



Photos by Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Beekeeper Marcus Hill handles a successful beehive in an almond orchard near Desert Creek Bulk Bees.

Almond crop faces ‘catastrophic’ threat

U.S. beekeepers are seeing worst honeybee die-off in decades

By Maliya Ellis

Last month, trucks loaded with beehives rolled into Desert Creek Bulk Bee’s Fresno-area facility, delivering millions of honeybees primed to pollinate almond trees across the Central Valley. But operations manager Marcus Hill noticed that as many as half of each truck’s hives were dead.

“Usually you might get 5% to 6% that look like that, but when it’s most of the truck, truck after truck after truck after truck, you know pretty quickly that something’s wrong,” said Hill, himself a beekeeper who splits his time between California and Texas.

Beekeepers nationwide have reported stunning losses to already-precarious bee populations this year — commercial beekeepers lost an average of 62% of their bees from June 2024 to February 2025, according to a survey of 702 beekeepers administered by Project Apis m., a nonprofit dedicated to beekeeping research. Factoring in losses from smaller beekeepers, the industry saw a “catastrophic” loss of



A bee pollinates an almond blossom in an orchard near Fresno. Unlike other crops, almond trees’ biology makes them dependent on honeybees.

1.1 million colonies this year, the nonprofit said in a statement.

Losses on that scale imperil each element of the complex pollination infrastructure that underpins much of domestic agriculture — from beekeepers, to bee brokers, to growers of pollination-dependent crops, which run the gamut from almonds to melons to cherries to vegetables.

Chief among the at-risk

crops are almonds. Every February, millions of almond trees in California’s Central Valley burst into pink and white blossoms, which eventually become almonds — but only if pollinated.

Unlike other crops, which can self-pollinate or rely on wind, beetles or other methods for pollination, almond trees’ biology makes them dependent on honeybees, said Aaron

Smith, a professor of agricultural and resource economics at UC Berkeley. As many as 90% of the nation’s bees migrate — or are trucked in — to California for the all-important almond bloom, he said.

With so many hives wiped out this year, some beekeepers said there might not be enough bees left alive to pollinate almonds, the state’s fifth

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Officials seek new approach on drugs

Expert’s help sought to create a tailored intervention plan for S.F.

By Maggie Angst

David Kennedy has devoted his life to developing new approaches to curb gun violence and dismantle open drug markets.

In Boston, interventions adopted under Kennedy’s direction led to a 63% decline in youth homicides. And in High Point, N.C., the city almost entirely eliminated open drug use and dealing over three years and saw a steep decline in violent crime, according to studies.

So could Kennedy — a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and founder of the National Network for Safe Communities — help San Francisco eradicate its relentless open-air drug markets?

Some city officials want to find out.

Supervisor Bilal Mahmood, with the support of Board President Rafael Mandelman and Supervisor Matt Dorsey, will make a formal request to Mayor Daniel Lurie and the board on Tuesday to hire Kennedy as an independent contractor to analyze San Francisco’s open-air drug markets and create an intervention plan tailored to the city.

“We can kind of view Kennedy as the medical specialist who is going to diagnose the problem as it is occurring in San Francisco,” Mahmood said.

The request comes as Lurie is trying to tackle the city’s drug crisis in multiple places. After a push to calm U.N. Plaza and the Civic Center

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CURTIS KIMBALL 1978-2025

Chef became a street food pioneer in S.F.

By Mario Cortez

Curtis Kimball, who brought San Franciscans together with his Mission District crème brûlée cart and neighborhood pancake parties in Bernal Heights, died of an aortic aneurysm last week. He was 46 years old.

Kimball and his off-the-wall cart project — for which he donned a chef’s toque and white jacket to torch crème brûlée in the middle of a park — didn’t just charm passersby. It helped develop regulations for the many San Francisco street food vendors that followed. His knack for capturing peoples’ imaginations could also be seen in his pandemic-era pancake parties, which cooked up hundreds of free flapjacks for buzzing crowds.

“He was always so eager to put on a party for people without any expectations of getting anything in return,” Kimball’s wife Nicole Belanger remembered. “He just had a desire to connect with people and to be a force for others to connect with each other.”

