



Fort Bend Buzz

the monthly newsletter of the Fort Bend Beekeepers Association

fostering safe, responsible, successful beekeeping

Our July 13 meeting will again be both in-person and online. In-person will be at Long Acres Ranch, 2335 Richmond Pkwy, Richmond, TX 77469 (where we met last month, not far from the Community Center where we used to meet). ZOOM contact information is the same as before (an email with clickable links will go out soon). We'll be called to order at 7:30 pm after 30 minutes of socially distanced social time.

Fort Bend County's COVID-19 alert status is still at YELLOW or "Low/Moderate Community Risk" as the number of vaccinations continues to grow and infections, hospitalizations and deaths show weekly declines. More than 219,000 have been vaccinated at Fort Bend County sites and the number is growing every day! The County also reports that we have had 60,007 cases with 58,919 that have recovered. Sadly there have been 714 COVID-19 deaths in Fort Bend. "Low/Moderate Risk" allows us to resume careful contact with others as we look forward to being able to resume normal contacts. (Perhaps GREEN is in sight!)

The scariest part of this disease is its easy transmission and huge uncertainty of outcome. You may have few symptoms. Or you can end up in the ICU or even worse. And a few days in ICU can wipe out your bank account even if you have good health insurance. We hope that everyone has decided that getting vaccinated is a good idea.

July meeting

The July 13 meeting of the Fort Bend Beekeepers Association will again be both online and "in-person" beginning at 7:00 pm. We plan to be ZOOMing from our in-person meeting at Long Acres Ranch, 2335 Richmond Pkwy, Richmond, TX 77469. A clickable ZOOM link will go out by email. The LAR gate will be open until 8 pm. If you arrive after the gate has closed, the keypad code is 2337 (bees). This code will only work during our meeting. We'll be called to order at 7:30 pm after 30 minutes of social time.

While there are no longer any special COVID-19 precautions, reasonable caution is probably still a good idea. If you don't feel well or have a medical condition that concerns you, we ask that you join the ZOOM meeting rather than attending in person.

We are grateful to the Fort Bend County AgriLife Extension office and the LAR staff for arranging the Long Acres Ranch meeting.

June Meeting Notes

After 30 minutes of social time, Vice President Danessa Yaschuck opened our in-person and ZOOM

meeting. Danessa reminded everyone of the TBA Virtual Summer Clinic on June 19 and then introduced our guest speaker Jacobo Campuzano who joined us via Zoom.

Jacobo is an instructor at the University of Antioquia in Medellin, Colombia. He teaches ecology, biology, environmental management, and wildlife management. He and his wife, Claudia are the owners of the Aburuma Jungle Bees, focused on using the natural Columbia rainforest for production of honey by Africanized bees. They also are working to develop a strain of Africanized bees with traits of gentleness, productivity and varroa resistance.

Jacobo shared with us some of the history of Africanized bees in Colombia and how the climate and topography has resulted in four primary 'stocks' there. The hot-humid lowland bees are higher in honey production, the high elevation and dry climate bees are major pollen gatherers, the bees in hot and arid climate produce honey, and the jungle bees are known as 'brood monsters' that make fast-growing colonies. Africanized bees reached Columbia in the mid-70s and in only about 10 years had spread throughout the country. Prior to this, bee-

keeping was limited, mainly hobbyists, with only a few apiaries over 100 hives. Not surprisingly, when the Africanized bees took over beekeeping was greatly diminished. The government and educational institutions have not invested much in research, but in the last twenty years or so, small-commercial beekeeping is starting to take hold and private projects have started breeding programs. There is also interest in promoting beekeeping as an income for people in remote areas. Though most known for their excessive defensiveness, Africanized bees seem to be heartier than European bees, with high levels of varroa resistance. There are obvious challenges in working with Africanized bees, challenges in the breeding program (the need for instrumental insemination), and even challenges with working in Colombia (limited access to knowledge, technology, and equipment). However, using the selection process to breed a gentler bee, results can be seen in as few as 10 generations. Due to time restrictions, members only had time for a few questions of Jacobo.

Danessa and Lynne conducted the door prize drawings. Thank you to those who provided prizes and congratulations to the many winners.

