



Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

Via email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

20th December 2023

To the Committee Secretariat,

Submission on Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into red imported fire ants in Australia.

The Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales (NCC) is the state's peak environment organisation. We represent over 170 environment groups across NSW. Together we are dedicated to protecting and conserving the wildlife, landscapes and natural resources of NSW.

NCC strongly supports urgent action to ensure the eradication of red fire ants in Australia, in order to protect our threatened species and ecosystems.

We are very concerned about the recent spread of fire ants into Northern NSW, and urge governments to increase funding where necessary to ensure their eradication.

Additional control measures must be implemented urgently, recognising both the compounding efficiencies of early and swift action, and that any reduction in budget would risk undermining the gains already made.

NCC wishes to briefly highlight the ecological impacts of fire ants, and the need for eradication to remain the goal in Australia.

Ecological Impacts

The impacts of fire ants on Australia's ecology are difficult to quantify given their novelty in the Australian context. However experience in the United States and Queensland to date suggests that the impact could be significant and devastating for many species, and the integrity of ecological communities.

Fire ants are listed as a Key Threatening Process under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC)*.

As the EPBC listing states:

Studies in North America have found that fire ants largely replace the native invertebrate predatory species, becoming the dominant predator and disrupting invertebrate-based food webs. Fire ants have the potential to threaten the survival and abundance of native fauna, particularly invertebrate species.

Ants are a fundamental component of Australian ecosystems as a food source and for their role in ecological processes. ... Fire ants have been shown to relocate and eat seeds, which alters the ratios of the various seeds and the distribution of seeds available to develop, which can cause major changes in an ecosystem.

Other impacts include reduced survival and weight gain resulting from fire ant stings, alteration of feeding patterns and habitat use by species to avoid fire ants, reduced food availability from fire ant predation, effects on the food chain, and ecosystem changes resulting from the impact of fire ants on ecological processes. Small vertebrates can be blinded, lose digits or suffer from infection as a result of fire ant stings.

Evidence of red fire ant's biodiversity impacts in Queensland has shown:

...among vertebrates, red imported fire ants are likely to affect most species in the SE Queensland Bioregion, with effects sufficiently severe to cause population declines in ~45% of birds, ~38% of mammals, ~69% of reptiles and ~95% of amphibians.¹

Whilst these findings in relation to vertebrates are concerning, the assessments have only considered impacts on some species, and have not assessed the majority of invertebrate species likely to be significantly impacted by fire ants. This potential for wide ranging and unforeseen ecological implications is of grave concern and strengthens the need to ensure eradication from Australia.

The devastating impacts on ecosystems could be witnessed across Australia. Climate analysis for the Queensland Government 10 year eradication plan shows that most of Australia presents suitable climate conditions to support their survival. In NSW alone it shows that 99.31% of the state could be potentially affected by red fire ants.²

The need for eradication

NCC supports the need for national eradication of fire ants. Alternative options to simply manage, contain and engage in asset protection from fire ants present unacceptable risks to Australia's ecology. NCC supports the current response plan (2023-2027) and its aim to achieve eradication within ten years. However, we are very concerned by the recent spread of fire ants

¹ Lach L and Barker G 2013, Assessing the Effectiveness of Tramp ant Projects to Reduce Impacts on Biodiversity, The University of Western Australia and G M Barker and Research Associates, A report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra. Available at: www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/tramp-ants-projects.pdf (page 92)

² Queensland Government, 10 Year Eradication Plan, available here: https://www.fireants.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1625424/fire-ant-10-year-plan-appendices.pdf

into Northern NSW. We are also concerned by the various barriers to success of the plan, including ongoing funding uncertainty from some jurisdictions and the potential for extreme weather events to both impact control operations and further the spread of the ants.

NCC submits that the committee:

- should recommend that complete national eradication must remain the core goal of Australia's fire ant management program;
- recommend that States and territories who have not yet committed funding to the 2027 response plan should do so immediately; and
- should make recommendations that additional Commonwealth funding be provided to ensure that this goal can be met, for example by resourcing accelerations in eradication where opportunities arise and for emergency containment of new outbreaks outside the existing biosecurity zone.

More broadly, NCC is concerned that fire ants are another example of Australia's biosecurity and invasive species frameworks failing to protect our ecosystems and primary industries. Australia's ecosystems are already heavily degraded, and whilst we struggle to contain and manage the impacts of existing invasives, new species such as the fire ant are arriving and proliferating. The National Biosecurity Strategy and Sustainable biosecurity funding frameworks are welcome steps forward; however funding and resourcing remains inadequate given the scale of the threat. Situations such as the delayed funding responses from some States and territories to the fire ant eradication program undermine the effectiveness of programs. The competing invasive species priorities within jurisdictions must also be recognized, and as such there is a need for additional national leadership and resourcing from the Commonwealth.

Yours sincerely,

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Chief Executive Officer

Nature Conservation Council of NSW