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Beekeeping Challenges in Europe

During the APICAVE symposium in Portugal's Minho region, we spoke with Antonio Gómez Pajuelo, a Spanish biologist and beekeeper with 50 years of experience across the Iberian Peninsula, South America, Saudi Arabia, North Africa, and other regions. In our conversation, Antonio shared the main challenges facing European beekeeping today, especially in the Iberian Peninsula.

Three Major Changes Facing Beekeepers

Antonio identifies three primary forces shaping modern beekeeping: the varroa mite, climate change, and treatment residues. He also highlights the added threat of the Asian hornet (*Vespa velutina*).

Varroa mites: The Top Threat

Antonio considers *varroa destructor* the principal pain point for European beekeepers. In the Arabian Peninsula, high temperatures limit varroa survival, but Iberian beekeepers encounter persistent spread, especially when neighbouring hives are unsynchronised in treatment. Growing hive numbers intensify these issues, as does the varroa's damaging impact—malnutrition, viruses, and immunity suppression.

Climate Change and Poor Nutrition

Changes in climate and more frequent droughts are altering when flowers bloom and affecting bee nutrition. Antonio's pollen studies showed that 95% of summer honey collected during droughts contained shrivelled pollen. Poor pollen quality is linked to colony decline, especially when varroa mites are also present.

Residues and Synergies

Toxic residues from treatments accumulate in pollen and wax, silently reducing bee lifespan and weakening colonies. These residues interact with other stressors, and Antonio warns that no region faces a single, simple solution.

Europe's Honey Market Dilemma: honey shortages and cheap honey importation

Because of ongoing shortages, Europe now imports half of its honey. Cheaper honey, mostly from China and Ukraine, attracts buyers who care most about price. Others choose local, higher-quality honey that helps rural communities.

This price gap affects local producers. Most imported honey is simple and pure, not fake, but it cannot compete with the higher costs in Europe, where the minimum wage in Spain is €1,380. Antonio encourages people to "choose basic or quality" and prefers options that support local communities. Antonio calls on Iberian beekeepers to work together by coordinating mite control, using safer treatments, and planting climate-resilient plants to keep hives stable.

A Broader Industry Crisis and Honey Authenticity Problem

European beekeeping faces serious risks from falling profits and unstable markets. Robert Chlebo, Chair of the Apimondia Regional Commission for Europe, says that global market pressures and worries about honey authenticity are major concerns. The EU, which imports a lot of honey, pays an average of €1.81 per kilogram in 2025, putting strong pressure on European producers. EU checks have found that about half of imported honey samples are suspected of being adulterated, leading to the HarmHoney project (2024–2027) to standardise detection methods. Chlebo says these problems reduce consumer trust and market stability, and create a need for better traceability, improved testing, and fairer conditions for beekeepers. Etienne Bruneau, an agricultural engineer and former Chair of COPA-COGECA, also points to other challenges, such as invasive species, climate change, low prices, international trade pressures, and new adulteration methods that are hard to detect with current technology.

A Wider Crisis: Honey Authenticity and Market Fairness

The challenges go beyond production. **Robert Chlebo**, Chair of Apimondia's Regional Commission for Europe, highlights the scale of the problem:

"European beekeeping is facing increasing pressure from global market dynamics and honey authenticity issues. The EU is one of the world's largest honey importers, with imports from third countries averaging around €1.81/kg in 2025 — creating fierce competition for European beekeepers. Recent EU control actions found that roughly half of tested imported honey samples were suspected of adulteration with sugar syrups. In response, the EU launched the HarmHoney project (2024–2027), a joint initiative of the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and the Joint Research Centre, aimed at harmonising detection methods for new sugar-based

adulterants. These developments undermine consumer trust and market stability and highlight the urgent need for stronger traceability and fairer market conditions."

Etienne Bruneau, agricultural engineer specialised in beekeeping and former Chair of COPA-COGECA, who recently participated in European beekeeping discussions at DG Agriculture, points to an even broader set of pressures:

"Besides Vespa velutina, Vespa orientalis, and climate change, the industry faces many other urgent challenges: very low honey prices, the Mercosur trade deal, Ukrainian honey imports, adulteration, and the ongoing work of the JRC to detect new adulterants — including a new Indian beet syrup that current techniques cannot yet identify."

The Road Ahead

The problems facing European beekeeping are connected, so working together is vital. Beekeepers need to coordinate mite control and use climate-resilient plants. The industry should focus on safer treatments, stronger market protections, and better ways to check honey authenticity. For lasting results, both beekeepers and consumers need to cooperate. This is the way forward.

Article adapted from original interview "Charlas de la Colmena: Apicultura en Europa". Watch the full interview with Antonio Pajuelo here.

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