

**Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References**  
Answers to questions on notice  
**Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Portfolio**

**Inquiry:** Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia  
**Question No:** IQ24-000031  
**Hearing Date:** 18 March 2024  
**Division/Agency:** Plant Protection and Environmental Biosecurity Division (PPEBD) G3  
**Topic:** Inquiry QoN 1 - 2021 Review  
**Hansard Page:** 23-24  
**Question Date:** 25 March 2024  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Whish-Wilson asked:**

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Okay. Are you aware that the relevant minister at the time for agriculture and environment received a copy of that report?

Ms Saunders: I don't have that information available to you, Senator.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Okay. I'll consider whether it's worth putting it to you on notice. I'm not necessarily sure what it's going to achieve, but I suppose we're all reasonably optimistic based on what they told us the other day about things that are changing. I think I could probably speak on behalf of the committee. There were concerns about efforts being led by a state agency and there's a significant amount of Commonwealth funding going into that effort. My next question is actually on the amount: \$268 million was the recent amount that was provided by the Commonwealth. Are you able to tell us briefly how that amount was arrived at and why it was \$268 million? Was it modelled that was necessary to fund certain aspects of the response or was it just a lump sum in annual appropriations that was handed over to the national efforts?

Ms Saunders: My colleagues will correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding is that obviously ministers considered the overall cost of the program and then in-principle agreement was given that the Commonwealth would fund half of the cost of that program over the period of four years.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: That information was provided in detail—this is how much we would need to eradicate?

Ms Saunders: I think a detailed costing was considered by ministers in July of 2023.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Is that publicly available, that detailed costing?

Ms Saunders: I would have to take that on notice, Senator.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Could you take it on notice and could the department provide us with a copy of that on notice, please?

Dr Hennecke: Can I just add to that. The funding for the current eradication plan or response plan was part of the development of the response plan. There was scientific consideration taken into account, as well as new technologies that have been developed over the last 20 years of the program. That's how they arrived at the total amount of \$592.85 million. Then, as Ms Saunders was saying, the Commonwealth, as part of the arrangement, is taking 50 per cent of those costs and the other 50 per cent is divided amongst the jurisdictions.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Okay. I haven't got the information behind why they've been throwing around the numbers they have. But we have received submissions from the Invasive Species Council, for example, and today from the National Farmers' Federation saying successful eradication is going to require an additional \$100 million to \$250 million per annum in costs shared amongst the states and the Commonwealth. That's additional to what's already been allocated. Has the department got any views as to why there are key stakeholders out there saying that it's going to need a much bigger response than what's been allocated already?

Ms Saunders: I can't speak for the stakeholders, Senator. The point that I'd make is \$525 million is a four times increase in expenditure that we've had, as you know, over recent years. Obviously, this is very much informed and shaped by the independent review that was undertaken in 2021 and is informed by those recommendations. Even those figures at that time aren't mirrored in this proposal, as you'd be aware, primarily because it wasn't fully costed at that time. What has occurred since that review, and to ensure that we've got this costed correctly, is that we've made sure that we've had informed technical advice. Of course, what has occurred is there's been further thinking and sophistication in regard to the nature of the strategy, new technology to improve eradication efficacy and further infield identification technology. So it's a different approach to achieving that outcome as set out by the independent review. I guess the point to be made is that this is not a set and forget. Whilst that's been allocated

for the next four years, this will be the subject of ongoing monitoring and review by the national management group, which I will chair. Of course, there are other triggers that would consider us reviewing the funding envelope that's currently allocated, including infestations, supply chain disruptions and climate changes. They will trigger it. As well, there's already been agreed a set review point in the 2024-2025 period to assess, first, the efficacy of what's occurring and whether funding is appropriate.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Just to be clear then, if you could provide a copy of that to us on notice—how the 592 or 268 Commonwealth component was costed—that would be really useful.

**Answer:**

The Australian Government's contribution to the program for 2023 to 2027 was determined through the development of the 2023-27 Response Plan (response plan). The response plan includes a budget of \$592.85 million over the four years to implement, which is derived from the technical and operational requirements to deliver the response plan. Agreement from all cost-sharing partners is required to release budget information. This is underway and the department will provide further information as it becomes available.

The response plan and budget development was led by the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in response to the 2021 Independent Strategic Review and supported by the program's former National Steering Committee. The Steering Committee reviewed the response plan to confirm that the response strategy was technically sound and that the indicative budget costed to deliver the strategy was appropriate.

Following agreement by the Steering Committee, the National Biosecurity Committee and Australian Government Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC), the response plan including the required funding to deliver was endorsed by all Agriculture Ministers in July 2023. This is consistent with the process for cost-shared biosecurity eradication responses, aligned to National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA).

