

Sustaining Whatcom Agriculture: *Farm Friends (FFs) is launching a long-term series of articles connected to the theme, “Sustaining Whatcom Agriculture.” This is our first column.*

Recently the Pickford Cinema showed, “The Queen of the Sun: What the Bees are Telling Us.” In brief it suggested that i) monoculture, ii) pesticides and iii) recombinant DNA (rDNA) aka GMOs were causing Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) a problem throughout history, but which has rapidly increased since 2006. Science is not in agreement with the film’s conclusions.

We have not had major instances of CCD in Whatcom County. Some of this may be because of the nature of our local farms. Let’s look at farming in Whatcom County. Our principal crops are forages for dairy cows, seed potatoes, raspberries and blueberries. They are grown on large fields and our farmers rotate land use for disease and insect control reasons. That is hardly monoculture.

If berry producers are going to maximize their yields one of the things they do is use bees. One berry farmer responded to the issue of pesticides killing bees with, “how dumb do you think I am?” He went on to explain that during pollination season he has some 1,200 – 1,300 hives of bees working for him. He was not about to go out and kill those bees.

Regarding rDNA technology, we do not use rDNA technology in our berries, milk production, or seed potatoes. The reason is simple - the market doesn’t want them. This in spite of the fact that biotechnology offers a quicker, targeted, and cost effective way for varietal development for disease and/or insect resistance and thus, among other things, reduce the need for pesticides.

An important feature of our Whatcom agriculture needs to be noted here. Because of our climate, soils, and the know how of farmers our farmers have learned over the years we can do a better job of producing milk, berries and seed potatoes in terms of quality and cost than many other areas of the world. We are competitive. We deliver products to consumers that meet their expectations for quality and at a price they are willing to pay.

Of course we could grow other crops, e.g., carrots, but as we found out years ago, carrots cost too much to grow in our county and other places can do a more cost effective job. Raise the price of carrots and farmers might go back to growing carrots. Good for farmers, but what about for consumers? It is the specialization of our farmers in those areas of food production they do best that enables them to deliver quality, safe and affordable food to the American consumers. Indeed in America our citizens have the lowest cost, quality food of any country in the world. Our Whatcom County farmers are doing their part.

Back to bees and CCD. In November 2010, the CCD Working Group (primarily based at Pennsylvania State University) reported, "...it is becoming increasingly clear that no single factor alone is responsible for CCD." Many associations (some 61 variables),

including pesticides, parasites, and pathogens were looked at. Also in 2010 Bromenshenk (University of Montana) et al. reported that a virus and a fungus provided a one-two punch that killed every colony his group studied. Neither the virus or fungus seemed able to devastate on its own; but together they were 100 percent fatal. Bromenshenk et al. went on to say that additional research is needed to determine how environmental factors such as temperatures, drought and pesticides might play a role, if any.

Where does the certitude and readiness to blame farmers in “The Queen of the Sun...” come? Our farmers seem to be pretty good at **Sustaining Whatcom Agriculture** as well as providing quality food in which we have a comparative advantage in producing at affordable prices. And, our berry farmers still have their bees.

Farm Friends Board of Directors
July 6, 2011