



Government of South Australia

Department of Primary Industries  
and Regions

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Mr Tas Larnach  
Committee Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References  
Committee

RRAT.Sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Larnach

Thank you for the opportunity to make submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry into matters relating to red imported fire ants (RIFA).

RIFA are one of the most serious invasive ants in the world due to their harmful effects on people, the environment, and the economy. They have a painful bite that can affect people, pets and livestock.

RIFA are declared in South Australia under the *Plant Health Act 2009* and interstate movements of high-risk products or equipment from the affected area into South Australia are regulated. Those regulations have successfully prevented RIFA from establishing in South Australia for over 20-years.

The spread of RIFA interstate is of concern, and South Australia remains committed to preventing this pest from impacting on our valuable primary industries, public amenity and the environment.

South Australia has therefore decided to take up the offer of making a submission on this matter. That submission has been uploaded via the Online Submission System. A copy of the submission is attached to this letter.

Yours sincerely

Professor Mehdi Doroudi PSM  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

30/11/2023

Att: South Australian submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

## **South Australian submission to the Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia**

Thank you for the opportunity to make submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry into matters relating to red imported fire ants (RIFA).

### **Background / South Australia's commitment**

RIFA are one of the most serious invasive ants in the world due to their harmful effects on people, the environment, and the economy. They have a painful bite that can affect people, pets and livestock.

The spread of RIFA interstate is of concern, and South Australia remains committed to preventing this pest from impacting on our valuable primary industries, public amenity and the environment.

At the Agricultural Ministers Meeting on 13 July 2023, Agriculture Ministers endorsed a revised Fire Ant Response Plan 2023–27 (Response Plan), agreed to progress formal budget approval through jurisdictional processes and noted any delay in a funding decision may increase the cost and time required to eradicate. South Australia's total commitment under that revised response plan is \$21.105M. South Australia is undertaking the normal budgetary processes to consider increasing our total contribution to \$21.105M over the forward estimates.

RIFA are a declared pest in South Australia under the *Plant Health Act 2009* and interstate movements of high-risk products or equipment from the affected area into South Australia are regulated. Those regulations have successfully prevented RIFA from establishing in South Australia for over 20-years.

RIFA is one of six exotic ants for which South Australia conducts surveys each year. Port Adelaide and Adelaide International Airport are two of the recognised entry pathways for RIFA in South Australia. Additional areas of interest surveyed include primary production areas, commercial and industry sites. Since 2019, PIRSA Biosecurity has surveyed for the presence of RIFA at 27 sites. The surveillance included the deployment of 248 traps and 37 visual inspections undertaken.

### **South Australia's response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference**

1. 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;
  - RIFA is one of the most serious invasive ants in the world due to their harmful effects on people, the environment, and the economy. They have a painful bite that can affect people, pets and livestock.
  - Fire ants have not been detected in South Australia but can move from infected sites in Queensland to South Australia on things like machinery and other equipment, in soil, hay, mulch, manure, quarry products, turf, potting materials and potted plants (anything in a container including as a root ball).
  - If allowed to spread, RIFA could significantly affect South Australia's native biodiversity directly through predation upon, or competition with, native animals, or indirectly by modifying habitat structure and altering ecosystem processes. Particularly in dry years/areas where they dominate margins of dams and other

water sources making it impossible for native animals and livestock to reach water without being seriously stung.

