis himself seems to have accepted graciously the Department's decision to relieve him of his leadership duties, we cannot help but to view the decision cynically. Having met with ARS Administrator Jacobs-Young immediately following the decision regarding Dr. Pettis, we were told that he had been falling behind on his administrative duties and therefore was being re-assigned to a research only role. As business owners and operators, we struggle to understand the logic behind this decision. Each of us has a great deal of leadership experience, and without exception when we fall behind in administrative duties, we simply add administrative support. What we do not do is remove our best business leaders from their posts because they are falling behind in their least essential duties. Similarly, Dr. Pettis is a scientist first and an administrative professional second. Wouldn't it have made more sense to add administrative support rather than to relieve him of the position where he could continue to best impact the direction and outcome of the honey bee research agenda at ARS? We cannot help but to believe there was a better solution.

Despite a lack of resources and no conclusive answer to the most serious of challenges facing our industry, having Dr. Pettis in a leadership position gave us a great deal of confidence in the direction of honey bee research. We did not always fully agree with his weighting of the causes of CCD or emphasis in research, but we always respected his integrity and the integrity of the science undertaken at the Beltsville laboratory. With Dr. Pettis removed from his research leader position and with other ARS honey bee scientists finding themselves reprimanded for reasons unclear to our organizations, we are quickly losing hope that a solution is around the corner.

Dr. Pettis's research has been instrumental in keeping American commercial beekeeping viable in these most challenging of times. In an era when our industry's challenges are increasingly fodder for political theater and public relations battles between groups not directly impacted by the decline in bee health, we urge you to consider that changing honey bee research leadership at ARS – and great leadership at that – only serves to heighten rhetoric and slow scientific advancement. We have always promoted and we continue to promote science as our first, second, and third lines of defense against whatever the ultimate cause of honey bee health decline is. And we have always believed wholeheartedly that USDA is our best chance at getting this science right.

With the greatest amount of respect for the United States Department of Agriculture and with sincere gratitude for the role it has played in keeping our industry afloat to date, we ask you to reconsider your decision to relieve Dr. Pettis of his leadership role and to reinstate him as the permanent lab leader in Beltsville this fall.

Regards,



Tim Tucker
President
American Beekeeping Federation



Randy Verhoek
President
American Honey Producers Association



Gene Brandi
Vice-President
American Beekeeping Federation



Darren Cox
Vice-President
American Honey Producers Association

Cc: Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young, ARS Administrator, USDA

Cc: Mr. Douglas J. McKalip, Senior Policy Advisor for Rural Affairs, Domestic Policy Council, Executive Office of the President

Cc: Michael Stebbins, Ph.D., Assistant Director, Biotechnology, Science Division, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Executive Office of the President