



Michael CRANDON MP

Member for **Coomera**



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Forward:

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the “Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia” enquiry. As the State Member for Coomera, the most northerly state electorate in the City of Gold Coast, I have been very concerned about the actions taken by the state government in managing this program.

Simply put, it is my view that the decision to use a suppression strategy, as opposed to a eradication strategy along the coastal strip, including the sugar cane growing area in the Coomera Electorate was flawed.

The recent revelations that red imported fire ants have now been detected in NSW have confirmed my argument, put to Minister Furner and Bio Security Queensland on numerous occasions, that without an eradication strategy on the northern Gold Coast, it would only be a matter of time before they would march into NSW, along the coastal strip.

The blame for this outcome must be put squarely at the feet of the Minister, for turning a blind eye to my concerns and the concerns voiced by my community.

I note the terms of reference are as follows:

- a. the expected costs and impacts, if red imported fire ants are able to spread across Australia, on human health, social amenity, agriculture, the environment, infrastructure and regional workers;
- b. an assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants;
- c. an evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans;
- d. the effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants;
- e. learnings of Varroa mite in managing red imported fire ants; and
- f. any other related matters

Focus of Submission:

My submission will focus on item (b) an assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants; item (d) the effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants; and item (f) any other related matters.

Detection of Red Imported Fire Ants in the City of Gold Coast:

The fire ant issue first came to my attention on June 1st 2015, when I was notified by Bio Security Queensland (BSQ) that there had been changes made to the Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA) Restricted Area and then on June 25th 2015, I received an email from BSQ regarding what appeared to be the first fire ant detection in the State Seat of Coomera and the City of Gold Coast.

Following my enquiries, I became concerned about the issue and the impact this scourge could have on the residence and businesses of the Coomera electorate. So much so that I spoke in the Queensland Parliament on September 9th 2015 (copy of speech attached).

As time progressed, I had ad hoc conversations with BSQ, which were very concerning to me due to the lack of action by BSQ in their efforts to reel in the spread of fire ants on the northern Gold Coast (NGC).

The Coomera Electorate is one of eleven state electorates, and the most northerly electorate, on the Gold Coast and is approximately 340 sq kilometers. By geographic area, it makes up more than 25% of the City of Gold Coast (1,334 sq kilometers). It is largely a Regional Landscape and Rural Production Area (RLRPA), interspersed with an urban growth that has seen it as the fastest growing region in Queensland, by population, over the past 10 years.

SEQ Regional Plan

With reference to the designation as RLRPA, on page 83 of Shaping Southeast Queensland (SEQ) – SEQ Regional Plan 2017, the strategy for Element 6: Natural economic resources: The region's natural economic resources are managed sustainably and efficiently to meet the needs of existing and future communities.

Strategies:

- 1 Conserve agricultural areas, including those which provide communities with an affordable supply of fresh food, food security and export earning potential (Map 5d and Table 11b).
- 2 Protect and manage the region's limited extractive resources, such as sand and quarry rock, to ensure the ready availability of construction materials to support cost-effective development into the future (Map 5d and Table 11b).
- 3 Protect and enhance the region's native and plantation forests in the Regional Landscape and Rural Production Area.
- 4 Protect, enhance and sustainably manage estuarine and freshwater habitats to sustain fish stock levels and maximise fisheries production for the ongoing benefit of the environment and community.

5 Protect the region's drinking water catchments and aquifer recharge areas from inappropriate development to avoid compromising the delivery of a safe, secure and cost-effective drinking water supply (Map 5d and Table 11b).

I bring the committee's particular attention to strategies 1, 2 and 3. In considering these strategies, it is evident that BSQ did not give sufficient consideration to the impact RIFA would have on the ability of the NGC community, to manage these natural resources, sustainably and efficiently, to meet the needs of existing **and future communities**.

The lack of consideration has, and will continue to have, an economic and lifestyle impact on the NGC, a community that continues to be the fastest growing region in the state.

Efforts Calling For Eradication Falling on Deaf Ears

In 2018, at various times from June 13th 2018 to December 12th 2019, I met with senior managers of the erroneously named Fire Ant Eradication Program and finally the minister responsible for the program, The Hon Mark Furner MP, Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities.

In this period of time, I asked several Questions on Notice, raised the matter at Estimates Hearings, sponsored petition to the Queensland parliament, participated in radio interviews, raising the concerns that I continue to have about the lack of focus by the Department of Agriculture and BSQ.

I note that in this period of time the message from the General Manager, in the Fire Ant News dated August 9th 2019 was as follows "2 years into the 10 year program – the strategy is working." "On track to rid our country of the 'super pest' once and for all." "Focused on eradication etc etc".

Nothing could be further from the truth. At that time and the 5 years leading up to that time, it was made clear to me by the Minister and by senior management of BSQ that their strategy for the NGC and Logan City was not an eradication program, it was a suppression program. A suppression program that was a complete and utter failure.

Throughout 2020 commencing on January 15th 2020 through to November 2020 my lobbying and raising of awareness once again continue to no avail. During this period I continued to lobby for the commencement of an eradication program commencing south of the Coomera River and moving north into the newly developing urban areas and the 13,000 hectare RLRPA, with a goal of stopping the march of the fire ant colonies south and ultimately to the NSW border, all to no avail.

My lobbying included once again meeting with various management, concerned groups, including Cane Growers Rocky Point, other concerned colleagues and the Principal Engagement Officer of BSQ.

During this period a damning review found that the Fire Ant Program was going backwards. At the same time reports were provided confirming fire ants were now south of the Coomera River and continuing their march south.

