



Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia

Terms of Reference:

- 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.*

WA Department of Health Response

Red imported fire ants (RIFA) are one of the world's most invasive ant species and are a significant pest species that can cause substantial long-term impacts on agriculture, the environment and infrastructure. They also represent a serious health concern, as they can repeatedly sting an individual resulting in very painful, burning blisters. RIFA are aggressive and will swarm and readily sting in defence of the colony resulting in individuals receiving tens and possibly hundreds of bites. RIFA stings inject venom which result in severe pain, burning and itching for up to 60 minutes, followed by blistering of the skin and then a white pustule that appears approximately one day after the sting occurs. Permanent scarring can result from stings. A systemic allergic reaction to the sting can occur if a person is hypersensitive to the stings. Hypersensitivity may be characterized by a number of symptoms, including flushing of the skin, general hives, swelling of the face, eyes, or throat, chest pains, nausea, severe sweating, and difficulty breathing or speaking. Persons experiencing these symptoms must immediately seek emergency medical assistance. Severe cases require hospitalisation, and allergic reactions can result in death, although this is rare. The cost to the community is significant especially when worker's compensation is included.

The overall economic impact associated with the management and control of RIFA is significant. The National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review August 2001¹ estimated that in southeast Queensland alone, the cost of eradication would be \$2-300 million per year over 10 years to avoid over \$2 billion in potential annual economic costs that would be incurred in the region if no action was

¹ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Strategic%20Review%20of%20the%20National%20Red%20Imported%20Fire%20Ant%20Eradication%20Program%20August%202021.pdf>

taken. Previous estimates² have projected the potential cost associated with RIFA to the Australian economy to be between \$8.5 billion and \$45 billion.

In Western Australia, RIFA were detected at Fremantle Port in November 2019 and a comprehensive multimillion dollar surveillance and eradication response was initiated and involved multiple inspections of over 3,500 premises and over 14,000 samples collected for identification. The response was successful and WA was declared free of RIFA on 21 October 2023, however WA remains at risk and ongoing surveillance activities are required to ensure future incursions are detected and reported immediately.

Establishment of RIFA in Western Australia would clearly be a significant public health concern and would result in increased utilisation of health services. Benefit cost analysis undertaken by the WA Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development indicated that benefits of eradication increase over time and after 30 years the benefit cost ratio of eradication was estimated to be 18.4. Therefore the WA Department of Health strongly advocates for surveillance and eradication efforts in Australia to continue to be effectively co-ordinated and adequately funded to ensure they remain successful and avoid a significant public health issue.

² <https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/tp/2023/5723T890-8723.pdf>