australasian society of clinical immunology and allergy

1 December 2023

To whom it may concern,

Re: ASCIA Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia

On behalf of ASCIA, the peak professional body for clinical immunology and allergy in Australia and New Zealand, this submission is made in response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants.

The **red imported fire ant (RIFA), *Solenopsis invicta* Buren**, is an invasive pest that has become widespread in southern USA and the Caribbean after accidental introduction from South America in the 1930's. RIFA has continued to spread more widely to many countries around the world, including several countries in the Asia Pacific region.

RIFA was discovered in Australia and New Zealand in 2001, where it may have been present since 1992:

- In south-eastern Queensland, it has been reported that 700,000 hectares have been infested.
- in New South Wales, five RIFA nests were detected as recently as November 2023.
- Eradication of RIFAs has been achieved at ports in Queensland and Western Australia.

RIFA is an aggressive, group territorial defender and this behaviour often results in multiple stings from multiple RIFAs in a single human. The health consequences of RIFA becoming endemic in Australia include allergic reactions, non-allergic reactions and infections consequent to RIFA stings.

In particular, severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) to RIFA stings could be a significant cost burden on the Australian health system, based on experience with anaphylaxis to other stinging insects:

- Bee stings are currently Australia's most common cause of insect sting anaphylaxis, and will cause anaphylaxis in 1% of the population, whereas anaphylaxis to RIFA stings has been documented in 2.8% of those stung (Taiwan 2008).
- Hospitalisations due to bee stings are high in Australia. For example, in 2021, 927 patients were hospitalised after a bee sting and there were 12 deaths due to anaphylaxis to bee and wasp stings in Australia (AIHW 2021).
- Anaphylaxis is almost three times more common with RIFA stings than with other stinging insects. Therefore, if RIFA became endemic in Australia it is likely that hospitalisations and deaths due to stinging insects would significantly increase.

Further eradication of RIFA has the potential to reduce the negative health impacts due to RIFA stings.

Based on this information, ASCIA recommends:

- Upscaling of resources to eradicate RIFA in south-eastern Queensland and other areas where RIFA have been found.
- Promoting awareness of the threat of RIFA, ways to prevent RIFA stings and first aid for allergic reactions to RIFA stings.

Yours sincerely,

A/Professor Theresa Cole — ASCIA President

Jill Smith — ASCIA CEO

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA)