

To bee or not to bee?

For Marion man, it's no question



PHOTO BY BRITT COMBS | JCOMBS@MCDOWELLNEWS.COM

Ray Revis, beekeeper, among the beehives on his 40-acre farm. He received a \$6,000 Ag Options grant to support his efforts to breed Russian honeybees.

Ag Options grant will help with Russian honeybee project

By Britt Combs

jcombs@mcdowellnews.com

There's been a lot of buzz about the decline of the honeybee population in the past few years. Bees face a lot of pressures in North America, including parasites, drought and invasions by Africanized honeybees.

Ray Revis, a McDowell beekeeper and president of the McDowell Honeybee Chapter of the N.C. State Beekeepers Association, makes his living breeding queens to supply to farmers throughout America. This year he received a \$6,000 Ag Options grant to support his work raising and supplying Russian honeybees.

The WNC Agricultural Options

Program awarded 42 farmers grants totaling \$225,000 this year to assist them in completing farm diversification projects, according to a press release from the N.C. Cooperative Extension.

Revis' Fairview Road farm has been home to beehives since his grandfather bought the place after he lost his Cherokee home to the expanding national forest. The farm has hundreds of hives. Many, he said, are dead. He opened several to show the abandoned combs inside.

But he continues his breeding work, explaining that his particular trade is the breeding of bees, rather than honey.

Revis is enthusiastic about the abil-

ity of Russian honeybees to resist the mites that have killed so many bees since 1987. Some success in parasite resistance can be had by introducing Russian queens into European hives, but the hybrid bees lose their desirable characteristics in a few generations.

It is best to acquire entire Russian hives, queen and all, he said.

"It's been a terrible year for bees," he said. The rains of 2009 kept the bees from foraging for extensive periods, he explained.

"Last year when the tulip poplar started blooming, the rain came and washed the nectar away," he stated.