Mid-Atlantic Apicultural Research & Extension Consortium

MAAREC

Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and the USDA cooperating

MOVING BEES

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There are many reasons for moving bees and any number of ways it can be done. However, everyone who has ever moved bee hives agrees on one point: a successful bee move is an uneventful one! Moving bees is a relatively easy job if you know the right way to do it. Here are some suggestions how bee hives can be moved with few problems and less effort.

WHEN TO MOVE BEES

The best time to move a colony of bees is when the temperature is above 50°F. Below that temperature, the bees cluster and any bumping and jarring can cause part of the cluster to break away. Bees shaken away may not be able to regain the cluster and many or all of them could perish.

Bees should be moved in the evening or early morning before flight has begun. Cool, rainy days with temperatures cool enough to keep bees inside the hive may also be suitable for short moves. Moving bees in complete darkness or under rainy conditions is difficult because it is easy to lose one's balance or drop the hive. Even under the best of conditions, bee hives are heavy and difficult to move. Early morning moves must go as planned because you will have less time for "adjustments" if they become necessary.

WHAT TO WEAR

Beekeepers should consider wearing protective clothing when moving bees. The best outfit to wear is a set of coveralls with a zip-on veil and elasticized cuffs. Bees crawl at night (the best time to move) and tend to get inside clothing and beneath many types of veils. Stings on the neck, face, and head seem worse in the dark or in the rain. Gloves and boots with two pair of heavy socks should be worn. If a new beekeeper or non-beekeeper friend is helping out with a move, be sure that person is well protected and be prepared to avoid any accident.

HOW TO MOVE BEES

When moving a colony, make sure the bottom board is cleated, banded, or preferably, stapled onto the first brood chamber, hives are locked together and the cover is secured to the boxes. Special 2" staples are sold by bee supply companies. If the colony hasn't been examined in the last two or more weeks, there will be a propolis seal that keeps the boxes "glued" to one another. If the colony is handled smoothly, the boxes usually won't shift. Any jarring can cause shifting however, so do not rely on the propolis seal. As a tip, don't hammer hive staples all the way in — leave enough space to slip your hive tool under the staple to remove them. Staples should be attached one to several days before the move. Bees do not take kindly to hammering at night (or day for that matter!).

A few puffs of smoke at the hive entrance several minutes before and again 10 seconds before the hive is picked up will help keep the bees inside. Push a folded piece of heavy wire screening into the entrance. Close all other entrances with tape, grass or other secure material! Take care to treat the colonies as gently as possible. Never bump them or set them down roughly, no matter how much of a hurry you are in. Do not forget to remove the screening at the hive entrance as the last thing you do at the end of the move.

The use of smoke is the most important part of the moving job. Use it liberally. Keep the smoker well filled and tamped down, so the smoke stays cool. When you are ready to screen the hives, or to load unscreened ones into a vehicle, smoke all the entrances heavily. Wait two or three minutes for the smoke to take effect. As you put open hives into the vehicle, smoke them again after they are in place. Do not hesitate to smoke a hive any time you see bees coming out of it. The car or truck should have the lights off and the motor running while you are loading. The engine vibration helps quiet the bees.

Place the hives as close together as possible in the vehicle. This keeps them from moving around enroute to the new location. They should be tied down to hold them in place. When you tie lids, be careful that you do not split the hives open. Smoke the entire load before tying it. Face the hive entrances forward if you are moving more than three or four colonies.

When you reach your destination, leave the engine running, turn off the lights, and relight the smoker. Do not slam the doors. Smoke the hives liberally, untie them, and unload them from the vehicle. Bees in unscreened entrance hives may have clustered outside the entrances. If so, smoke them and wait long enough for the bees to go back into their hives. A fine spray of water will also help force them back inside their hives. In extremely hot weather or after a long, rough ride, the bees may be so heavily clustered that it would be best to wait until early morning to unload them.

MOVING BEES A SHORT DISTANCE

If you move bees more than 5-10 feet and less than 1 mile, the field bees will return to their original site rather than to their new hive location. Bees orient to their hive by physical landmarks, not by some special radar. This can create problems for the colony that loses its field force and also for the beekeeper. Family members and neighbors may not appreciate having a number of disoriented bees nearby. If you want to move a colony a short distance—for example from one side of the yard to the other—the move should be done a few feet at a time, with several days in between each leg of the journey. Alternately, move the colony at least 1 1/2 miles away for a minimum of 10 days, then move it back to the new desired location.

MOVING BEES A LONG DISTANCE

Many beekeepers move bees to pollinate various crops or to other locations to produce honey. A truck with a relatively low flat bed is best for this. The hives should be placed so they butt up against one another. Tying down a load of bees securely is absolutely essential. Many beekeepers prefer not to screen entrances for long moves. If very hot, stop every other hour and hose the colonies with water.

There should be no shifting, not to mention dropping of the load. A hive cover that flies off a colony could go through another vehicle's windshield and cause a terrible accident. All lids should be nailed down or secured in such a way there is no possibility anything can fly off. Some states require all bee loads to be screened or netted. Colonies should not be left sitting on a stopped truck during the day. The field bees will fly out and the bees can overheat quite readily. Many people prefer to load their bees at twilight and unload them at daybreak.

The beekeeper should always put fuel in his vehicle before starting on a move. Stopping for any reason can cause problems. Be sure the vehicle is road-worthy. Tires, fan belts, etc. should be checked in advance. Being stranded is extremely unpleasant, and tow trucks and mechanics are reluctant to assist vehicles loaded with bees. Plan your route in advance and be familiar with the location where you plan to unload the colonies. Landmarks will look different at night so prepare well in advance to insure uneventful moves.

MAAREC, the Mid-Atlantic Apiculture Research and Extension Consortium, is an official activity of five land grant universities and the U. S. Department of Agriculture. The following are cooperating members:

University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware

University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

Rutgers University
New Brunswick, New Jersey

The Pennsylvania State University
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West Virginia University
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Participants in MAAREC also include state beekeeper associations, and State Departments of Agriculture from Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

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