- RIFA are omnivorous and will feed on a wide variety of agricultural crops and crop developmental stages. i.e. sown seeds, young plants, shoots and fruits. They can attack newborn animals and damage infrastructure. They sting or bite people when they are in their backyards, urban parks and working in agricultural fields. Extensive nesting sites cause a loss of planting substrate and poor soil quality due the displacement of native beneficial soil species.
  - The economic cost of RIFA in the USA is estimated to be US\$7B annually in control measures, medical treatment and damage to property, infrastructure and agricultural output. The potential cost to Australia has been estimated at AU\$1.65B annually if left unchecked.
  - According to the Western Australian Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, if not controlled in Australia, RIFA could cause an extra 140,000 medical consultations and 3,000 anaphylactic reactions a year.
  - South Australia remains committed to preventing this pest from impacting on our valuable primary industries, public amenity and the environment.
2. An assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants;
- RIFA were first detected in Queensland in 2001 which pre-dates current national emergency response arrangements for managing incursions of emergency plant pests and environmental pests. Those national arrangements have since proven effective in bringing Affected Parties to a collective decision-making table to assess the technical feasibility and costs of managing responses such as these.
  - Those arrangements have also helped to establish and maintain industry/government partnerships in managing responses such as these in recognition of the need to foster strong partnerships and a shared responsibility for biosecurity in Australia.
  - The RIFA Eradication Program has made good progress in recent times to ensure that the principles of those national provisions are reflected within its own governance arrangements. The National Biosecurity Committee have recently agreed to a revised governance structure for the Program which now incorporates a National Management Group, National Consultative Committee, a Program Board and Risk Management and Assurance Committee. In the future, it will be vitally important to maintain strong national oversight and governance of the response, including appropriate representation of all funding partners in decision making.
3. An evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans;
- South Australia has already contributed around \$13M to the eradication of RIFA since they were first discovered in Queensland in 2001. This is in recognition of the significant impact that RIFA could have if they are allowed to establish and spread in Australia.

- With more than \$21M proposed in contribution from South Australia over the next 4-years (see Table 1 below), this will be the largest commitment that South Australia has ever made to an interstate pest eradication program.

*Table 1: Proposed SA RIFA contributions*

| RIFA Contributions (\$'000) |              |          |
|-----------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Year                        | Contribution | Status   |
| 2026-27                     | 5,842        | Proposed |
| 2025-26                     | 5,434        | Proposed |
| 2024-25                     | 5,091        | Proposed |
| 2023-24                     | 4,738        | Proposed |

- While remaining supportive, South Australia's ability to continue to contribute to the national response is not limitless. This program must be successful given that future funding contributions cannot be guaranteed. This is particularly the case if confidence in the technical feasibility of eradication diminishes if the pest continues to spread.
4. The effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants;
    - The latest response plan focusses on two areas; stronger containment outside the known infested area by the Program and more aggressive suppression in the current residual area, managed and funded by Queensland.
    - South Australia agrees that this dual approach is the most sensible means of both stopping the spread of RIFA while also reducing pest pressure inside of containment lines. Close attention will be required to ensure that RIFA do not continue to spread and adequate national governance will be important in considering any modification to this approach if new detections require a change in mindset.
  5. Learnings of Varroa mite in managing red imported fire ants;
    - The recent response to Varroa mite in New South Wales has highlighted the importance of early, consistent and ongoing engagement with all stakeholders at the national level to continually assess the technical feasibility of the response and to adapt if need be.
    - In a similar way to RIFA, Varroa mite has a diverse number of parties who could be affected by the pest and national arrangements under the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed have allowed them to come together to consider Varroa in a structured way to develop and adapt agreed Response Plans.
    - Unfortunately, while the governance structures recently agreed by the National Biosecurity Committee do help in providing national oversight for the Response, there is still no agreed means of allowing non-government parties who stand to benefit from the Response to provide financial contribution.
    - The ongoing assessment of technical feasibility of eradication through the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests for Varroa has been integral to that decision making by ensuring that Response Plans are based on the best technical advice and thus provide the best chance of success.

- While ultimately not successful in eradicating Varroa mite from Australia, that process allowed a structured and transparent decision-making process throughout the Response. The new governance arrangements agreed for the RIFA Response should provide similar benefits.
6. Any other related matters.
- South Australia would like to highlight the fact that it too continues to manage nationally significant pests that pre-date current national emergency response arrangements.
  - In particular, the South Australian government have invested over \$100M into responses to outbreaks of Queensland fruit fly and Mediterranean fruit fly in the last 4-years and in doing so, continues to protect and maintain national trade arrangements which are estimated to be worth in the order of \$840M annually.
  - While South Australia has recently received support from the Commonwealth Government's Building Resilience to Manage Fruit Fly funding package, the significant national contribution to RIFA contrasts the lack of assistance that South Australia receives nationally for our work to protect those trade arrangements.
  - While South Australia supports the pressing need to eradicate RIFA, there is a clear inconsistency in managing RIFA when compared to other pests that pre-date national emergency response arrangements, which remains to be adequately addressed at the national level.