Contributions from each jurisdiction to fund the response plan are determined using the NEBRA formula, the Australian Government's share is 50% of eligible costs. This is \$296.42 million, \$268.2 million in new funding announced by the Australian Government in October 2023 plus \$28.2 million already approved under the previous response plan.

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**Inquiry:** Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia  
**Question No:** IQ24-000033  
**Hearing Date:** 18 March 2024  
**Division/Agency:** Plant Protection and Environmental Biosecurity Division (PPEBD) G3  
**Topic:** Inquiry QoN 3 - Research Funding  
**Hansard Page:** 26  
**Question Date:** 25 March 2024  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Matthew Canavan asked:**

CHAIR: Did you say there is some funding there for research? How much did you say?

Ms Saunders: I'll go back to that. We've got \$17 million over four years for scientific services.

CHAIR: That's part of the funding announced last October?

Ms Saunders: That's right. The overall national contribution is \$592 million; and \$17 million in scientific services and \$2 million in innovation over that time. If it would assist the committee, I can also provide some guidance as to what those priority areas of investment would be.

CHAIR: Perhaps on notice, I think.

**Answer:**

The National Fire Ant Eradication Program (NFAEP) relies on scientific and technical research, advice and expertise provided by program scientists and external Australian-based and international research partners.

Over \$17 million is allocated through the 2023-27 Response Plan for the science program over the next four years, to deliver activities including:

- fire ant diagnostics
- genetic analysis and genotyping of fire ant individuals and populations to determine origin and relatedness
- research, review and scientific advice on eradication techniques and processes such as regular assessments of fire ants to provide confidence that treatments are effective.

Additionally, \$2 million has been budgeted for innovation activities over the first two years of the response plan. Innovation program activities include:

- use of drones for precision bait dispersal and surveillance,
- further development of environmental DNA assays highly specific to RIFA to identify infestations or provide evidence for the absence of RIFA,
- development of bait (including weather-proof), including working with CSIRO to develop a novel RNA-interference bait,
- the application of big data analytics, bioinformatics and AI to existing and future data to accelerate data analysis that will inform operational efficiencies and monitor operational effectiveness.

In addition to the response plan, biosecurity agencies also directly fund research projects on exotic and established invasive ant control tool development.

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**Inquiry:** Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia  
**Question No:** IQ24-000034  
**Hearing Date:** 18 March 2024  
**Division/Agency:** Plant Protection and Environmental Biosecurity Division (PPEBD) G3  
**Topic:** Inquiry QoN 4 - Costings  
**Hansard Page:** 28  
**Question Date:** 25 March 2024  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Malcolm Roberts asked:**

Senator ROBERTS: What's the total amount spent so far on eradication, containment and management? Do you know?

Ms Saunders: I don't have those figures in front of me, Senator.

Senator ROBERTS: Would it be possible to get them on notice, please?

Ms Saunders: Of course.

**Answer:**

- Since 2001, Australia has successfully eradicated seven red imported fire ant (RIFA) incursions from around Australia, with a total of \$6.5 million spent on nationally cost-shared eradications of separate RIFA incursions at Gladstone, Port Botany, Fremantle and Brisbane Airport.
- In addition, the National Fire Ant Eradication Program (program) is dedicated to eradicating the south-east Queensland infestation (including the recent detections in northern NSW). It is currently the only active response to RIFA underway in Australia.
  - Between 2001-02 to 2022-23 the total spent was \$690 million.
  - The budget for the 2023-2027 Response Plan is \$592.85 million.
  - The Queensland Government has also committed an additional \$37 million for the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (over 2021-2026).

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**Inquiry:** Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia  
**Question No:** IQ24-000035  
**Hearing Date:** 18 March 2024  
**Division/Agency:** Plant Protection and Environmental Biosecurity Division (PPEBD) G3  
**Topic:** Inquiry QoN 5 - State and Territory Funding Levels  
**Hansard Page:** 28  
**Question Date:** 25 March 2024  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Malcolm Roberts asked:**

Senator ROBERTS: I attended a fire ant forum. I've attended two forums in Queensland. I wasn't impressed with the state government. One was six or so years ago and the other one was two years ago, roughly. Is there any difference in funding levels or funding formulae for eradication programs compared with containment programs? Are they different funding levels?

Ms Saunders: I'll try to clarify as best I can and take it on notice if there are any gaps in my advice to you. There is the biosecurity emergency response fund. That's approximately \$30 million a year. Obviously, knowing the cost of RIFA, a separate budget proposal was made, as we've outlined. Then there are obviously other funding sources for different activities within the auspices of our emergency responses across plant and animal. There's a range of different funding sources through deeds and so on that we obtain our funding for all of the support that we provide in a nation sense.