In 2021 it was revealed that a free self-treatment program was to be offered to areas in Logan City and the Gold Coast. Alarming on April 22nd 2021, I was notified by the department that the NGC community was not included in this program.

On May 10th 2021, I received a response from Minister Furner confirming the NGC was not included on the free self-treatment program. Following various other interaction with the department and other concerned stakeholders. I met with Minister Furner on December 1st 2021.

Refer to the copy of the handwritten notes taken by Michael Crandon MP

Fast forward now to 2023 and finally due to the march south by the fire ants to less than 5 kilometres from the NSW border, we now saw in the media Gold Coast councilors calling for action. We now see a decision by the Minister, at least 5 years too late in my estimation, to form a barrier at the southern end of the Gold Coast to stop the further march south of fire ants and to work north from there to systematically eradicate fire ants whilst **continuing with the failed suppression program on the Northern Gold Coast.**

It is beyond absurd that something I was calling for that could have been properly managed as an eradication program using the Coomera River as the line in the sand all those years ago, is now employed just 5 kilometers “as the queen ant flies”, from NSW, with the NSW border the line in the sand.

As the Invasive Species council said recently in a press release: *'If fire ants spread across Australia they will be worse than rabbits, cane toads, foxes and feral cats combined. They are now racing towards the NSW border, but our governments are stuck like rabbits in the headlights.'*

I have continued my lobbying throughout 2023 and have now been joined by a chorus of others raising concerns. It is such a pity that it has taken a myriad of Gold Coast City councillors and more than 20 media stories both in the Gold Coast Bulletin, Courier Mail and other media to finally get some action from Minister Furner and his Federal counterpart Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Murray Watt MP, to take some action on this matter, whilst leading up to this time Minister Furner sat on a damning report from 2021, that was ringing the alarm bells and should have been acted on by the Minister then.

Urgent Need for an Eradication Program

On the home front (my home front), on behalf of the residents of the Coomera electorate, both farmers and residents in the urban areas, I urge this committee to make a recommendation to the Federal government that they immediately commence an eradication program for the broad acreage currently under sugarcane and the surrounding farmland, bushland and urban area because the NGC continues to be the breeding ground for fire ants, and no amount of effort in an eradication program further south will be successful unless we go from a suppression program to an eradication program on the NGC.

Free Bait Program Inadequate for Purpose:

Unbelievably, the free bait program that is now being rolled out to my community consists of a maximum of 4 x 500g containers per resident. This is sufficient for approximately a quarter of a hectare (2,500 sq mtrs) of treatment. This is despite the fact that hundreds of properties in my electorate exceed that area by at least 5 times.

When questioned about this, the department advised me that they are “running a further trial” (apparently all of the trials that have been run so far were not sufficient), on only 10 properties across Logan and the Gold Coast, to determine the “viability of a greater supply”.

Concluding Comments:

In conclusion, the Queensland government Minister responsible for the program, The Hon Mark Furner MP, has been complicit in the mismanagement of this program, either with the full knowledge that it was failing or by being foolish enough to believe the preposterous advice he was receiving from those responsible for its failure.

As proof of the tardiness and mismanagement by those responsible for the erroneously named RIFA Eradication Program, the Minister advised me he was happy to organise a briefing on June 26th 2023, after my initial request to the department on May 31st 2023. It took until August 1st 2023, before the minister’s office contacted my office to arrange a meeting date. The meeting finally took place on August 24th 2023.

Almost 3 months to arrange a briefing! Why?

Epilogue:

We now find, at the end of November 2023, RIFA have now been detected 13 kilometres into NSW. The prediction I made a year ago, on ABC radio, was that they would be there by 2025, due to the failures of this program. They’ve arrived more than a year early.

Support Documents included:

23/11/10 - Response to Question on Notice (QoN) 2259
03/06/15 - Email from Biosecurity QLD (BSQ)
17/0915 - Adjournment Speech in Queensland Parliament – M. Crandon MP
24/03/18 - Logan News – Fire ants on the march – Robyn Wuth
02/08/18 - Letter from Minister for Agricultural Industry Development & Fisheries
12/02/19 - Response to QoN 16
03/04/19 - Response to QoN 528
12/04/19 - Logan News – Building sites infested as fire ant program fails, says expert
11/06/19 - Response to QoN 897
09/08/19 - Message from General Manager – Dept. of Agriculture & Fisheries
20/08/19 - Response to QoN 1131
09/10/19 - Response to Petition No 3163-19
13/11/19 - Response to Petition No 3218-19
22/04/21 - Response to QoN 500
01/08/21 - National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review August ‘21

01/11/21 - Handwritten notes – Meeting with Minister for Agricultural Industry Development & Fisheries
25/07/23 - Gold Coast Bulletin (GCB) - Waging war on fire ants
25/07/23 - GCB - Cartoon
26/07/23 - GCB - Fire ants' \$470k sting
27/07/23 - GCB - 'Flying the white flag' on fire ant eradication amid fears war on pests lost
07/08/23 - GCB - Fire ant strategy falls short of expectations
07/08/23 - GCB - Editorial - Pest Invasion
07/08/23 - Courier Mail - Blazing row over fire ants
08/08/23 - GCB – Paying to conquer fire ants
10/08/23 - GCB – Fire ant program 'an absolute joke', say councillor
11/08/23 - Northern Rivers Watch - Fears as 'super pest' closes in
18/08/23 - GCB - Sniffer dogs in border ant fight
23/11/23 - Map - Fire ant eradication map
27/11/23 - GCB - Out of control fire ants jump the border
27/11/23 – Media Statement - Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry

Regards

Michael Crandon MP
Member for Coomera