



Office of the Mayor

City of Gold Coast

29 November 2023
Our ref:MS2#A95118892

PO Box 5042
Gold Coast MC QLD 9726
Australia

Telephone +61 7 5581 5283
Facsimile +61 7 5581 6054
Email mayor@goldcoast.qld.gov.au
cityofgoldcoast.com.au

Mr Tas Larnach
Committee Secretary
The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

INQUIRY INTO RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS IN AUSTRALIA

The Council of the City of Gold Coast (City) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the *Inquiry Into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia*.

The City has serious concerns regarding the threat posed by Red Imported Fire Ants (RIFA) to the residents, visitors, environment and our outdoor lifestyle of the Gold Coast. The presence of RIFA represents a significant risk to the city, with detections increasing rapidly and infestations recently reported 13 kilometres south of the New South Wales border in Murwillumbah.

The City has worked closely with all levels of government to eradicate this biosecurity issue, advocating strongly with both State and Federal Governments to secure the necessary resources and funding. Additionally, there is a need to progress the development of a national communications and education campaign to raise community awareness, stressing the importance of immediate action to reduce their spread.

In June 2023, Biosecurity Queensland released the findings of the *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review*, which was completed in 2021. The review highlighted that while the current program has significantly slowed the spread of RIFA in and out of South East Queensland, it will not be able to eradicate or contain RIFA within the scope and budget of the *Ten Year Plan*.

Further, on 4 July 2023, the Queensland Audit Office assessed how effectively State and local government entities are managing RIFA and advised that the *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program* (Program) estimates an additional \$593 million (which includes Commonwealth and State Government funding) will be needed over four years from 2023-27 to implement a new RIFA response strategy. Biosecurity Queensland have confirmed that the community, landholders and local governments must play a greater role in RIFA management.

The City submits the following comments as related to the specific reference points of the inquiry:

- a) 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

The Gold Coast is a leading tourism, business and events city, offering one of the best lifestyles globally and faces disruption if RIFA reach a high density. Such infestations would interrupt and reduce people's willingness to participate in outdoor work and leisure activities, impacting on this lifestyle. Calculating costs is challenging due to the current level of infestation and record keeping. Our costings are based on information gathered from previous reports from Australia and the United States, as well as our own treatment programs.

Currently, reporting of workplace health and safety incidents related to fire ant stings is minimal, with only three incidents recorded in the City's safety management system. As RIFA density increases, more City employees will be exposed to RIFA and require controls to reduce the risk posed by stings. The *Invasive Species Council* reports that in the United States, between 30% to 60% of people in infested areas are stung each year. If RIFA became established in the city this would equate to 194,100 people each year (30% of our current population of 647,000). Including the 12 million annual visitors to the Gold Coast, over 3 million people would be at risk of being stung each year. Increased lost time injury frequency rates are a concern; however, it is the catastrophic risk that stings pose through anaphylactic shock (1% of the population is at risk) that would be the greatest cost.

The City has committed \$600,000 to reduce the risk of RIFA to our community and support the efforts of the Program. With current RIFA density considered low (an average of 1.7 nests per hectare on City property), the continued spread and increase in density of RIFA would see annual treatment costs increase from the current \$61 per ha. If we apply the anticipated cost of treatment to 10,000 hectares of City property (a conservative estimate of City property at risk of infestation) we would gradually see annual treatment costs increase to \$6,000,000 per year to manage RIFA (based on an annual treatment cost of \$600/hectare).

In addition to treatment costs to meet our General Biosecurity Obligation (GBO) and demonstrate our commitment to protecting our city, Council's internal business areas are absorbing direct and indirect costs associated with the detection and prevention of RIFA including:

- Cleaning of equipment before transport across biosecurity zones.
- Amending overlays to reduce the risk of exposure when RIFA are found prior to events (including filming).
- Apart from treating RIFA, when a nest is found in public areas, a resourcing response is required to make the site immediately safe before they can be treated.
- RIFA detections on sports fields increase operational costs as treatment prevent routine management. Staff must delay mowing and irrigating the affected sports fields, impacting clubs and the community through the period to address or treat the ants.



- Reduction in the ability to reuse materials that can transport RIFA from construction sites.
- Existing resources are required to monitor, report and manage sites with RIFA.
- Paid variations to contracts to get suppliers to report and treat RIFA and third party certification.
- Funding communication campaigns encouraging private property owners to meet their GBO.