Ask a dozen beekeepers...

Here is this month's **Q** (from one of our members) and an **A**:

Q: I would like for one of your members to put beehives on my property. Can you help?

A: This is a question that is frequently asked though it is not unusual from one of our members. The underlying issue is most likely to gain or preserve an "ag exemption" to cut property taxes. An internet search for "Texas beekeeping ag valuation" yields many website links, but few provide basic information about how property taxes work.

For the most part, it is property taxes that fund schools and local government including roads, bridges, law enforcement, and emergency services. They are also used to satisfy bond debt for things like parks, levee construction, new schools, etc. These taxes are sometimes referred to as "ad valorem taxes", literally meaning that they are "based on value". The property value used to calculate taxes can be its actual market value or some lower value allowed by law. Government must go on, so any property tax "savings" by one taxpayer just shifts the burden to others.

Any specific questions about property tax valuation should be raised with the Fort Bend County Central Appraisal District. Understand that these folks don't assess or collect taxes. Their job is to establish value. The County, School Districts, Levee Districts, etc. set the tax rate (sometimes referred to as "millage"); they do not collect taxes. Taxes are collected by the County Tax Assessor/Collector. For anyone wishing to understand their property taxes, this whole system seems designed to create an adolescent "go ask your mother" situation. Tax rates are set by elected officials, so you'll have to deal with them at the ballot box. The tax collector is elected too, but they just multiply the millage times valuation and send you the bill.

Except for at the ballot box, the only property tax impact an individual can make is in the value set by their appraisal district. Our county appraisal district folks are very helpful when it comes to understanding how property is appraised. It is an especially good idea to visit with them if you are contemplating purchase of rural property. What is the property's market value appraisal? Is the property currently ag exempt? What must be done for it to remain in ag?

The intent of having ag valuation is noble: preventing increasing ad valorem taxes due to rising property values from "taxing farmers off the land". Ag valuation for cropland, pasture, timber production, etc. each has its own valuation based on the potential value of crops or livestock produced. "Beekeeping" seems completely different in that it is an activity. Fallow cropland or a pasture without cows is still in ag use. "Beekeeping" without bees isn't.

A 500 acre ranch can be appraised as "native pasture", but a subdivided piece of "native pasture" may not be considered large enough to support livestock. Property currently "in ag" can stay there, but if it can't, five years of "rollback taxes" become due. This is important to know: it is the sum of previous tax reductions attributed to ag use and can amount to nearly 10% of the property's market value (5 years x 2%/year). Ag valuation benefited the previous owner but the purchaser gets the rollback bill if the sale results in ag exemption going away. Similarly, property must be in ag use for five of the preceding six years to gain ag valuation. When your request for ag valuation is denied, or, worse yet, when you get a surprise tax bill (sometimes a year or more after buying rural property) it is too late to start worrying about property taxes.

Taxable market value is the sum of land value plus improvements less any exemptions provided by law. The most significant exemption is for one's "homestead". If someone

lives on rural property, one acre of the tract is the usual size considered as their homestead. The remaining acreage may be taxed at a much lower ag valuation if it is in ag use.

By law, "beekeeping" activity can significantly reduce a landowner's tax bill on 5 - 20 acres. But if a beekeeper fails to "perform" and the ag valuation is lost, the five years' "rollback taxes" become due. After having lost their ag exemption, the landowner would have to pay market value property tax for five years before they can get it back. Any beekeeper in such an asymmetric situation should be very careful. Beyond liability for beestings and wayward swarms, the beekeeper could be viewed as responsible for a huge tax liability. It would work best for property owners to do the "beekeeping" or, at the very least, own the hives. Any formal "beekeeping" agreement, especially one that tries to accept (or deny) any liability is probably a bad idea.

Treasurer's Report

Our June treasury balance was \$3,572.39. Since then we collected \$75.00 in dues and \$100.00 in donations. Our expenses were \$12.99 for the monthly email cost and \$233.82 annual website fee. The resulting balance is \$3,500.58 (\$3,450.58 in our checking account plus \$50.00 in cash to make change).

TEXAS A&M
AGRI LIFE
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