

THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENECES COMMITTEE CHAIR AND SENATOR WHISH-WILSON ASKED:

QUESTION: 1

Why haven't there been more regular communiques on this issue on the federal government's website, agriculture.gov.au, given how important it is:

- a) Is there information in the minutes that is potentially commercial-in-confidence?
- b) Can you speak to us more generically or broadly as to why these things may not have been released in the past?
- c) are there any sensitivities there that we would need to be aware of, perhaps even academically speaking?

ANSWER:

Until 22 February 2024 the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Steering Committee had oversight of the Program. Meeting minutes were prepared by the Secretariat and are endorsed at the following meeting by members. The decision to publish the minutes is at the discretion of the Steering Committee Chair and members.

Details relating to sensitive information, such as Cabinet-in-Confidence or Commercial-in-Confidence, may be bound by external factors and potentially not published due to the nature of the documents.

SENATOR WHISH-WILSON ASKED:

QUESTION: 2

We heard evidence from the Australian Environmental Pest Managers Association earlier this morning which gave us an example of the program buying 85 new cars during COVID to deal with social distancing. Do you want to respond to that? Are you aware of that? Is that information correct?

ANSWER:

No vehicles were purchased by the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (the Program), during the period of 20 January 2020 to 4 March 2024 for the purposes of social distancing.

The Program hired approximately 70 vehicles during COVID-19 to enable the Program to continue delivering services, while adhering to Departmental Work Health and Safety policies informed by the Department of Health's recommendations.

QUESTION: 3

Is the eradication zone the same size that was recommended in the 2021 review?

ANSWER:

The National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Steering Committee partially adopted recommendation 6 of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review 2021 (the Review). The Response Plan 2023-27 accounts for treatment to the outer 10km of the ring identified in the Review, which is estimated to be 299,000 unique hectares. This eradication treatment area progressively moves inwards approximately every two years. The number of treatment rounds applied to a unique hectare over a two-year period is dependent on achieving a >99% confidence that Fire Ants are not present.

The Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) operates within the suppression area (recommendation 20 and 22), which is on the inner side of the eradication treatment area.

Table 1 – Unique hectares target for treatment year on year.

| | 2023/24 | 2024/25 | 2025/26 | 2026/27 |
|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Work Plan 2023/24* | 70,700 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Response Plan 2023-27 estimation** | 299,000 | 299,000 | 299,000 | 299,000 |
| NFAEP Target*** | 170,000 | 299,000 | 299,000 | 299,000 |

* Work Plan 2023/24 is Attachment A of the Response Plan 2023-27 utilising the remaining funds of the 10-year strategy. It focussed eradication treatment initially in the Scenic Rim, Southern Downs, and Gold Coast amounting to 70,700 (unique) ha.

** The Response Plan 2023-27 also includes a notional allocation of 100,000 ha to conduct multiple rounds of treatment on new detections.

***As funding has been approved, the eradication treatment area has increased to 170,000 unique ha in 2023/24. In addition to this, planned polygyne treatment of 1,830 unique ha and responsive treatment to detections in NSW are also being completed in 2023/24.

THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENECES COMMITTEE CHAIR ASKED:

QUESTION: 4

- a) Noting recommendation 1 from the 2021 strategic review that calls for a larger steering committee and strengthened independence, can you provide more information on the process that led to the decision to retire the steering committee and migrate the oversight role to the National Management Group (NMG)?
- b) Why does the NMG not have an independent Chair (as recommended) and representation from industry and the broader scientific community?

QUESTION: 5

Will there be any independent oversight and/or decision making following the removal of the steering committee? Noting that SAG is an advisory group and arrangements for the chair of the National Biosecurity Management Consultative Committee appear unclear.

ANSWER (4&5):

The retiring of the Steering Committee enabled a new governance arrangement, including the establishment of the RIFA (SEQ) National Management Group (RIFA NMG). This arrangement has been designed to align with other national biosecurity responses under a National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) like governance arrangement. In addition, the arrangements are intended to implement Managing Successful Programs (MSP) and best practice governance principles.

Overall guidance and monitoring of the Program is undertaken by the (RIFA) National Biosecurity Management Consultative Committee (NMBCC) and the (RIFA) Risk Management and Assurance Committee (RMAC), which both have an independent Chair.

The Risk Management and Assurance Committee (RMAC) considers and provides advice to the RIFA NMG, RIFA NBMCC and Program Board on risks to achieving the Program's vision. It will also provide independent advice on program assurance. Mr Alan Millis is the independent Chair of the RMAC. There is currently a recruitment process for additional independent members for the RMAC.

At the RIFA NMG meeting of February 2024, it was agreed that Dr John Robertson would be the independent Chair of the RIFA National Biosecurity Management Consultative Committee (RIFA NBMCC), following the appropriate checks. This Committee comprises of appropriate expertise in response management and hold relevant technical subject matter expertise. The Committee is responsible for assessing and advising the RIFA NMG on matters relating to potential risk triggers outlined in the Response Plan 2023-27.

The RIFA NMG is made up of representatives from the national cost-share partners with appropriate delegations. Unlike other national biosecurity arrangements under a Deed, there are no industry

partners that contribute to the cost-share arrangement. Therefore, there are currently no permanent industry partners on the RIFA NMG.

As per the RIFA NMG Terms of Reference 'non-government entities may be approved by unanimous decision by the parties, to attend as non-voting members of the RIFA NMG.'

The structure provides for the RIFA NMG to be independent from the Program, enabling independent oversight and to provide independent scientific advice for the effective eradication of fire ants.

THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENECES COMMITTEE CHAIR
ASKED:

QUESTION: 6

What was the timeline for the decision of the removal of the steering committee and pivot to the NMG, including when they were first established? References to the NMG can be seen from 2019 in communiques published to the DAFF website, which appears to be inactive until the upload of the 22 February 2024 communique.

ANSWER:

An out-of-Session National Biosecurity Committee (NBC) paper 2023-21 sought approval for the new National Fire Ant Eradication Program Governance arrangement by 15 November 2023.

The new Governance arrangement was further discussed at the NBC meeting on 30 November 2023 where it was agreed a RIFA specific National Management Group (NMG) would be implemented.

The first RIFA (SEQ) NMG meeting and Program Board meeting were both held in February 2024.

THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENECES COMMITTEE CHAIR ASKED:

QUESTION: 7

Is there an updated governance chart that displays the allocation of responsibility, decision making and reporting (similar to the previous chart on the Program website)?

ANSWER:

