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23 November 2023

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Correspondence via email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia. Fire ants are projected to cover most of Australia and impact various sectors such as the environment and agriculture. These costs will run up to \$2 billion annually, alongside human health impacts and biodiversity losses.

Fire ants are listed as a Key Threatening Process under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and will contribute to population declines in about forty-five percent of birds, including the critically endangered plains wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*), a ground-dwelling species with their nests under threat of being overrun by fire ants, thirty-eight percent of mammals, sixty-nine percent of reptiles, with turtle hatchlings being highly vulnerable, and ninety-five percent of frogs. Sadly, this will result in our already threatened species being pushed closer to extinction.

The Society supports total fire ant eradication to protect our native threatened species. There is a full current response plan (2023-2027), which is projected to achieve eradication within ten years. Its methodology uses a biosecurity zone bounded by an eradication and surveillance band reduced gradually over ten years to reach complete eradication. Queensland, New South Wales, and the Federal government have committed to fund this plan until 2027. However, risks associated with the eradication plan include bait price increases and supply chains, human resources availability, resources for responding to infestations outside the treatment and containment areas, and compliance. Further risks include funding delays, extreme weather, lack of support from local governments, and new infestations at high-risk entry ports. These barriers will require program transparency, stakeholder engagement, and a concerted effort at public outreach.

The current funding amounts are unlikely sufficient to achieve total eradication over the coming decade, as funding ends in 2027. In addition, not all jurisdictions have committed funding to the response plan. Consequently, extra resources and funding are required to track fire ant infestations, engage businesses and communities to control fire ants, and maintain rapid eradication teams to eradicate fire ants.

Australian Wildlife Society, founded in 1909, is a national not-for-profit wildlife conservation organisation dedicated to conserving Australian wildlife (flora and fauna) through national environmental education, advocacy, and community involvement. The Society encourages your strong support for this action and an acknowledgement of the receipt of this letter, please.

Yours sincerely
Patrick Medway AM
Company Secretary