Kimball was born on Nov. 5, 1978, to Juli and William Kimball in Prescott, Ariz. He grew up with

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Reverend pushes back on immigration

By Olivia Cruz Mayeda

The Rev. Deborah Lee stood in a San Francisco church under a pale blue ceiling dotted with dark blue stars. Wearing a long, white robe and a green hoodie, she spoke about her commitments to loving her immigrant neighbors while flanked by rabbis, pastors and Buddhist monks holding posters with the word “sanctuary.”

“In my Christian tradition, we call them God’s executive orders,” said Lee, executive director of the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, which advocates for immigrants and incarcerated people.

Lee, the daughter of Chi-

nese immigrants and a longtime champion for immigrant rights once arrested in 2013 while blocking an Immigration and Enforcement bus in downtown San Francisco, took over the Oakland-based social justice nonprofit in 2018, at the height of the first Trump administration. Seven years later, she and her fellow clergy members are again trying to come between a president whose mass deportation agenda they oppose on moral grounds and the immigrants it has in its crosshairs.

“The racism, discrimination and generational harm inflicted then feels dangerous,” Lee said.

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Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

Rev. Deborah Lee, center, is the executive director of Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, which advocates for immigrants and incarcerated people.



BEES

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most valuable crop, according to 2023 data. Hill estimated that growers might come up short by 300,000 to 500,000 hives; no official estimates were available.

“My phone has been ringing off the hook for a couple weeks now with other beekeepers, brokers, growers, all of the above, searching desperately for bees,” said Hill, who was able to scrounge up the roughly 40,000 hives the company had promised to almond growers this season but turned down many others. “If I can help, I do what I can.”

Widespread bee losses could have a “large effect” on almond production, Smith said. “In a typical year, we use about one bee for every 20 almonds that are produced,” he said. “That’s a lot of almonds potentially not produced.”

Ryan Burris, president of the California State Beekeepers Association, said bee shortages for almonds have seemed possible for a couple of years, and “this year we might actually see it.”

In a joint statement, the Almond Alliance and the California Almond Board said they were aware of hive loss reports. “We take our partnership with the beekeeping industry seriously and are prepared to support with additional resources once we learn more,” spokespeople for the groups said.

Because almonds are often sold raw, supply shortages could translate directly into steeper costs for consumers, Smith said. “If you’re buying raw almonds in the store to snack on, the price of those could conceivably go up quite a bit.”

In both scope and symptoms, this year’s bee die-off is reminiscent of the last major bee disaster: colony collapse disorder, a phenomenon with still-elusive origins that scientists estimate killed between 750,000 and 1 million colonies over the winter of 2007-08.

Just like with CCD, these losses have a “strange suite of symptoms,” said Danielle Downey, executive director of Project Apis m. Beekeepers are not opening their hives to find boxes of bee carcasses; rather, they’re finding colonies stocked with food, a queen bee and larvae — but no adult bees.

“It’s a colony that looks



Photos by Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Beekeeper Marcus Hill handles boxes of dead beehives on Feb. 19 at the Desert Creek Bulk Bees central hub in Riverdale. Beekeepers nationwide lost an average of 62% of their bees since June 2024.

like it was good pretty recently, and now, where are the bees?” Downey said. “It obviously happened pretty fast, because otherwise the resources in the colony would be depleted.”

In a statement, the United States Department of Agriculture said it is “aware of the unusual losses to our nation’s honeybee colonies” and “concerned about its potential impact on food production and supply.” Researchers from the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service collected samples from beekeepers and are in the process of analyzing them for pathogens and parasites, the agency said. So far, the losses do not seem to be attributable to levels of parasitic mites nor to beekeepers’ mite control practices, nutritional supplements or wintering strategies, the USDA said.

There’s no shortage of possible culprits for the die-off, Downey said, citing the “four P’s” of bee threats: pesticides, parasites, pathogens and poor nutrition. To make matters worse, beehive theft is “spiking,” she said, as the precious pollination resource becomes scarce.

