

Florida's honey industry embraces purity law

BY KELLY CUCULIANSKY
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Fresh from the hive, wildflower honey drips from combs where two generations of honey packers have fought for and sold pure product.

Four decades ago, members of the McGinnis family of Tropical Blossom Honey Co. began the journey to create a honey standard in the United States. The Edgewater-based packers and distributors believe if it says honey on the label then that's the only thing that should be in the package.

The late David K. McGinnis helped form a group in the 1970s to push for regulation and sponsor research for tests that could detect additives like high fructose corn syrup. The tests were eventually developed, and his son, Doug McGinnis, picked up the cause for a honey standard at the federal level with other activists in the early 2000s.

That nationwide rule hasn't come through, but a new regulation at the state level ensures that all honey produced, packaged and sold in Florida is pure, unadulterated product made from nectar converted by honeybees. The news for consumers is that they can have more confidence in the product, but, for folks in the honey industry, the rule gives them a tool to protect honey integrity and take violators to court.

Considering his dad stood at the forefront of the movement so many years ago, Doug McGinnis said he wasn't sure if it would ever get this far.

"This is really a historic event in Florida," said McGinnis, who co-owns the 70-year-old family business with his sister, Patricia. "He would be so happy to see that we finally have a honey standard because it was something that he had been personally working on for much of his professional life."

Along with corn syrup, other common adulterants used to cut honey include water and sugar. McGinnis, who regularly sends honey for purity testing to a lab in Germany, said a similar standard has been in place in Europe since the 1920s. While some imported honey was diluted to stretch the product, he said the rule doesn't imply there's an industrywide problem with domestic or overseas products.

"This is something that we've wanted for so long because it does give us a little more teeth and more tools to make a case for prosecution," said McGinnis, standing in the packing room where 3 to 4 million pounds of Florida and south Georgia honey are bottled annually. Florida is the first in the country to adopt a rule of this kind, and officials say it's quickly become a role model.

FEDERAL BUZZ KILL

Honey activist Nancy Gentry, who has a small beekeeping operation in Interlachen, has traveled all over the country to spread the word to industry groups about Florida's progress. Originally, the plan

was to have the Food and Drug Administration adopt the "standard of identity" for honey at the federal level, but the agency issued a statement in 2006 saying it had other priorities.

Then the "brainy idea" to have it adopted at the state level was born, Gentry said. She collaborated on the project with her husband, Richard, a former trial lawyer, McGinnis, Bill and Anna Rhodes, commercial beekeepers in Umatilla, and state Rep. Alan Hays. Now, she said, industry groups and officials from 28 states are researching how to adopt something similar.

"I don't like to brag, but the honey industry leaders see this as the most significant progress in the last 20 years -- some say even in the last 40 years," said Gentry, who tends between 40 and 60 hives and sells local honey through Cross Creek Honey Co.

Here's how the rule works: If an adulterated product is misrepresented as pure honey, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services can issue a "stop sale" order to prohibit the manufacturer, processor or merchant from selling it. After the first warning, repeat offenders would face fines of up to \$500 per violation.

COMPLIANCE

Terence McElroy, a department spokesman, said samples will be taken periodically from stores and packers and sent for testing to ensure compliance. But he said enforcement would be primarily complaint-driven. Even a consumer could report honey that seems watered down.

The new standard won't ban honey blends outright. If there are additives such as tangerine flavoring or even corn syrup, they must be clearly identified on the label.

"You can call it a honey blend or a partial honey product," McElroy said. "What you can't call it is honey."

While the interest for the identity standard has existed for decades, industry groups made a big push in 2006 when a flood of adulterated honey was shipped to Florida from overseas.

"Most of the problems we've had have been with imports, particularly from Asia," McElroy said.

Some of the honey sampled from China had antibiotics that are banned in the United States, he said. Until now, regulatory agencies couldn't successfully prosecute cases against people selling adulterated honey because there wasn't a definition on the books, said Bruce Boynton, chief executive officer of the National Honey Board. The organization is a federal research and promotion board under the U.S. Department of Agriculture that seeks to maintain and expand markets for honey and honey products.

The new rule stands as a warning "to those few dishonest individuals who try to cheat consumers and hardworking, honest beekeepers," Boynton said.