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US beekeepers sue over import of Asian fake honey

Commercial beekeepers in the US say counterfeit honey from Asia is forcing down prices and pushing them to financial collapse

Imports of cheap, fake honey from Asia are pushing American beekeepers to financial collapse, according to a lawsuit.

Thousands of commercial beekeepers in the US have taken legal action against the country's largest honey importers and packers for allegedly flooding the market with hundreds of thousands of tonnes of counterfeit honey.

The class-action lawsuit aims to clear supermarket shelves of fake honey in jars and cereal packets and seeks millions of dollars in damages for lost sales and profits over the past decade.

The case has been filed in California on behalf of beekeepers by Kelvin Adee, owner of Adee honey farms, the largest commercial beekeeper in the US; Henry's Bullfrog Bees, based in Winters, California; and Golden Prairie honey farms, a Kansas not-for-profit organisation.

They have accused the honey importers Sunland Trading and Lamex Food and the honey-packers Barkman Honey and Dutch Gold Honey of conspiring to defraud the US honey market, along with True Source Honey, an organisation set up by the importers and packers to operate a honey-certification scheme that the beekeepers claim passes off fake honey as genuine.

The beekeepers have also accused Intertek Testing Services, in whose laboratory the honey is tested, and the certification scheme auditors NSF International of colluding in the million-dollar crime by using and approving outdated methods to detect fake honey.

Gillian Wade, the litigants' lawyer, said the action was her clients' last hope. "Beekeeper groups and organisations have appealed to the US Food and Drug Administration, the US Department of Agriculture and other agencies, they have organised and formed industry groups to help address the problem, yet it persists and has only got worse."

Many were afraid to be involved in any sort of action to help stop the alleged fraud for fear of retaliation and worried they would not be able to sell their honey at all, she added.

New nectar: could artificial pollen make life sweeter for bees?

Honey fraud can take many forms, from harvesting honey from beehives before it has matured and drying it artificially, to adding cheap sugars and syrups. Various tests can detect the presence of some added sugars, but those from rice, wheat, sugar beet, cassava and potatoes can evade traditional testing methods.

The global honey market has grown from 1.5m tonnes produced annually in 2007 to more than 1.9m in 2019, and is [worth about \\$7bn](#) (£5bn). But over the same period, according to the Mexico-based Honey Authenticity Project wholesale honey prices fell in the US from \$3,500 (£2,500) a tonne to

\$2,500 (£1,800), brought down by low prices of Asian honey of around \$1,750 (£1,250) a tonne, which accounts for a third of honey exports worldwide. The US imports 197,000 tonnes of honey a year, of which almost half are from Asia.

Honey is understood to be [the most adulterated](#) food after milk and olive oil.

Between 2007 and 2019, there was a 128% increase in Asian honey exports worldwide even though the number of hives has only risen slightly and honey yields have fallen due to threats to bees from pesticides, poor nutrition and parasitic mites.

“There is more honey being sold each year than existing bee populations are capable of producing and from some countries which don’t even have the climate or floral resources to produce large volumes of honey,” said Arturo Carrillo, coordinator of the Honey Authenticity Project, which estimates that about a third of worldwide honey imports [could be counterfeit](#).

Gordon Marks, executive director of True Source Honey, said its certification programme was designed to “help prevent illegal trade in honey that circumvents US law and that has the potential to harm the reputation of all honey sold in North America”. He added: “True Source Honey is committed to ensuring that honey is sourced in a transparent and traceable manner and is authentic.”

In [a statement](#) in December, True Source said it was updating its certification standards in 2021 to include “cutting-edge technologies to detect sugars/syrups”.

The packing company Dutch Gold Honey said: “As a 75-year-old family-owned business, our commitment to authentic honey runs deep. Our longstanding quality protocols, designed to ensure honey’s authenticity and its traceability from beekeeper to end-user, are the cornerstone of our business.”

NSF International said: “We are confident our team has performed its services to True Source Honey in full accordance with the law and with the True Source certified standards.”

Other defendants failed to respond to requests for comment.

Beekeepers warn that if they go out of business there will be a shortage not just of genuine honey, but of honeybees to pollinate the 75% of crops that [depend to some extent on pollination](#) to increase yield and quality.