Honeybees are the Buzz at Ford's Rouge Complex; Employee tends to 80,000 Honeybees to Help Combat the Insect's Decline

• Honeybees have been on the decline in the United States for more than three decades due to colony collapse disorder, parasites, pests, pathogens, poor nutrition and pesticides, according to the government
• Two beehives installed at Ford Rouge Plant help honeybee population – totaling about 80,000 honeybees – thrive
• Honeybees are part of the Rouge wildlife habitat strategy and the greening of the facility

DEARBORN, Mich., Oct. 12, 2016 – As the honeybee population in the U.S. continues its three-decade-long decline, Ford employee Mary Mason has taken up the task of caring for tens of thousands of bees right outside the Ford Rouge Complex.

That’s right, the complex, home to thousands of factory workers, is also home to 80,000 honeybees, thanks to Mason and the company’s wildlife habitat strategy, which in the last decade-and-a-half has brought nature back to a once gray and black facility.

It all started in the early 2000s as part of Ford’s environmental initiative – the Heritage 2000 program. An architect and sustainability designer was brought in to help “green” parts of the Rouge facility, and the entire complex was given a makeover.

The company brought crabapple trees to the site and someone came up with the idea of honeybees, noting their decline.

“We had the crabapple trees and thought when they flowered, the bees could pollinate them,” said Roger Gaudette, director, Dearborn campus transformation. “Bees are relatively easy to manage, so they were a perfect fit. We installed the hives in 2003, and even distributed the honey to company board members for the first few years.”

The orchard at Ford Rouge is now home to 80,000 honeybees. Mason, a Ford safety investigation engineer, brought in some of her own bees, and has served as a volunteer caring for the Rouge bees for three years.

“I think it’s wonderful Ford is so environmentally connected, and that officials are interested in how the company affects its community,” she says. “I just love that they’re letting me keep the bees here. It’s important they’re protected.”

According to government figures, honeybees have been on the decline for more than three decades in the United States. Colony collapse disorder, parasites, pests, pathogens, poor nutrition and pesticides are thought to be the cause. This could have a big impact on crops.

“We have about a 60 percent to 70 percent die-off rate in Michigan,” says Mason, “primarily due to pesticides and pollutants. Unfortunately, when you spray for pesticides, the chemicals can’t distinguish between nuisance pests, like mosquitos, and beneficial honeybees.”

The United States Department of Agriculture says healthy honeybee colonies are critical for meeting the demands of food production. The agency’s agricultural research services suggests pollination by managed honeybee colonies adds at least $15 billion to the value of U.S. agriculture annually by increasing yields and providing superior quality harvests.
Commercial production of crops – like almonds and other tree nuts, berries, fruits and vegetables – depends on pollination by honeybees.

Mason cares for the bees as if they were her pets. She checks in on them during lunch breaks and on the weekends, to make sure they’re active and moving in and out of the hives.

“They’re really unselfish,” says Mason. “They do everything to preserve the hive, sacrificing themselves to make sure their hive continues for the next generation of bees. I think it’s just a beautiful thing.”

There are only three types of bees in the hive – the queen, workers and drones. The queen mates for one week, then stays in the hive the rest of her life, laying up to 1,500 eggs a day, up to 1 million in her lifetime – which is typically five to seven years. The drones’ only function is to mate with the queen, after which they die.

“Worker bees have a very short life span, because they work themselves to death to provide for the hive,” says Mason. “They go from one flower to the next, exhausting themselves. One bee may visit 2,000 flowers per day.”

Mason says she couldn’t have picked a better place than the Rouge Plant to house her bees. Their hives are part of the Rouge Plant tour, so every day kids are being taught about the significance of bees.

Aside from the bees at the Rouge plant, Ford rescued tens of thousands of other honeybees this summer. Officials at the Ohio Assembly Plant in Avon Lake called in a beekeeper to remove about 10,000 bees and at the old St. Thomas Assembly Plant in Canada, thousands more were rescued.

“Bees are important for the crops, they’re important for nature,” says Mason. “They are crying out for help, and it’s up to us to help them and help the environment. It’s critical.”

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