

Africanized Honey Bees Information Sheet

In recent years the proliferation of Africanized Honey Bees (AHB) has increased such that the Martin County School District in conjunction with Martin County and Martin County Fire/Rescue has developed a response plan in the event that there is an incident involving students and/or staff and AHB.

AHB were the by-product of researchers' attempts in Brazil to develop a more hardy honey bee for tropical climates such as Brazil. It was expected that when mated with European Honey Bees (EHB) the AHB would lose their more defensive nature and also develop a bee that could produce more honey. In 1957, 26 African queen bees escaped from a breeding program and since that time they have slowly migrated to the southern United States with the first appearance in Texas in 1990. Now, unmanaged EHB are subject to being interbred with AHB and the traits of the AHB are more dominant in this process and the bees become much more aggressive and territorial.

It is important to understand that honey bee colonies are often referred to as **swarms**. In reality, a *swarm* is a dispersal stage when honey bees are looking for a new home or nest site. Because there is no nest to defend, swarming bees are not likely to attack. It is established colonies where bees are producing wax, honey and young that present potential sting attacks.

A natural response to a sting attack is to swat at the bees, but it **extremely** important that this not be done as the AHB will be provoked even more. When bees attack or are threatened they release an "alarm pheromone" which signals others to come and attack. When there are very large numbers of bees in an established hive many of these bees may be foraging and they will eventually come in response to the signal. This means that the bees may be in an attack mode for up to an entire day. For schools, this may mean that students and staff may need to stay in the school at all times.

It is very difficult to visually distinguish AHB from EHB and only through DNA testing can the species be verified. Some key differences between AHB and EHB are as follows:

AHB are more defensive and will defend their nests with less provocation in greater numbers and for longer distances (up to ¼ mile).

AHB may swarm up to sixteen times a year whereas EHB only swarm 1 – 2 times per year. Swarming is the reproductive behavior that occurs when bees are looking for a new nest site.

AHB are NOT selective of nesting sites. They will quickly inhabit empty spaces, holes or cavities. EHB are more selective and prefer drier sites 3 – 4 feet above ground.

Precautions:

- Have a plan and communicate it with your family for avoiding/responding to stinging insects.
- In case of possible allergic reaction, have a bee sting kit available. Notify your children's school if your child is allergic to bee stings.
- Eliminate potential nesting sites. Check walls and eaves of structures and plug any holes. AHB will penetrate an opening as small as 1/8 inch.
- Remain alert for bees. Look for bees in work/play areas before using power equipment such as weed eaters, lawnmowers and chain saws...noise excites bees.
- If bees begin to chase you, run away in a straight line, cover your face, particularly your nose and mouth and hide in a car house or other building. Even if a few bees get in with you, it is better than remaining outside where there is a greater potential for larger numbers of bees and stings.
- Do **not** jump into a pool, pond or other body of water. AHB will hover above the surface for extended periods of time and wait until you surface to attack and sting. In this case drowning becomes a distinct possibility.
- Contact a local pest control operator to remove any nest you find. **Do NOT disturb the nest in any way.**
- Remove any stinger by **scraping** it with a fingernail or credit card. *Grasping the end of the stinger to pull it out will release more venom.*
- See a doctor if breathing is difficult, if you are stung several times, or you are allergic to bee stings.

The Martin County School District has developed a plan in the event that an episode of a bee sting attack occurs on one of its sites. Principals, Plant Operators and teachers and staff have been informed of the response to one of these incidents. The schools will go into a Lockdown Mode. This will ensure that all students and staff are kept in the school buildings and classrooms until the threat is over. It will also require any students outside the buildings to be recalled into the school for protection. In the event that a group of students on a play field is attacked, the teachers supervising these students must be directed back inside the buildings. The bees that enter the building can be dealt with later.

Martin County Fire/Rescue has been extremely proactive with the school district in determining the response to these types of attacks and in the event of an attack at a school, firefighters and rescue personnel, will respond to the site and attempt to mitigate the situation.

Please note that in the event of an AHB attack at a school site, as in other lockdown procedures, parents will not be permitted to enter the building except as instructed by Martin County Fire Rescue. This may mean that drop-off and/or pick-up can be delayed for extended periods of time. The School District and Martin County Fire/Rescue will work to provide the maximum level of safety to the students and staff during this time.