**Answer:**

National emergency response eradication programs for incursions of exotic pests, weeds and diseases are different to the management and containment of pests, weeds and diseases that are not eradicable and therefore established in Australia. These programs have different aims, frameworks and cost-sharing arrangements.

A national response is triggered when an exotic pest, weed or disease is detected in Australia. Exotic means it is not established in Australia. National response arrangements are based on an 'all hazards, all agencies' approach.

Three national agreements outline the process to respond. These arrangements detail the responsibilities for government and industry including cost-sharing arrangements for national biosecurity incident responses with the aim to eradicate. Industry, where an affected party, is also obligated to reduce the risk of a biosecurity incident. The agreements are:

- Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA) - terrestrial animals (livestock) and poultry
- Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD) - plant pest incursions including grains, horticulture, nuts and forestry
- National Environmental and Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) – environmental pests, including marine and social amenity.

Under the NEBRA, the Australian Government contributes 50% of the funding for national biosecurity incident responses. Cost-sharing for each state/territory is calculated as:

$$\text{A State/Territory Party's share of the combined investment} = \frac{\text{the number of people in a potentially affected area in that jurisdiction}}{\text{the total number of people potentially affected in Australia}}$$

Where a pest, weed or disease has become established and it is no longer considered technically feasible or cost effective to eradicate, the management focus changes from eradication to containment, management and/or asset protection.

The state or territory where the incident or outbreak occurs is responsible for the cost of implementing any containment or management strategy (along with land managers and industry). There is no obligation for the Australian Government or other states and territories to cost share management activities.

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**Inquiry:** Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia  
**Question No:** IQ24-000036  
**Hearing Date:** 18 March 2024  
**Division/Agency:** Plant Protection and Environmental Biosecurity Division (PPEBD) G3  
**Topic:** Inquiry QoN 6 - Scott Orr Review  
**Hansard Page:** 29-30  
**Question Date:** 25 March 2024  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Matthew Canavan asked:**

Ms Saunders: Chair, we are delivering on the strategy. We're just delivering it in a slightly different way, with improved technology and with a slightly different methodology.

CHAIR: Given the time, could you come back to me on notice, with particular reference to what was recommended in the Scott-Orr review and outlined in table 11, on how you have been able to save at least \$40 million, possibly more, given the range he had was up to \$300 million? Is the Caboolture centre up and running? We were told a few weeks ago that that horseshoe would be complete, and they'd have this Caboolture depot running very soon to do the baiting or sweeps in northern Brisbane.

Ms Saunders: I understand that three depots are being implemented, but the current status of that location I would have to confirm.

CHAIR: If you could take that on notice, that would be great. I believe that should have been up and running by now. For the money that has been allocated, I understand from your submission that South Australia and Tasmania have not contributed any funds; is that correct? Is that still the case?

Ms Saunders: No, I don't believe that's the case any longer.

CHAIR: Okay.

**Answer:**

The \$200-\$300 million annual budget identified in the 2021 Independent Program Review (Scott-Orr et al 2021) was not a fully costed budget. As the review report states 'these figures should be viewed as estimates, rather than minimum or maximum.... the budget is based on Program experience'.

The review report provided an indication that the quantum of funds required for the program to achieve its objectives would need to be increased significantly to deliver its objectives.

The 2023-27 Response Plan (response plan) determined the resources required to deliver the plan, in accordance with the recommendations of the 2021 review, is \$592.85 million for the next four years.

The plan is focussed to drive efficiencies through new technologies to increase operational windows and lower per area costs, and includes some efficiencies of scale.

Savings were also identified through the anticipated adoption of new technologies that will improve eradication efficacy (e.g. use of new weatherproof baits), innovation (including rapid in-field fire ant identification techniques) and efficiency (e.g. use of drones to deliver baits over people walking).

*Status of the Caboolture depot*

The following advice was provided by the National Fire Ant Eradication Program (Queensland Government).

Operations in the northern part (Moreton Bay and Somerset) of the containment area commenced in July 2023. Activities to date include surveillance to detect fire ants, pre-aerial flight treatment planning, response treatment, and community engagement in preparation for treatment activities.

To improve efficiency of delivery, in early March 2024 the Program finalised an agreement to establish a new depot at Caboolture.

Team leaders and assistant team leaders for the Caboolture depot commenced with the Program on 13 March 2024. They have been training with existing teams from the established Berrinba depot. Another 50 field officers will be inducted on 26 March 2024.

Treatment operations delivered from the new depot at Caboolture will commence from 3 April 2024. This location, under a flexible work arrangement, will also host compliance officers and community and industry engagement officers as required.