INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF BEEKEEPERS' ASSOCIATIONS

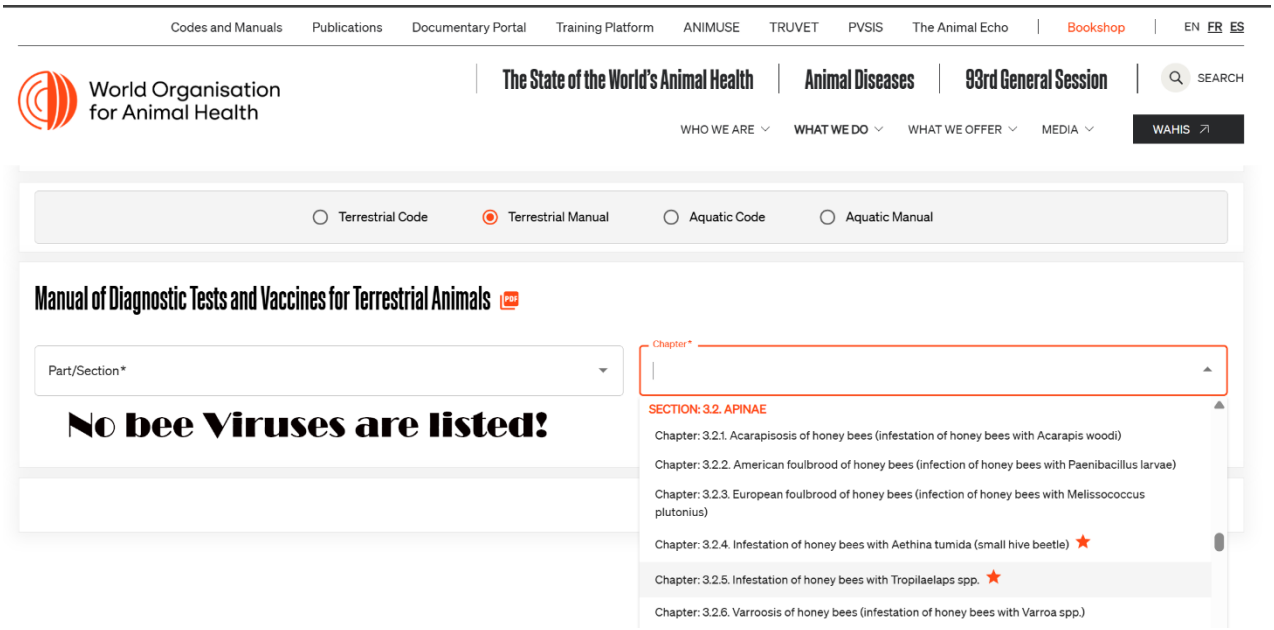
POLICY BRIEF

PROPOSING WOAH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HONEY BEE VIRAL DISEASES LISTING

1. Executive summary

Honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) are essential for global food security and biodiversity, yet **viral infections of managed honey bees are not currently listed diseases** in the WOAH Terrestrial Animal Health Code or the WOAH Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals

This Policy Brief argues that WOAH, in partnership with APIMONDIA and national veterinary services, should **formally include selected honey bee viral diseases in its international standards**. By doing so, WOAH can ensure that honey bees receive the same level of regulatory attention and technical support as other livestock species, supporting the One Health principle and the sustainability of managed pollination worldwide.



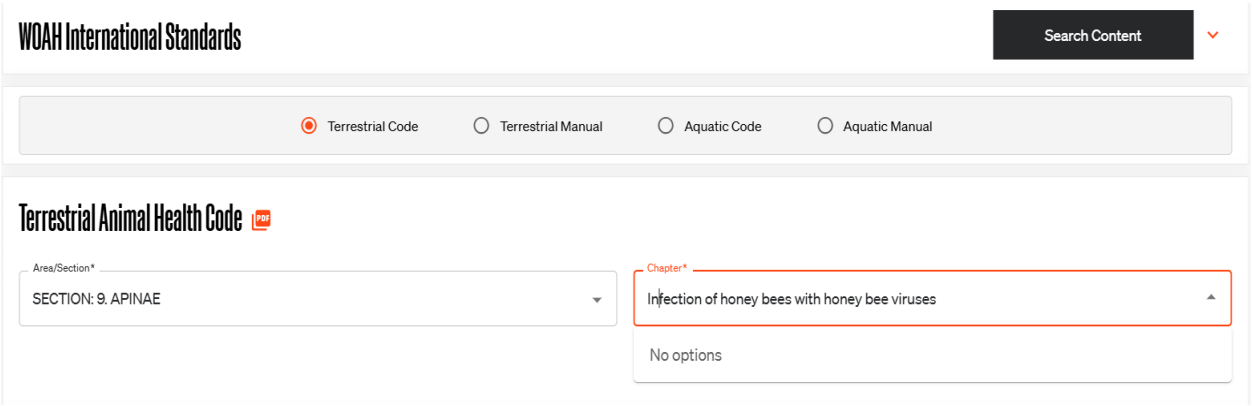
2. Background and rationale

Honey bees provide pollination services for about **75%** of leading global crops and are central to the production of honey, propolis, royal jelly, and other apiculture-derived products. They also contribute to rural income, biodiversity, and nature-based tourism. However, the health of managed *Apis mellifera* colonies worldwide is increasingly threatened by multifactorial stressors, with viral pathogens playing a central role.