Beekeepers are used to being buffeted by a “perfect storm” of challenges — so much so that winter loss rates of 40% to 45% have become accepted as somewhat normal, said Blake Shook, who owns Desert Creek, a Texas-based company that manufactures honey and transports bees to California every year. Those high loss rates are



Widespread bee losses could have a significant effect on the state’s almond production.

sustainable only because beekeepers can recoup their losses by breeding the remaining bees, he said.

But loss rates of more than 50% go beyond the industry’s “breaking point,” Shook said. “Once we get to 70% to 80%, you can’t recoup your numbers anymore. It’s a scary place, and we should be worried about national food security.”

For commercial beekeepers, who have been operating on razor-thin

profit margins for years, this die-off is the latest blow, Downey said.

The losses translate to about \$428 million in lost income from almond pollination contracts and \$225 million in replacement costs for Project Apis m. survey respondents, who account for about 68% of the country’s bees.

That’s probably an underestimate, because the survey does not include lost income from blighted honey production or non-almond pollination con-

tracts left unfulfilled.

If beekeepers “can’t make it, there’s no backup plan,” Downey said. “If these businesses fail, growers will find a very hard time getting their crop pollinated.”

Ryan Jacobsen, an almond grower and the CEO of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, said that if he did not have honeybee pollination, “I would not have a crop.” Though self-pollinating almond varieties are on the rise, Jacobsen said, most growers he knows still rely on honeybees.

Though Jacobsen was able to receive all the hives he requested, he said he won’t know for sure whether the pollination was of top quality until May, when almond trees begin to bear fruit. If honeybees are weak or compromised, or if cold and wet weather inhibits their flight, they sometimes pollinate less effectively. “We’re not in the panic mode yet,” Jacobsen said. “But obviously that’s an uncertainty until after the pollination has come and went and we can see what took place.”

Logan Clancey, a bee broker who owns Bee Connections in Phoenix, barely managed to find enough bees to fulfill the 59,000 hives he had promised to almond growers in Fresno County. Clancey fielded calls from other almond growers searching for an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 more hives, but he couldn’t find enough supply to meet their demand, leav-

ing them “in a panic.”

“It was just a lot harder to source them, and the ones we did get, the quality wasn’t as good as it normally was,” he said.

In normal years, the beehives Clancey brokers are bustling with bees — out of 18 frames in each box, 10 or 11 of those frames are typically covered with bees, a metric for beehive health.

But this year, Clancey said, the hives he brokered had many fewer, with just 7.5 out of 18 frames flush with bees.

Clancey worries that honeybee losses could harm his business, which depends on maintaining good relationships with produce growers — from almonds to blueberries, apples to cranberries.

“If we take bees that aren’t up to standard, that damages our relationship with the growers, and if we simply can’t come up with the bees, it also damages our relationship,” he said.

Tim Hollmann, who operates about 7,000 hives in South Dakota with his wife and two sons, said his family is struggling to keep up morale after losing more than 72% of his bees this year, leaving him with just 1,824 viable hives.

He usually sends 3,500 to 4,000 hives to California for the almond bloom; this year he sent just 1,750. That lost revenue from unfulfilled contracts, plus the money he expects to shell out to buy replacement bees, makes this die-off a “double whammy,” Hollmann said.

“As a family farm, it’s hard to sit around the dinner table and not be anything but depressed about the day’s work,” he said. Hollmann’s “tremendous” die-offs have him scratching his head; he said he did not find excessive mite counts in his hives, and the residue left in empty hives does not indicate colonies wiped out by a virus.

“It’s not like following a gunshot wound to somebody’s torso — it’s not an obvious kill, if you will,” he said. “So what is the kill? What’s happening here?”

Hollmann said he worries that the die-off portends a larger problem.

“We’re the canary in the coal mine,” he said. “If bees are dying now, that tells you something is wrong with the ecosystem, and what that is remains to be seen.”

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DRUGS

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moved illicit drug activity to Sixth Street, Lurie surged enforcement resources there and opened a holding area for those arrested for drug-related crimes. But that initiative seems to have driven people into other areas of the city, including around Jefferson Square Park in the Fillmore District and the Mission, which the mayor and police say they are working to address. Meanwhile, accidental drug overdose deaths are on the rise after months of declines, and a sentiment that San Francisco has become too permissive to open-air drug use is building steam.

