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Opinion Piece

The existence of European honey will be at stake in the coming months in Brussels

**What image first comes to your mind when you hear about EU counterfeit products? Perfumes, bags, or branded items? If so, think again! Honey should be at the top of the list when you think of these products! The European Commission has just released a report on an EU-wide investigation into the quality of honey imported into the EU. Its findings are shocking: 46% of all samples analysed[[1]](#footnote-1) by EU public bodies were found to be suspicious from a fraud point of view and yet imports still account for as much as 40% of the EU’s annual honey consumption.**

I am **a professional beekeeper** with 150 beehives in Southern Finland. Similar to my fellow beekeepers on the continent, I take care of bees, provide pollination services to Finnish fruit producers and crop farmers and collect and sell local honey. Part of my activity also focuses on the preservation of the European dark bee, a protected species, which almost became extinct in my region.

I am speaking out today because I no longer want to be reduced to nothing more than a spectator of beekeeping’s silent decline in Europe. For years, European beekeepers have been sounding the alarm about the state of the **European honey market[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4)**. The situation has become desperate for most commercial beekeepers. This is mainly because traditional market forces, shaped by supply and demand, have been corrupted for years with **scandalous ploys to deceive honey consumers**. This is mainly because the European legislation on honey lacks robustness. As things stand, consumers are often unable to clearly identify **honey’s** **exact place of origin**, particularly in commercial blends where EU and non-EU honey is mixed. Further compounding this is the fact that **imported** **adulterated honey, meaning a mixture of honey with complex syrups,** leads to store prices decreasing to such low levels that consumers’ perception of the real value of authentic honey ends up thoroughly altered.

Less sales by beekeepers, growing stocks of local honey and non-existing profitability progressively whittle away at European production. We are simply unable to compete with imported products which do not meet the legal definition of honey. As an illustrative example, the declared value for honey imported from Asia has been going at around 1,5€/kg for years while the average production cost for honey produced in Finland can reach 15€/kg: ten times more! The current inflation rates and increased cost of energy is only accelerating this trend. We are unable to adjust our prices to the same levels as those of imported products containing syrups that are decoupled from inflation and natural weather-driven fluctuations.

**The value of beekeeping is of far greater significance to the EU than its economic weight**

Some may argue that honey is not a substantial component of the European and national economies. However, we must examine the critical market situation in a broader societal context. The **EU Pollinators Initiative** which wasrecently revised underlines the importance of immediate actions to halt the decline of pollinators. Honeybees kept by beekeepers play a vital role in pollination for the food our citizens eat, not to mention the preservation of biodiversity around us. Copa and Cogeca estimate that the destruction of European commercial beekeepers’ livelihoods may lead to more than 5 million honeybee colonies being lost across the continent. That is almost a third of the current numbers. In the face of the biggest societal challenges such as climate change, we cannot afford such a reduction because other insect pollinator populations are simply not there to replace the loss of honeybee colonies kept by beekeepers.

**Available known remedies to the market crisis**

Confronting this situation requires doing more than observing as bystanders given that political solutions have already been clearly identified. Policy decisions must be swiftly taken by the Commission to implement such solutions and Copa and Cogeca, Member States and Members of the European Parliament stand ready to collaborate.

Firstly, we have the upcoming revision of the **Council Directive on Honey (2001/110/EC)**. The Directive must address the following three priorities in order to bring about actual results: transparent information for food-chain operators and consumers about the origin of honey blends and their makeup, provision of tools to effectively combat fraud in honey and preservation of honey quality benefiting both consumers and producers. **Traceability and laboratory testing** of honey origin will be an essential part of the strengthened legal framework as a means of conducting compliance checks with more transparent labelling.

Setting up a **community reference centre for honey** would be equally as important. With such a specialised body, we will all have a place to develop and test modern methods to prove the authenticity and quality of honey before they are made official by the Commission. We simply cannot continue to test honey and legally certify imported batches using an outdated legal framework with laboratory methods which have not been updated in decades!

The Commission and national authorities must also have the capacity to prevent adulteration and trade in fraudulent honey. We need to establish **a red list of importers and manufacturers** banned from exporting to the EU market combined with systematic testing of imported honey consignments traded in bulk.

Finally, it is also important that we **provide clearer origin labelling** to empower consumers. We have made enormous efforts in this direction and our sector is ready today. In recent meetings I had in Brussels, Commission officials pointed out the risk that such a type of labelling could create: a risk of “*promoting nationalism on labels*” for intra-Community trade. What a futile worry in today’s Europe! How inconsistent the Green Deal is! We honey producers are collectively proud of showing this geographic diversity to our clients. The obligatory display of the country of origin on the honey label without any exceptions in the case of blends will by no means harm a market that it so dependent on imports from outside the EU.

Together with my colleagues from Copa and Cogeca, we are convinced that urgent policy measures must be taken to reverse the decline in European production and protect the image of honey. Without such political decisions, our beekeeping will be reduced to the role of an open-air museum hobby activity with far-reaching consequences to our environment, food production and consumer confidence.

**Stanislav JAS**

**Chairman, Copa-Cogeca Working Party on Honey**

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Download the picture of the Honey Working Party Chair [HERE](https://we.tl/t-4E8A0amnMF).

About us - Copa and Cogeca are the united voice of farmers and agri-cooperatives in the EU. Together, we ensure that EU agriculture is sustainable, innovative and competitive, while guaranteeing food security for 500 million people throughout Europe. >>> More information [www.copa-cogeca.eu](http://www.copa-cogeca.eu)

Translations will be available in DE, ES, FR, IT, PL and RO on the Copa-Cogeca website soon.

For further information, please contact

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1. <https://food.ec.europa.eu/safety/eu-agri-food-fraud-network/eu-coordinated-actions/honey-2021-2022_en> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Press Release - After challenging years in 2020-2021, the bad streak continues for European honey producers in 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Press Release - After another catastrophic year for beekeepers, the revision of the Honey directive should not pour honey into the sector’s ear [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. European honey producers are sounding the alarm in the face of a distressing market situation and call for an emergency action plan to be put in place. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)