Backup pollinators: California almond, fruit producers hope blue orchard bees can reinforce honeybees

The need for a backup bee has become critical, particularly in almond orchards. Almonds are California's second-largest crop, injecting an estimated $21 billion annually into the state's economy. In 2016 California's almond growers needed nearly 1.9 million honeybee colonies—almost three-quarters of all the commercial colonies in the country—to pollinate their 940,000 acres.

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Annual colony losses in the U.S. for the past 11 years have ranged between 29 and 45 percent. Add in the ever-expanding almond acreage—from 570,000 acres in 2004 to more than a million today—and the entire system is stretched.

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[The Wonderful Company, the largest almond grower in the world] chose to develop *Osmia lignaria,* a native mason bee known as the blue orchard bee, or BOB.

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In 2017 Wonderful needed about 76,000 honeybee colonies to pollinate its almonds (at two colonies per acre). But that number will diminish by 320 this spring because [Gordon Wardell, director of bee biology for the Wonderful Company] will put 128,000 female BOBs into the orchards—the largest deployment ever. If Wardell's experiment succeeds, the results could have far-reaching implications for the almond industry as well as a host of other early-blooming crops—from apples and cherries to apricots and peaches. All told, more than a million and a half acres could benefit from having BOBs as a backup—if they prove worthy this year.

Read full, original post: Building a backup bee