Dorsey also plans to introduce legislation Tuesday to codify that the city’s “primary objective” of its drug policies is to stop illicit drug use and help people attain long-term recovery from addiction. The legislation, in part, is meant to address concerns from some residents and city leaders that it is too focused on harm reduction and not enough on treatment. Dorsey made a request in late 2022 to bring in Kennedy, and the professor developed a proposal to address the city’s illicit drug

markets, but the deal was never finalized. The estimated cost of the two-year initiative at that time was about \$550,000, according to city records.

“The preeminent expert in drug market interventions is David Kennedy,” Dorsey said in a recent interview. “If anybody can help us coordinate our city response, I think it’s him.”

Since San Francisco is already spending hundreds of millions of dollars on public health and public safety initiatives to try and tackle the city’s drug crisis, Mahmood said bringing in Kennedy’s team to better focus the city’s efforts would be a “high return on investment.”

Kennedy’s strategy — referred to as “Drug Market Intervention” — calls for disrupting the supply of drugs into the market and creating a maintenance plan to ensure the market stays closed. His team saw success in cities like High Point, N.C. and Nashville during the crack epidemic, but he told the Chronicle that addressing San Francisco’s current markets, which are dominated by the sale of the cheap, highly addictive synthetic opioid fentanyl, will likely require its own unique approach.



Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle 2023

Enforcement surges designed to halt open-air drug markets in the city seem to have succeeded only in driving activity into different parts of the city.

“I’m not presuming that any of the particular tactics that worked for the crack era markets will work here,” Kennedy said in an interview. “But I wouldn’t be agreeing to work with the city if I didn’t think that there was real promise here.”

Under the strategy used by Kennedy’s team during the crack epidemic, officers arrested violent dealers and hosted interventions with nonviolent dealers. During those interventions, which consisted of law enforcement officers, social service providers and the dealers’ friends and relatives, officers offered the nonviolent dealers an ultimatum. If they continued to deal, police had built criminal cases against

them that would be pursued. But if they agreed to walk away from dealing, the cases were suspended. The social service providers then offered to help the dealers make lifestyle changes through housing, drug treatment or employment assistance.

Traditional law enforcement responses to drug markets, he found, fails to fix the problem as street-level dealers are easily replaceable.

San Francisco has seen that trend play out in real time over the past few years.

During the pandemic, as businesses closed, most people retreated from public spaces and homeless shelters were thinned out to create social distancing, San Fran-

cisco’s illicit drug markets in the city’s strained Tenderloin and SoMa neighborhoods proliferated in plain sight. Meanwhile, narcotics arrests dropped and initiatives to increase treatment access and resources were paused.

At the same time, San Francisco overdose deaths soared, the number of tents and people suffering in the streets from addiction grew, and frustration from neighbors spiked.

Then-Mayor London Breed, who once supported safe injection sites where people could use drugs safely under supervision, began denigrating the city’s harm reduction policies and pushed for more punishment of drug users and dealers.

Still, an aggressive push by local, state and federal law enforcement to dismantle the city’s most brazen daytime drug markets did not stop operations. The market merely adjusted. As enforcement efforts escalated in the Tenderloin, dealers moved to other parts of the city and now operate primarily at night, when the city’s street ambassadors and many police officers head home.

In an interview with the Chronicle, Kennedy would not specify what policies he thought would

be most effective. Instead, he said he would start by meeting with frontline law enforcement officers, public health and social service workers and other experts to understand the inner workings of San Francisco’s markets, including how organized the network of dealers are, what segment of the market is dealers buying drugs and taking them to other parts of the state, and where users on the streets of San Francisco are coming from. Then his team would tailor an intervention policy based on the intel they gather.

To guide Kennedy’s work, Mahmood is proposing to expand the city’s Drug Market Agency Coordination Center, a public safety interagency task force started under Breed, to a 24/7 operation to arrest more overnight drug dealers. He also wants to see the city add more street ambassadors to deter drug markets from popping up in new areas and increase support for workforce and youth development programs to prevent young people from getting pulled into the drug trade.

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