NYC beekeepers swarm City Hall to protest ban

By SUZANNE MA – Jun 23, 2009

NEW YORK (AP) — There's a secret buzzing around the rooftops and backyard gardens of New York.

Despite city regulations prohibiting it, hundreds of New Yorkers have kept beehives on rooftops and backyard gardens for years, defying the law in their efforts to create something sustainable in the urban environment.

They're people like 61-year-old Deborah Romano, a gardener and first-time beekeeper in Brooklyn. She had hopes of selling honey at the city's various green markets — but that dream was put on hold when a complaint drew city inspectors, she was ordered to pay a fine and her hive was removed.

"I grew up in the 60s; I haven't always been law-abiding," Romano joked. "But really, I wasn't thinking about the legality of it. I was more thinking about the company I'd be keeping," she said, referring to the family of President Barack Obama, which recently installed a hive in the south lawn of the White House.

It's an issue that has bee enthusiasts, well, abuzz. More than a dozen gathered Tuesday on the steps of City Hall in support of Romano and to push a city bill that would legalize beekeeping in the nation's largest metropolis.

The New York City Health Code prohibits keeping bees and more than 100 other wild animals, including iguanas, venomous snakes, ferrets and elephants. The Health Department maintains that bees are venomous insects that can sting people and in some cases cause a severe allergic reaction.

So far this year, the Health Department has received 49 bee or wasp complaints. Nine inspections have been conducted, and just four summonses have been issued.

But those in favor of city beekeeping point out that honeybees help pollinate plants and flowers. Beekeepers, they said, are performing a public service. Beekeeping is currently legal in cities including Chicago; Atlanta; Portland, Ore.; San Francisco; Seattle; Minneapolis; Toronto; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Honeybees are "the least likely to sting you," as opposed to wasps and hornets, said Jackie Berger, executive director of Just Food, a New York-based group supporting sustainable food sources.

"Unless you go up and kick their hive, they're really not interested in people," she said. "For them, a sting is a suicide mission. They do not survive it. So it's really a last-ditch effort of a honeybee."

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer said the proposal to legalize beekeeping would impose a licensing system on all city beekeepers.

"Right now we have the worst of both worlds. We have people who want to engage in this activity but they don't want to be outlawed. Meanwhile, you have an underground beekeeping world that we're not regulating at all," he said.

"We know a lot of people are keeping bees," he said. "What we don't know is whether all of them know what they're doing."

Romano said she never considered herself a criminal. She would put on a veil, long sleeves and pants, then snap on latex gloves before approaching her backyard beehive cautiously, with a smoking tin can in hand, the slender stream of smoke keeping the bees calm.

Then, one by one, she'd pull out the hive's panels, inspecting the tens of thousands of bees buzzing around the hive.

She installed the hives in April after checking with most of her neighbors to make sure they were "fine" with the bees. Still, someone made a call to the city to complain.

"I don't know why (that neighbor) did it," she said at the rally. "But my guess is that it probably was a combination of ignorance and fear. They didn't understand how vital bees are to our very existence on the planet, and a more livable existence in NYC. They probably didn't realize that honeybees and other pollinating insects are more endangered than dangerous."

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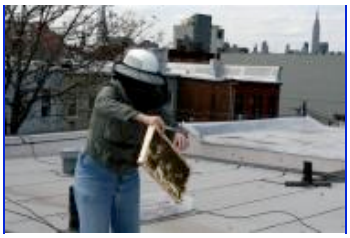

In this April 18, 2009 photo, a beekeeper, who did not want to be identified, pulls out panels from her rooftop beehive to check on the condition of her bees in the Brooklyn borough of New York. Keeping beehives in New York City is illegal under the same law that bans venomous snakes, ferrets and elephants. But beekeepers have secretly tended to them for years in backyards and on rooftops, and now they want the rules changed to make it legal. (AP Photo/Suzanne Ma)

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