A road show to understand bee health in Europe

Berlin, January 23rd, 2013 – Today OPERA, in partnership with Julius Kühn-Institut, presented in Berlin the first stage of the "Bee Health in Europe" project, a road show that will call at 8 European capitals to stimulate debate on how to support bee health and the establishment of robust bee colonies. The first target of the project is to communicate research activities and findings in order to promote simple and pragmatic recommendations and potential measures to ensure wellbeing of bees to policy makers, international and national institutions, beekeepers and farmers and their institutions on the basis of the most relevant international studies, collected and analyzed in the new edition of the OPERA Compendium.

Bees are one of the most economically important insects, producing honey and pollinating crops that account for about 35% of global food production. Bee populations are key for pollination of many plants with economic and ecological impact on the diversity of wild plants and the stability of the wider ecosystem, crop production, food security and human welfare.

Jens Pistorius, Head of bee risk Assessment at the Julius Kühn-Institut explained: "Bee health is influenced by numerous external factors, like availability of nectar and pollen throughout the season, diseases pressure, colony management, proper disease treatments of colonies and, bee-safe pesticide use in agriculture. To maintain and improve bee health, bee and plant diversity, pollination and ecosystem services and profitable beekeeping the need for further action has been pointed out by the scientific community. Policy and decision makers on international and national level as well as all interested parties should be made aware of scientific findings on the factors influencing bee health and the necessity of enforcement of measures that have a positive influence. Joint efforts should be undertaken and include beekeepers, farmers, beekeeper- and farmer organizations, scientists, authorities and policy makers to communicate scientific findings and enable an implementation of the right measures from the beekeeper´s apiary up to parliament level".

"There's so much at stake: insect pollination is valued at about €15 billion a year in the EU alone", added **Alexandru Marchis**, Coordinator of the Policy Team, at the OPERA research center. "*Policy makers are eager to take action now and we need to set the right priorities so as to ensure that we enhance bee health. Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2020, a move likely to benefit both wild bees and honey bees, is one of the European Commission's main objectives".*

In the occasion of this first event, OPERA took the opportunity to present its new edition of the Compendium "Bee Health In Europe – Fact & Figures 2013" that provides, in a clear and comprehensive form, data, studies and theories developed to explain how bee health is influenced and how to improve the maintenance of bee colonies. The OPERA report actually

aims to describe bee population trends in Europe, to determine what might explain them, and to recommend steps that can be taken to improve the situation on the policy level.

Taken by themselves, data might suggest that the honey bee is close to extinction. But this is clearly not the case. In most countries, according to the number of colonies maintained annually, no decline is detectable on the basis of colonies kept. Even though in some years high winter losses occur, beekeepers are able to compensate losses of colonies, which nevertheless requires some additional resources and efforts, making beekeeping activity less profitable. A decline in the number of hives is observed only in some countries and sometimes it may be simply explained by the fact that there are fewer beekeepers.

The Berlin event is intended to be a first step to gather knowledge, research and experience from the main European experts on the major factors which influence bees, an issue that has stimulated the scientific community to produce data and evaluations to understand the mechanisms. This knowledge then needs to be communicated to stakeholders and fed into the policy making process.

In Germany, colony losses can be observed during winter time. The dimension of the phenomena is alternating from year to year and most researchers agree that losses are probably not caused by a single factor, but rather by a combination of interrelated pressures. Nonetheless, there is a culprit that turns up repeatedly: *Varroa destructor*, a parasitic mite found in almost every apiary in Europe. The “Deutsche Bienenmonitoring” project showed that honey bee losses are highly correlated with Varroa infection, a conclusion similar to that described in the Journal of Apicultural Research’s special issue “Colony Losses”.

“Compared to the number of colony losses reported, the number of reported incidents caused by pesticides is comparably low, although there are a lot of intensive, emotional discussions ongoing on the impact of pesticides to bees and the possibility for improvements of risk assessment and risk mitigation measures. As the scope of the OPERA report is a general overview on factors influencing bee health, also the role and activities of different international institutions working intensively on pesticide issues are described. As this a very important issue but only one aspect that may influence bee health, a broad view on all different factors is necessary, as researchers have also identified environmental issues such as habitat loss, reduced biodiversity and insufficient amounts of high quality nectar and pollen as major factors affecting bee health”, explained **Jens Pistorius**.

For more information on the bee health in Europe, visit http://www.operaresearch.eu.

OPERA Research Center
OPERA is a young, growing independent research centre and think tank of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy) providing simple pragmatic solutions to support EU and national decision making and bridging science and policy through a transparent platform to debate the right approaches for sustainable, intensive agriculture.
Website: http://www.operaresearch.eu/

Julius Kühn-Institut

The Julius Kühn-Institut (JKI), Federal Research Centre for Cultivated Plants, is both a federal research institute and a higher federal authority. JKI activities are centred on cultivated plants as such. The Institute does research in the fields of plant genetics, cultivation of crops, plant nutrition, soil science, plant protection and plant health. Its broad competence enables the JKI to develop holistic concepts for crop cultivation as a whole, ranging from crop production to plant care.

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