

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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Rollin Hannan Harnesses Honeybee Power

Beekeepers maintain an essential agricultural link

Interview with Rollin Hannan Jr.

Owner, Hannan Honey

President, Connecticut Beekeepers Association

Rollie Hannan's passion for raising bees started when he caught his first swarm of bees at 15 years old. Today he manages bee colonies comprising about 3 million bees. Hannan is one of TK beekeepers in the state, who manage TK bees.

Rollie's bees pollinate plants for farmers all over Connecticut, in the process creating a second income stream for Hannan from the honey that he sells at many of the same fruit orchards that were pollinated by his bees.

Honeybees Are the Angels of Agriculture

A lot of people call honeybees the angels of agriculture. They're not really known for how much they do, but they're the link that connects all agriculture.

The honeybees pollinate 90 crops throughout the United States. In Connecticut, we pollinate apples, blueberries, pears, squashes, and most of time a lot of the farm stands have bees there for various other things. They do everything that most people don't see. I mean, bees have an impact even on milk production. The farmer buys alfalfa and clover seed. Bees are used to pollinate, to make the seed. So it's a tie-in with everything.

I'll explain it this way. If you have a dinner plate and you take one third of the food off it, that's what the bees pollinated. I don't care what it is, the volume of food is what the bees do. If we did not have bees, we would have one third less food surplus in the United States.

Growing To Love Bees and Growing a Business

I grew up on a small farm in Southbury. We had animals, cows and sheep, and I was fascinated by them. But it wasn't my calling in life. One of my dad's friends had a couple colonies of bees. I caught a swarm when I was 15 or 16 years old, and I fell in love with it. I kept studying more and got really involved.

So, 16 years later I have more than 400 colonies all over Connecticut and Eastern New York. In the summertime, there are 50,000 to 70,000 bees in a full-size colony, so we're probably talking 2.5 million to 3 million bees that I own. But I do this part time. My real passion is to try to take my bee business from 400 to 1,000 colonies and make a full-time living at it.

I just bought a house six months ago on land we've used for 20 years. It's a house that was built in 1765 – and old barn. And I bought five acres. The Southbury Land Trust has been buying a lot

of land, production or farmland, in town and keeping it open. They bought the rest of the farm, and I have life-use of that and can put bees on their property.

Beekeepers don't need a lot of land. Because you can't have all those colonies in one spot, we spread them out all over the place. We need holding yards, and a lot of the farmers let us put bees on their property.

My business is sort of two businesses in one. I run my bees both for honey production and pollination. I pollinate a lot of the major orchards in the state as a service to them. We can gain a little more. Maybe there's enough for 600 or 700 hives just on rentals, dealing with the big growers.

On the honey side, sometimes you'll make honey on pollination, sometimes you won't. It's really where the business is geared. Doing pollination you're not going to make as much honey as you would for just raising bees for honey production. It's a different style of bee management. But it's kind of nice, because most of my orchards sell my honey at their stands so you get some income that way. And if one year's better than another, you have something to fall back on.