Several honey bee viruses are now recognised as high-impact pathogens, especially when transmitted or amplified by the ectoparasitic mite *Varroa destructor*:

- **DWV-A, DWV-B** (Deformed wing virus A/B)
- **ABPV** (Acute bee paralysis virus)
- **BQCV** (Black queen cell virus)
- **CBPV** (Chronic bee paralysis virus)
- **SBV** (Sacbrood virus)
- **KBV** (Kashmir bee virus)
- **IAPV** (Israeli acute paralysis virus)

These viruses can be present in clinically healthy bees, often occur as **mixed infections** and can cause colony weakening, queen loss, reduced brood viability, and ultimately **complete colony collapse**. Despite this, they remain **neglected** in WOAH international standards.



3. Scientific evidence and “time-flow”

Chapter 1.2 of the World Organisation for Animal Health criteria for listing diseases, last revised in 2017, is outdated and too general to address the specific characteristics of honey bee health. Given the growing importance of pollinators and evolving disease risks, the current framework does not adequately capture bee-specific epidemiology and impacts. A targeted revision is needed to incorporate up-to-date, species-specific criteria for honey bees, ensuring more effective disease

listing, surveillance, and international coordination. Empirical and epidemiological evidence support the need to list honey bee viral diseases in WOAH instruments.

- A **recent large-scale mortality event** in the United States showed that **exceptionally high loads of *Varroa*-vectored *RNA viruses***, including DWV-A/B and ABPV, were strongly associated with symptomatic bees and collapsing colonies (Lamas et al., 2026, *PLoS Pathogens* 22: e1013939).
- At the same time, the **historical roots**[4] of honey bee virology stretch back decades; for example, Bailey (1963) described **two distinct viruses from adult honey bees** in *Virology* (19(1):131–140), laying the foundation for modern research on bee-paralysis agents.

This combination of **historical precedent** and **contemporary high-impact evidence** shows that honey bee viral diseases are not new, but are **emerging, under-regulated threats** to managed pollination species.

4. Status in WOAH instruments

In 2026, the **"State of the World's Animal Health"** reports and related WOAH documents do not include dedicated sections on **viral infections of honey bees**. Managed *Apis mellifera* and its viral pathogens are:

- **Not listed** in the WOAH Terrestrial Animal Health Code,
- **Not systematically covered** in the WOAH Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals.

WOAH web pages and standards currently treat honey bees as a **marginal animal group** in terms of viral disease regulation, despite their agricultural and ecosystem importance.

WOAH's mandate is to:

- Improve animal health and welfare globally,
- Collect, analyse and disseminate veterinary scientific information,
- Promote international solidarity and a **One Health approach** that recognises the interdependence of animal, human, and environmental health.

Given this mandate, there is an **urgent need** to update WOAH international standards to reflect the **neglected but high-impact** status of honey bee viral diseases.

5. Proposed action for WOAH and APIMONDIA

We propose that WOAH, in close collaboration with **APIMONDIA – The International Federation of Beekeepers' Associations**, take the following steps:

I. **Include selected honey bee viral diseases** (e.g., DWV-A/B, ABPV, BQCV, CBPV, SBV, KBV) in the **Terrestrial Animal Health Code** as diseases of managed *Apis mellifera*.

II. **Develop dedicated chapters** in the **Terrestrial Manual** on:

   a. Surveillance and early detection.

   b. Laboratory diagnosis and reporting.

   c. Risk-based control and prevention measures.

   d. Veterinary-service responsibilities and biosafety guidance.

III. **Recognise beekeepers, apiary laboratories, and Veterinary Services** as key actors in the prevention, early warning, and response to honey bee viral diseases.

These updates would allow WOAH to fully apply its **Standard-Setting Process, Commissions, and technical tools** to support APIMONDIA, national beekeeper associations, and veterinary services managing anything from a single hive to thousands of colonies.

Plan for rapid, multi-viral diagnostic kits or accredited reference protocols to prevent viral spread, especially via queen bee production, artificial insemination, and pollen and package bee trade.

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6. Pathway to adoption and stakeholder engagement

APIMONDIA is a core stakeholder in this process, as it represents hundreds of thousands of beekeepers worldwide and actively promotes bee health within its work programme.

Together, WOAH and APIMONDIA can:

- Establish a **technical working group** on honey bee viral diseases, bringing together virologists, apiarists, diagnostic laboratories, and veterinary authorities.
- Draft **proposed texts** for inclusion in the Terrestrial Code and Manual, based on existing scientific evidence and field experience.
- Present the proposal to the **World Assembly of Delegates** at the WOAH General Assembly for formal approval, following WOAH's transparent and democratic procedures.

WOAH Members already coordinate the global response to:

- Animal health emergencies,
- Prevention of zoonotic diseases,
- Promotion of animal health and welfare,
- Better access to animal health care.

This institutional framework provides the **tools, capacity, and support** needed for Veterinary Services to engage effectively with honey bee viral diseases.

7. Why this update matters

By strengthening standards for honey bee viral diseases, WOAH would help countries:

- Protect **food security** and **crop yields** through more resilient pollination services.
- Safeguard **apiculture-derived income** for rural communities and small-scale producers.
- Support **biodiversity** and **ecosystem services**, including nature-based tourism.
- Strengthen **One Health resilience**, as healthy bee populations are linked to healthier agro-ecosystems and reduced spillover risks.

Honey bee viral diseases are no longer a niche apicultural concern; they are **animal-health issues** with global implications for agriculture, economies, and ecosystems.

8. Conclusion and call to action

This Policy Brief calls on WOAH and APIMONDIA to:

- **Update WOAH international standards** to include selected honey bee viral diseases in the Terrestrial Animal Health **Code and Manual.**
- **Launch a formal standard-setting process** that integrates scientific evidence, field experience, and stakeholder input.

With APIMONDIA and national veterinary services, WOAH can raise the profile of honey bee health and ensure that managed pollination species such as *Apis mellifera* receive the same level of international attention and protection as other livestock species.

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