

African Honey Bee Information for School Administrators¹

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In 2002, African honey bees (AHBs) established a presence in Florida. The AHBs exhibit several characteristics that have caused public concern—the ability to nest anywhere, a highly defensive response to colony disruption, and an ability to pursue individuals who have disrupted a colony over long distances, among others. Due to the media attention the bees have received, many parents have voiced concern over the safety of their children attending school or after-school activities. It is important that school officials and administrators stay current on AHB information, educate students about the AHB, and ensure that school properties are bee-proofed.

About the AHB

In recent years, the media has made a spectacle of the African honey bee—labeling it the killer bee. As a result, an unnecessary public fear of and concern over honey bees has arisen in the southern United States. However, honey bees are one of the most beneficial pollinators in the world, they ensure the production of about one third of the food we eat; also, they are responsible for all the honey and honey-related products we enjoy. The African

(sometimes called Africanized) honey bee is not very different from the European honey bee—the docile bee that is managed by American beekeepers. In fact, the AHB is a little smaller; its sting is not any more potent, and it also produces honey and pollinates flowers. The AHB characteristic that concerns the public most is its defensiveness. All honey bees are defensive; that means if a colony is disturbed, bees will come out of the hive to defend against the possible intruder. European honey bees will send out 5-10 bees to defend an area about 20 feet around the colony, but if an AHB colony is disturbed, it may send out several hundred bees to defend an area up to 40 yards around the colony. Also, while most honey bees nest in enclosed areas, AHBs have been known to build colonies out in the open in close proximity to humans. Additionally, bees foraging and visiting flowers are normally not a threat, but AHBs are attracted to soda and juice containers, and children have been stung on the lips and mouth while outside drinking.

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Precautions

Several steps can be taken to lower the risk of AHBs interacting negatively with students. The first precaution to be instituted is bee-proofing the school property. Bee-proofing is the practice of methodically removing or restricting access to potential AHB nesting sites. This practice is beneficial for many reasons. Naturally, if an area is bee-proof, the potential for feral colonies to move into that area is greatly lowered; therefore, the risk of stinging incidents is also lowered. In addition, colonies that establish themselves inside a wall or around a structure must be removed immediately. This process can be expensive and often requires structural repair (which also costs time and money). Bee-proofing a property not only makes the area safer, but it also saves time and money. It is an ongoing process that requires an initial assessment to address a majority of the sites on a property; also, it requires follow-up inspections to maintain the bee-proofed area. Another necessary precaution is teaching faculty, staff, and students information about the AHB, what to do when someone is stung, and what to do when a honey bee colony is found.

Administrator's Checklist

- have school property bee-proofed (for bee-proofing information, view “Bee-Proofing for Florida Citizens” ENY-143)
- require custodians to perform regular AHB inspections
- ensure that faculty and staff are educated about AHBs including what to do if they find a colony or see bee activity
- speak with county agent about incorporating AHB materials into science curriculum
- involve individuals and leaders from PTA in the AHB education process
- proactive bee-proofing reduces liability

Resources

In response to the presence of African honey bees in Florida, UF-IFAS personnel have partnered with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to create the AFBEE program (Affricanized honey Bee Extension and Education). To date, members of the AFBEE program have produced a proliferation of resources about the African bee in Florida. This includes material catered specifically toward children, school administrators, school custodians, and others. For additional information, contact your county extension office or visit the AFBEE website at: <http://afbee.ifas.ufl.edu>.