



28 November 2023

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

Via: [rrat.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:rrat.sen@aph.gov.au)

## **Re: RRAT inquiry into the spread of Red Imported Fire Ants**

GrainGrowers welcomes the opportunity to participate in the inquiry into the spread of Red Imported Fire Ants (RIFA).

GrainGrowers is a national organisation working to enhance the profitability and sustainability of Australian grain farmers. We achieve this through our focus areas of policy and advocacy, grower engagement, thought leadership and active investment in future focused activities for all growers. Australian growers are at the heart of all that we do and the focus of our work.

RIFA is a significant concern for the Australia's \$31 billion grains industry. Fire ants can damage crops by chewing through the seed and reducing germination. According to the Invasive Species Council, fire ants can reduce agricultural output by approximately 10 per cent<sup>1</sup> in cropping land, however there are examples of far more intense damage. Indeed, a review from 2016<sup>2</sup> found a 20 per cent reduction in sorghum yield in an outbreak in Arkansas, and there are some circumstances where complete crop failures can occur.

In addition to damaging grain production, RIFA pose a threat to the personal health of growers, their families, workers, and communities. Multiple stings can cause anaphylactic shock, which is a particularly acute risk for farmers and their workers who often work in isolation, away from immediate medical assistance.

The detection of RIFA at Toowoomba suggested this pest is "knocking on the doorstep" of broadacre agriculture. The more recent reports of RIFA in Murwillumbah are of great concern, and highlights that one single movement of contaminated hay, a flooding event, or movement of horticultural products containing RIFA all have the potential to tip the balance and allow the pest to spread. GrainGrowers makes the following urgent observations:

### **1) Australia needs a reset in its approach to biosecurity:**

There are many moving parts to Australia's biosecurity system. GrainGrowers has been calling for a reset of Australia's biosecurity system to ensure that it is better positioned to meet modern biosecurity threats and there is secure ongoing funding to maintain the national biosecurity effort. The announcement of sustainable funding for

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<sup>1</sup> [Fact-Sheet-Red-Fire-Ants-Updated-Sept2023.pdf \(invasives.org.au\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [5723T890-8723.pdf \(parliament.qld.gov.au\)](#)

Commonwealth biosecurity efforts is an important step towards this reset, as is the announcement of the National Biosecurity Strategy and its intent to develop a comprehensive national approach to biosecurity. However, this intent needs to be translated into action to regain the confidence of the agricultural industries, along with the broader community, and to ensure there is broad recognition and support for the importance of biosecurity. A successful response to RIFA will require a groundswell of support and engagement by industries and communities to bring about change and truly make a difference.

**2) States and Territories need to ensure biosecurity is resourced appropriately:**

State and Territory governments play a central role in Australia's biosecurity system, however industry has significant concerns about their capacity to manage multiple biosecurity responses to simultaneous incursions as well as practical elements such as the attraction and retention of skilled front line staff. For example, an incursion of Foot and Mouth Disease and/or Khapra beetle and/or Lumpy Skin Disease would deplete on-the-ground resources dedicated to RIFA control. It is important to recognise the pressure that resources can be put under when there are competing demands, and that the rest of Australia is relying on a successful response by Queensland, and now New South Wales, to ensure RIFA is contained and eradicated. The resourcing and safeguards to assist in the management of these responses under situations when resources are stretched, including the potential for resource sharing, must be clear.

**3) Australia needs a biosecurity system that promotes continuous improvement:**

It is vital jurisdictions share key learnings from their respective on-the-ground biosecurity responses, including the RIFA and Varroa mite responses. Cross jurisdiction knowledge sharing can strengthen the responses of other States and Territories, avoid duplication, shorten response times, and enable cost savings. It is important that learnings can be incorporated into the national biosecurity system. Currently the Inspector General of Biosecurity role focuses on the review and analysis of the pre- and at-border biosecurity activities, and there is an opportunity to extend this model of review to include working with States and Territories to understand and learn from their experiences responding to incursions. Biosecurity must be informed by continued learning and improvement.

**4) Greater transparency is required in the operation of the biosecurity system:**

Stakeholder confidence in the biosecurity system is fundamental to its continued successful operation. The discussion around the proposed biosecurity protection levy, however, has highlighted that there is limited transparency around investment in and performance of Australia's biosecurity system. Agricultural industries are seeking greater transparency around biosecurity spending to ensure that investment commitments are upheld, and that performance measures are put in place to ensure that our biosecurity system is delivering the services and outcomes that the nation needs and can be held to account. Performance management and reporting is an important element of communicating the work being done on biosecurity and building greater understanding of its importance and value amongst stakeholders and in the broader community.

**5) Industries need the tools to help in the RIFA eradication effort:**

Biosecurity is a shared responsibility and requires everyone to do their part. For growers to do their part in monitoring and reporting this pest it is vital the farmers have access to targeted resources them in this role. There is currently very little information available targeted towards our industry that can help growers understand the risks and what to look out for. As the “eyes and ears” on the ground growers need access to appropriate resources that will allow them to be alert and play their role in the RIFA response.

GrainGrowers would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further with you.

Yours sincerely,

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GrainGrowers