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Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

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Dear Secretary

Red Imported Fire Ant (*Solenopsis invicta*) (Fire Ant)

This is our submission to the Committee. First, we ask it to consider the following sequence of reports.

August 2021

"If (the Fire Ant) moves out of (South East Queensland), the Review Panel considers, based on overseas experience, that any hope of eradication will be lost forever, and ongoing costs for all Australian jurisdictions and for rural and urban industries and communities will be far higher than the current or proposed program"

National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review Report (page 11)

13 July 2023

"Fire ants expected to march into NSW after governments delay any new action to stop spread".

Guardian headline

26 November 2023

"Queensland fire ant infestation marches over the NSW border"

ABC News online headline

The just reported advance of this invasive South American pest from Queensland into New South Wales suggests that, despite the warning from the Review Panel more than two years ago, Australia's fight to eradicate the Fire Ant is failing.

The perception is that this is the result of ongoing delay by and indecision of our governments, state and federal, and that it means that we are effectively giving up on eradication of the Fire Ant.

It may already be too late.

However, we submit that it is overwhelmingly in the interests of the people of Australia that all our governments fully commit to and fund the national program to eradicate the Fire Ant in Australia.

The likely consequences of failure will be painful and expensive for all of us and for future generations.

Consider the following extracts from the publications cited. These draw attention to the expected impact of Fire Ants in Australia, with particular reference to the adverse consequences for our environment and biodiversity, including our native invertebrates.

The impact of Fire Ants on our environment may be seen to rank in importance below the impact on our health and lifestyle, agriculture, infrastructure and economy (all of which may, according to the experts, be very seriously impacted by Fire Ants in Australia). However, this submission registers our particular concern about the predicted impact of the Fire Ants on environment and biodiversity and on many Australian species (our emphasis being on invertebrates) and the consequences which could flow to Australia from that.

1 Advice to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee on Amendments to the list of Key Threatening Processes under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.)

Fire ants have the potential to threaten the survival and abundance of native fauna, particularly invertebrate species.

...fire ants have the potential to occupy most arable land areas on mainland Australia within the next 30 years.

..... fire ants are able to consume insects at any stage of development from egg to adult, ...Because of their prevalence and efficiency, fire ants may control the balance of species within an invertebrate community..... This may indirectly affect other insectivorous species and threaten ecological processes such as seed dispersal, pollination and germination.

Fire ants feed on a wide variety of invertebrates in the United States. Evidence from the United States suggests that fire ants affect species richness and the abundance of invertebrate individuals in an area ...

Australian invertebrates that are particularly at risk are flightless carabid beetles, localised land snails, native earthworms and mygalomorph (trap-door) spiders.

The effect of fire ants on pollinators, ground-dwelling native bees and Thynid wasps is potentially devastating for the natural fertilisation of flowers and subsequent seed production of orchids.

(Fire Ants in Australia) could cause native species to become listed as threatenedrepresenting a high degree of endangerment.

2 Red Imported Fire Ant in Australia: What if we lose the war? By F. Ross Wylie and Sharon Janssen-May

Red Imported Fire Ant., one of the world's most invasive species

Red Imported Fire Ant is not just another invasive, it is a 'super pest' whose impacts, if unchecked, will surpass the combined effects of many of the pests we currently regard as Australia's worst invasive animals (rabbits, foxes, feral pigs, camels, wild dogs, feral cats, cane toads) (see McLeod 2004).

adverse impacts are likely in most sectors of the economy,.....there will also be negative impacts on public health and lifestyle, the environment and infrastructure

Wylie et al. (2016). Lach and Barker (2013) conducted an expanded assessment of the risks in the south-east Queensland bioregion, assessing a total of 123 species comprising 47 birds, 16 mammals, 32 reptiles, 19 amphibians, four freshwater fishes and five invertebrates. They concluded that, among vertebrates assessed, Red Imported Fire Ant is likely to have effects sufficiently severe to cause population declines in 45% of birds, 38% of mammals, 69% of reptiles and 95% of amphibians.

Birds with terrestrial or low arboreal nests will be impacted directly through predation of eggs or hatching chicks, and indirectly by the reduction in invertebrate densities (food source) that occurs in heavily infested areas (Allen et al. 2004)

Invertebrate communities are likely to be impacted through direct predation, competition for the same resources and interference with symbiotic relationships.

CLIMEX and Climatch modelling indicates that there are few places in Australia where Red Imported Fire Ant could not become established....

..Red Imported Fire Ant is a proven hitchhiker

As noted by eminent Australian biologist and author Tim Low (2015): “invasion debt” – the future cost of battling pests that escape today. Australia is still paying dearly for the rabbits and foxes freed more than 150 years ago’. Increased spending on Red Imported Fire Ant is justified to avert that invasion debt and avoid a repeat of history. This is a war that Australia cannot afford to lose.

Failure to pursue immediate and effective action against the Fire Ant would be inconsistent with the objectives of **2022–2032 Threatened Species Action Plan: Towards Zero Extinctions**, which include reducing risks of extinction, protecting more of the Australian continent and managing invasive species.

Our submission is that the Committee strongly recommends that all our governments act together to address this critical issue. Present and future Australians, from all parts of the country, will salute your foresight.

Yours Faithfully

Gordon Ley
President
Entomological Society of Victoria