The Killer Bees Are Still Not Coming

Half the United States has lived with Africanized bees for decades while hardly noticing anything.

Part 1 of 2. By: Peter Awram, Canadian Beekeepers Federation Director

In October 1957 a local beekeeper at an agricultural research station near Rio Claro, Brazil, took the queen excluders off some hives that weren't his. Twenty-six queens left with small swarms. Warwick Kerr had brought the African stock in to breed a bee that would produce honey in the tropics, which is an ordinary thing for a bee scientist to be doing, and it was an ordinary mistake. What happened afterward was not ordinary. Those bees got a name.

"Killer bee" is one of the most successful pieces of branding in the history of agriculture. It produced a real panic, a run of films through the 1970s, and a set of confident predictions about a swarm front rolling up through the Americas and arriving, eventually, at everybody's door. Nearly seventy years on, it's worth asking how those predictions did:

BADLY

The bees reached North America in 1985 and south Texas by 1990, and then the front slowed and stopped. It sits at around 34 degrees north. (This limit was predicted by several people in the 1970s as the bees had failed to move much beyond northern Argentina.) Work out of UC San Diego tracking the California expansion found the rate had slowed considerably. Genome sequencing published in 2020 found the reason, and it isn't complicated. Bees carrying mostly African ancestry can't get through a cold winter.

That is the entire northern limit. Not a quarantine, not an inspection program, not a border. Temperature. Thirty-five years after they made it to Texas, they have yet to make it to Oregon. **An invasion of Canada was never going to happen.**

What happened when AHB entered the US

This is the part that should settle the argument on its own, and it doesn't require a single peer-reviewed scientific paper.

The southern parts of the United States, from southern California across the Southwest and the Gulf states to Florida, are designated Africanized. Not at risk of becoming Africanized. **Infested.**

Thousands of commercial beekeepers work in that zone, running an enormous number of colonies, and it isn't a crisis. It isn't even a story. Nobody puts on full containment suits to keep bees in Arizona. They work their hives in the same veils and jackets we do, plenty of them work with very little on when the weather and the flow are right, and when they get a hot hive they requeen it. The same as here.

The mixing nobody worries about

Every February the US beekeeping industry runs the largest deliberate bee-mixing exercise on earth. More than two million colonies, the bulk of the commercial hives in the United States, are trucked into California for almond bloom, parked shoulder to shoulder for three or four weeks, and then hauled home to Washington, Montana and the Dakotas. Every year, for decades.

It's worth being specific about what happens in those orchards, because it is exactly the mechanism CFIA's concern depends on. Drones don't stay home. They drift between colonies constantly and guard bees don't stop them. In a holding yard with pallets touching, drones move through the whole outfit within days, and then through the neighbouring outfit. Nobody's drones stay their own.

The almond bloom isn't just two million colonies parked next to each other. It's two million colonies pooling their drones into a shared mating population, where bees have come from many Africanized areas, mix, and then dispersing back across the continent. If Africanized drones were the contaminant the CFIA's risk assessment imagines, this is precisely the mechanism that would have carried them into every commercial operation in the United States decades ago.

These American colonies are worked right up along the 49th parallel, and drones drift. They don't report in at a border crossing, and nobody screens them. Whatever is flying in northern Montana is flying in southern Alberta. It has been wide open the entire time the package border has been shut, and it runs in the same direction as the one CFIA is worried about, with none of the controls.

The genetics have had every opportunity to make it out of the southern US in the last thirty-five years. There has been no outbreak of defensiveness anywhere that anybody has had to control. Not in the northern states, not on the Prairies, not anywhere.

And the lawsuits that never happened

Now think about where this is all taking place. The United States is one of the most litigious countries on earth, and it is not shy about agricultural liability.

If Africanized bees were putting people in hospital in any numbers, there would be a body of case law by now. There would be insurance products written specifically for the exposure, lawyer billboards promising to fight for your suffering, and a steady run of newspaper coverage. Beekeepers would struggle to get liability cover in the southern US.

None of that exists. There are occasional incidents, and they make the local news for a day, which is exactly the profile you would expect from something rare. What there isn't is the litigation footprint that grows around every genuine hazard in American life.

