

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Borg delivers opening speech at High Level Conference on Bee Health

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends the Conference for Better Bee Health

Brussels, Belgium, 07 April 2014

CONFERENCE FOR “BETTER BEE HEALTH”

CHARLEMAGNE BUILDING, DE GASPERI ROOM

MONDAY, 7 APRIL 2014, 10.00HRS

OPENING SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to open this first ever European Commission conference on bee health.

I warmly welcome all participants and thank you all for having taken the time and trouble to be here today. I know that many of you have travelled considerable distances to attend this important event.

Let me say at the outset that I take a deep and personal interest in bee health. Unlike other animals kept for farming purposes bees live and work in the wild world and in the cultivated world. Not only do they produce a wide range of greatly appreciated products but are also responsible for the pollination of crops to a very great extent. The realisation that they may be under threat was useful also in raising the alarm regarding other, wild pollinators whose populations may not be as closely observed.

I am not alone in this. The European Commission as a whole has taken the reports in recent years about honeybee mortalities very seriously indeed. This concern is reflected in the actions we have taken.

The most recent of these actions was the compilation of the first official EU data set on honeybee colony mortalities.

This ground-breaking EU survey into honeybee health, undertaken with the voluntary co-operation of veterinary services in 17 Member States provides us with a solid basis to compare the situation among Member States.

Detailed results of the study will be given by a representative from the EU Reference Laboratory for bee health later this morning.

I would, however, just like to make a few comments.

First of all that we can take some encouragement from the limited winter bee mortality in several major beekeeping countries, which accounts for a large proportion of the total EU bee population.

However, some Member States with relatively small bee populations show high winter bee mortality. Clearly these regional differences require further investigation.

The new study is the latest output of a comprehensive European framework which the Commission has assembled over recent years in the field of bee health. It will be repeated next year.

There are many EU tools available to improve bee health. These range from direct financing of apiculture measures, to support for rural development, for agro-environmental measures, for nature projects, and also legislation on veterinary issues and pesticides.

On this last point, I took decisive action last year to ban the use of several neonicotinoids in order to protect the health of bees. The risk as assessed by European Food Safety Authority at the request of the Commission demanded swift and meaningful management. You will hear more about this issue and related work later today.

The EU framework on bee health also includes key scientific hubs such as our European Reference Laboratory, the European Food Safety Authority and EU networks of scientists contributing to EU-funded research projects. Of course, Member States and stakeholders form a very important part of the framework.

Our comprehensive approach is essential in ensuring better bee health for the future, to avoid duplication of effort and to exploit to the full the knowledge each participant has already gained and is in a position to develop further.

Secondly, I should also mention the more worrying situation regarding wild bees including bumble bees – highlighted by other studies – which also warrants close attention. Wild bees are, of course, key pollinators in many environments and may be particularly vulnerable.

This suggests that successful efforts to improve bee health require a wide range of expertise from a wide range of actors.

Today, also thanks to this Conference, I can say that we have succeeded in bringing together experts, key people and organisations who not only care about bee health and but are also committed to doing something about it.

I consider it to be a primary objective for the Commission to promote, support and facilitate the maximum synergies possible.

There is a wealth of ongoing research initiatives from many sources looking at factors which determine bee health and how such factors may interact. All such efforts are welcome.

New bee health science has the potential to be translated into new policies, rules, assistance or simply into better practices. The Commission is certainly open to taking on board new elements where appropriate.

At this Conference, we will showcase some ideas which could act as catalysts or models for possible wider use. The Commission's actions have certainly been a major element in ensuring better bee health. But of course, there is a limit to what the Commission can do.

Real, decisive changes may also come from local initiatives. New developments can be expected through collaboration among beekeepers, Member State officials, vets, manufacturers of veterinary medicines and other actors in the field, working together with farmers, plant protection experts and scientists.

The one thing we may all agree upon regarding the challenge we face is that it is complex, multifaceted and not susceptible to a quick fix, that there is no silver bullet solution. If we agree on that, then we must agree that all of us have a part to play.

You are all part of the solution. I wish a very good day and a most fruitful participation in this Conference.