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As concerns grow over the health of honeybees in the US, pressure is mounting to find reliable alternatives for pollinating crops such as almonds, berries, and apples. This fall, one company in the Pacific Northwest even began offering money to anyone who could provide excess mason bee (*Osmia lignaria*) cocoons. But experts caution that very little is known about these small blue and black pollinators, and more research will be required before this species can be used effectively and sustainably.

“People are really clamoring for information right now,” says Theresa Pitts-Singer, a research entomologist with the Agricultural Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture (ARS-USDA, Logan, UT), “but there aren’t that many scientists involved in studying these bees.”

Most of what is known, she continues, hasn’t really been tested on larger scales. Instead, many of the techniques currently used to raise and sell the bees are learned through trial and error by those who stand to profit from them. These techniques are then shared between entrepreneurs who exchange information by word-of-mouth.

The Orchard Bee Association, which was founded only 2 years ago to accelerate the production and use of several *Osmia* species, still has fewer than 50 members.

Dave Hunter, the owner of a company called Crown Bees (Woodinville, WA), hopes that new research can improve industry practices, making them more sustainable. It was Hunter’s company that began offering “cash for cocoons” this year. According to Hunter, the collected bee cocoons are carefully inspected for signs of disease or parasites, cleaned, and sorted for future sale by their respective state of origin.

“Most *Osmia* bees are not transcontinental,” explains Jim Cane, a bee biologist with ARS-USDA (Logan, UT). “There is a heritable adaptation to regional climates,” he continues, so that moving cocoons from a colder state like Utah to raise them in a warmer state like California can require some pre-wintering manipulations of the bees to acclimate them to the different conditions.

“We’re learning that it isn’t sustainable to use the bees in the way that they were used in the past,” says Clinton Merrill (Logan, UT), whose company, Mason Bees For Sale, relies on a “bee farming” method to manage bees in the areas where they have been found and trapped. Better science may ensure a more stable future for pollination services, he adds.