The Gold Coast, one of the most biodiverse regions in Australia, would see reduced biodiversity if RIFA were to establish, as they would prey on other animals and plants. Regular baiting using a granular pesticide that kills ants is necessary to manage RIFA and long-term treatments would reduce our native ant populations.

The *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review* identified that in the United States, increased RIFA density and the associated publicity would lead to a reduction in tourist numbers, as people avoid outdoor activities or the city for areas yet to be impacted by RIFA. The cost was estimated at \$49 per affected tourist per year. If 30% of our 12 million visitors were negatively impacted, we could anticipate the annual cost to tourism being \$176,000,000.

- b) an assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants

The City of Gold Coast supports the intent of the *Fire Ant Response Plan 2023–27*; however, we are concerned that RIFA will continue to expand during the 12 months needed for the Program to upscale to deliver the plan.

The City understands that delays in securing funding for the new response plan have led to a reduction in the treatment zone within the city from 10km wide to 5km in the first year. The addition of a 5km strip to the western boundary in 2018-19 placed additional pressure on the Program to meet its treatment objectives in following years. Understanding how the Program's decision to only treat half of the proposed eradication treatment zones in the city will impact future treatment needs and will require clear communication to suppression partners.

- c) an evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans

At the time of writing, it is concerning that the funding needed to upscale operational areas to deliver compliance and treatment across the entire operational areas has yet to be secured. The delayed commitment and distribution of funding have been long-standing issues for the Program, as identified in previous Program reviews. Improving the ability of the Program to transition between changes of State and Commonwealth Government and financial agreements that run across financial years is critical to the success of the plan.

It appears that the delay in securing funding has impacted the ability of the Program to provide sufficient support to the *Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce*. In an attempt to facilitate collaborative treatments, the City has requested open data sharing agreements between the Program and the City, including information on the location of RIFA treatments and nest detections by both parties. Attempts to deliver this agreement and a fit for purpose solution to date have been unsuccessful.



d) the effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants

The City has not previously been exposed to eradication efforts by the Program, and attempts by the Program to contain fire ants have failed in those areas of the city impacted by RIFA, with infestations increasing from 17 suburbs in 2016 to 76 suburbs in 2023.

Detailed State Government policies around RIFA eradication appear to be still evolving with the City reliant on informal relationships with the *Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce* to understand the resource implications of new arrangements with the Program, including no responsive treatments by the Program, amendments to State regulations enabling RIFA treatment, nests within the suppression zone will no longer be treated, and supply of RIFA bait to support suppression treatments.

The scheduling of only two treatments within the 5km eradication zone in the Gold Coast is below the industry standard for eradication (the Program and CSIRO advise a minimum of three treatments per year for two years is required to achieve eradication), coupled with the reduced area being treated (5km not 10km) will reduce the effectiveness of the eradication efforts.

e) learnings of Varroa mite in managing red imported fire ants

The City is unable to comment on the Varroa mite eradication program; our understanding is that the decision to transition to management was based on it no longer being technically feasible to eradicate the mite. The City understands that the eradication of RIFA is still technically feasible.

f) any other related matters

The City believes there is a lack of public awareness of the effect these ants can have on the environment and lifestyle. Improved communication from the Program of the impacts of RIFA would likely increase reports of suspect RIFA infestations to the Program.

The Program must enhance its communication regarding the implementation of policy changes that impact City operations. The delay between announcing the new operational area for RIFA (August 2023) and updating the biosecurity zone (December 2023) has meant that large areas of the city have not been required to follow the regulations for the movement of materials that can spread RIFA, such as soil. The Program has relied on people understanding their GBOs to manage RIFA infestations outside the existing biosecurity zone, which does little to manage the risk of RIFA being moved by people.

The City has already committed considerable financial and human resources to the issue and recently appointed an additional three full time staff to increase the City's RIFA treatments. Their continued spread will impact on the economy across a broad range of sectors, the environment, our lifestyle and, importantly, local residents and tourists.

I trust the information provided in this submission will assist in the continued development of a national approach to address and alleviate this threat to our communities and lifestyles.

Yours sincerely

**TOM TATE
MAYOR**

