

County starts plan to battle 'killer' bees

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SANTA CRUZ — Plans to battle aggressive Africanized honeybees, if and when they invade Santa Cruz County, are being readied.

Vicki Kramer of the county Agriculture Commissioner's Office will brief county agencies on the Africanized honeybee and the threat it could represent in the county, during a meeting Nov. 15.

Kramer, the agriculture commission's insect-abatement specialist, said the meeting is the first step toward developing an action plan in case the bees show up here. They began spreading northward from Brazil in 1956, are well established in southern Texas and southern Arizona, and have made their way to the Arizona-California border.

The state agriculture department estimates the bees travel at a rate of 100 to 300 miles per year. But they have mysteriously stopped at the Colorado River, which divides California and Arizona.

"They very possibly could (show up here), based on projections," Kramer said. "They haven't been detected in California yet, but (state agricultural officials) had anticipated they would be in Southern California this year, and a lot of counties have made a lot of preparations."

Kramer said although the bees would have to cover much territory before arriving here, the climate and terrain are favorable to them. Agriculture and plants that bloom year-round are extensive in the county, and the bees tend to proliferate in such areas, Kramer said.

"Orange County and San Diego

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'Killer bees'

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County in particular have prepared for the bees," Kramer said. "They've done education in schools, made videotapes, trained OES (Office of Emergency Services) personnel and set up phone trees. That's what we're gearing up to do in this county."

The Africanized honeybee is similar to its European cousin, the common honeybee, with one major difference: Africanized bees will attack en masse and with much less provocation than the European variety. Between January 1988 and October 1993, 176 deaths in Mexico were blamed on the bees.

Since the bees arrived in Texas in 1990, 191 attacks on people have been reported. One was fatal. Numerous fatal attacks on pets and farm animals in Texas and Arizona also were reported.

"They will pursue up to a quarter of a mile," Kramer said. "Something like a lawnmower, or somebody throwing a rock at their hives, will provoke them to attack."

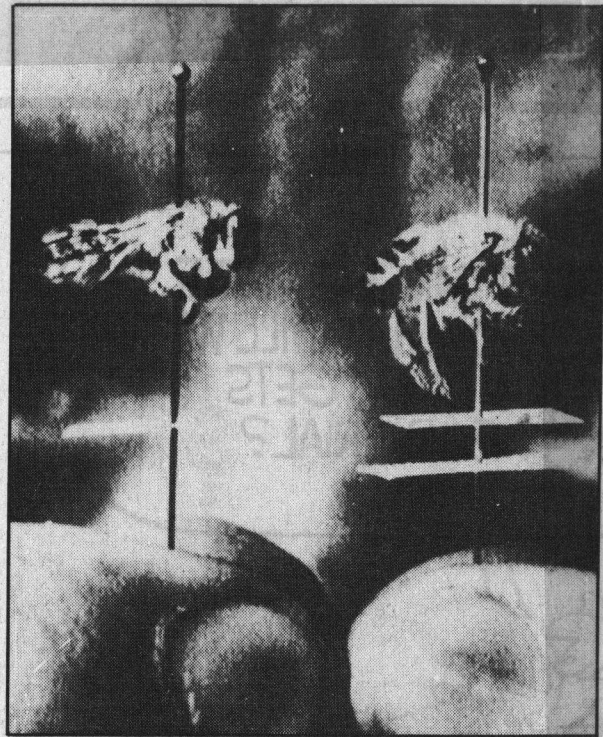
The Africanized bees also are less particular about where they build their hives, said Kramer, meaning they spread faster and into more areas than the European bees.

According to a report by Patrick Akers and Bill Routhier of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the chances of anybody being killed by Africanized honeybees in California are lower than the probability of being struck by lightning.

Nevertheless, according to the report, the Africanized strain "is going to present some danger to the residents of California." In addition to the bees' aggression toward humans and animals, they could infiltrate existing hives and interbreed with European bees, which add at least \$10 billion to the value of California agriculture, the report said.

Growers of about 90 California crops — including apples, Santa Cruz County's fifth-leading crop — use European bees to pollinate their crops.

Because of the possible impact on growers, the state agriculture department is the lead agency in the preparations to fight the Africanized bees. However, a statewide task force involving numerous agencies has been organized.



The Associated Press

Africanized, left, and European bee.

"We've been having meetings every two months or so," said Frank Ennik of the state Department of Health Service's Berkeley office, who is on the statewide task force. "Various communities in Southern California have a response plan, and we want to get everybody on line to respond when bees do appear."

"Emergency services are up to speed, county agriculture commissioners are involved, along with fire departments and health departments."

The state has issued a health advisory on the Africanized bees. Copies are available by writing to the Vector-borne Disease Section, California Department of Health Services, 2151 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, Calif. 94704-1011.