In that country, at that scale, over thirty-five years, it is about as close to a natural experiment in how dangerous these bees are as anyone is going to get.

The body count nobody actually counts

You will see a figure of about a thousand deaths, spread across two continents and seventy years, attributed to Africanized honey bees. Set aside for a moment whether that's a lot. Ask where the number comes from.

It comes from press reports and scattered case write-ups, added up over decades by people who were already writing about killer bees. There is no surveillance system anywhere that records the subspecies of the bee that stung someone. There is no box on a death certificate for it. No coroner sends the bee to a lab.

What actually gets recorded is much coarser. The best data in North America comes from the US National Vital Statistics System, and it reports a single combined category: deaths from hornet, wasp and bee stings. Between 2011 and 2021 that came to 788 deaths, an average of 72 a year in the US (in a population of more than 300 million). That figure doesn't separate a honey bee from a yellowjacket, never mind a European honey bee from an Africanized one. Most of those deaths are anaphylaxis in someone who was allergic, usually older males prone to heart attacks, and one sting from an ordinary bee, hornet or wasp will do that.

So, nobody knows the number of deaths specifically from Africanized bees, because nobody has ever measured it. What we have is an anecdotal total.

Even supposing it's accurate. A thousand deaths over seventy years across North and South America is roughly fourteen a year for two continents. Canada lost 1,964 people to motor vehicle collisions in 2023 alone. Lightning kills two or three Canadians in an average year. We could close the border to thunderstorms tomorrow, and it would be as effective as closing it to package bees has proved.

What CFIA said when it thought nobody was reading

This is the part that isn't in the movies.

In February 2003 Dr. Brian Jamieson, the CFIA manager who commissioned the first risk assessment, wrote to the risk assessor, Dr. Cheryl James. **The Health of Animals Act lets CFIA keep out a vector, a disease, or a toxic substance. Jamieson's reading was that "as AHB is none of those, CFIA has no authority to regulate it under that legislation**." He allowed that Africanized bees were a concern "& I presume a hazard. However, it is not a hazard controllable under our legislation." He thought it might belong to Environment Canada.

He then asked that it stay in the risk assessment anyway. It did. Eight years later the same doubt surfaced again.

In 2011 Dr. Amy Snow, writing to Dr. Medhat Nasr, then Alberta's provincial apiculturist, relayed that a colleague had concluded CFIA "did not have the legislative mandate under the HA Act to regulate invasive species such as AHB." The Act, she explained, "did not give CFIA a mandate to control the import of an animal to prevent the introduction of new genetics." Which is what blocking Africanized bees is. There's no pathogen in this hazard. There's a temperament.

The 2013 risk assessment, written after that exchange, kept the hazard and justified it on economic, public health and trade grounds (in contrast to the 2025 risk assessment, where CFIA claimed it had no duty of care to the industry), calling Africanized bees "a biological hazard for the bee industry in Canada with economic impacts" and a "public health concern." Justice Strickland's comment on that reasoning, in Paradis Honey Ltd. v. His Majesty the King, ran to one sentence: "How CFIA ultimately reached this conclusion is not apparent from the evidence before me."

At trial the Crown's own counsel conceded in closing that "it may well be that there was not a statutory basis on which to consider Africanized honeybees."

And the court's finding, on the record at 2024 FC 1921, is that CFIA "knew that it was at least likely that it lacked legislative authority to regulate the importation of US honeybees as a vector, disease or toxic substance."

Where that leaves us

CFIA's August 2025 risk analysis, the one that kept the border closed again, still lists the Africanized honey bee as one of its four hazards.

So here is the position in 2026. A bee that half of the United States works alongside without incident, that pools its drones with the whole American industry every February without consequence, that drifts across an unguarded land border every summer, like smoke from a wildfire, that has never been found in Canada, that can't survive a Canadian winter, and whose body count has never actually been counted, remains a listed hazard. Under an Act that, as the agency's own staff twice put in writing, doesn't cover it.

That's the reality on the ground. Next time, I'll look at the other half of it, which is the science, and it is in worse shape than the field evidence. There is no agreed definition of an Africanized bee, no diagnostic test with a known error rate, and after nearly seventy years nobody has properly connected the genetics to the behaviour that makes the bee a hazard in the first place.