



Dedicated to a better Brisbane

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Parliament House
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Dear Committee Secretary

Brisbane City Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on red imported fire ants (RIFA).

Council strongly advocates for funding security for the eradication of RIFA from Australia. Every level of government has been aware of the presence of RIFA in Brisbane and their spread across South East Queensland for more than 20 years. The threat they pose as a biosecurity risk was well recognised upon their discovery in Brisbane. Despite 20 years of funding and resourcing, the current treatment program has been unsuccessful in eradicating RIFA. Data shows RIFA continue to spread across South East Queensland.

RIFA are a category 1 species listed in the *Biosecurity Act 2014* and in recognition of the risk they pose to Australia, their management has been led by a National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication program (the Program), which is funded by all Australian states and territories, and the Australian Government. To date, \$231.3 million has been invested into the Program that has been led by Biosecurity Queensland, within the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. In 2022-23, \$94 million was spent on RIFA in Queensland. Council would like all states and territories to recognise the threat that RIFA pose to our national economy, environment, biodiversity and way of life and make active contribution to eradication of this threat entirely from Australia.

Recent reviews of the Program have highlighted that the response plan was not achieving effective suppression or eradication of RIFA. As a result, Biosecurity Queensland is currently adopting a perimeter defence and eradication approach and withdrawing from treatment in some local government areas. This means that local governments in South East Queensland are required to take on the management and control of RIFA on land they control. For Brisbane, this could potentially extend to up to 17,000 ha of open space and 2,500 km of road reserves. After 20 years of treatment the Program has been unable to control RIFA in Brisbane. The potential requirement for Council to manage treatment, eradication and control is not considered reasonable. Biosecurity Queensland have advised they do not expect to be undertaking eradication activities in Brisbane City for 8 to 10 years. As the Host City for the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games and as the capital city in the fastest growing region in Australia, Council considers the current approach, funding and resourcing from the Program to be inadequate. Council is deeply concerned that future program adjustments will commit management of RIFA to local government.

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It is Council's view that management of such a significant biosecurity risk to Australia should remain with Commonwealth and State Governments.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the review of the management of RIFA in Australia.

Council's full response to the questions posed in the consultation are attached for your consideration.

Yours sincerely

Colin Jensen
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Att: Appendix A: Brisbane City Council's submission on red imported fire ants in Australia

Appendix 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.

- Red imported fire ants (RIFA) are the one of the world's most invasive species.
- If left unmanaged, RIFA will likely invade and occupy all terrestrial habitats across Australia.
- The expected costs to the Australian economy are expected to be the order of \$1.25 billion per year, or greater (based on estimated costs on the US economy).
- The most significant impact from RIFA will be loss of life through anaphylactic shock as a result of reaction to stings.
- The US reports that over 80 deaths per annum are attributed to RIFA.
- Being a highly aggressive pest, their swarming behaviour is almost instant, and the potential for a person to receive multiple stings in only a few seconds is considered 'normal'.
- The elderly or very young are most vulnerable to RIFA venom, however all are susceptible to their bites and stings.
- Their foraging behaviour is extensive and means that they can move and expand over a wide area, and remain undetected for significant periods of time, impacting a wide range of activities.
- In significant numbers they can have a substantial impact on all forms of terrestrial native animals, cropping and animal husbandry.
- RIFA are also known to invade underground services where they occupy and chew underground conduits, service pits and electrical wires.
- Archerfield Airport is already reporting service disruption due to significant impact from RIFA on electrical connections.
- Recent changes adopted by the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (the Program), whereby all local authorities within the suppression zone are now requested to treat their own lands, is a significant cost shifting exercise from the National Program to Local Governments.
- Brisbane City Council (Council) land holdings potentially impacted by this cost shift are around 17,000ha in parks and natural areas, plus over 2,500km of road verges.
- Council has estimated that treatment of Council controlled land (with baits being provided by Biosecurity Queensland) could easily amount to around \$800,000 per annum, with costs increasing significantly if aerial treatment is required.
- If Council is required to use aerial treatment, a cost of anywhere between \$70-\$150/ha can be used as a guide, which could increase Council's costs to \$1.5-\$2 million in the addition to the estimated \$800,000 per annum cost.
- Council is unable to fund effective control works without suitable funding being provided by the Program.

An assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants.

- Biosecurity Queensland have advised that the previous four years of treatment reduced the spread of RIFA from 50–80km per year to 5km per year.
- This approach is not achieving the intended eradication, and therefore is not considered effective.
- In July 2023, the Queensland Government advised Council that a new alternative \$600 million treatment program is going to be rolled out over the next two years.
- Treatment will be directed towards the advancing RIFA front; north, west, and south of the city (perimeter defence and eradication).
- A Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce has also been set up which requires local government to undertake suppression activities on their land holdings, with Biosecurity Queensland supplying baits and technical support, and undertaking increased compliance and community awareness.
- Brisbane City Council is not supportive of the cost shifting of treatment to local government.
- Once RIFA become established they are very difficult to eliminate from the environment, and the costs to individual landholders will mount into the billions very quickly.

- Council would like to see the current approach refined, and further resourced, where funds can be provided to local authorities to support the treatment programs in a more meaningful way.
- Currently, local authorities, within the suppression zone, are required to fund and resource the treatment of their own lands, with bait only being provided free of charge by the National Program.
- Of the 17,000ha of parks and natural areas Brisbane City Council owns or manages, an estimated 5,000ha are within the known extent of RIFA, requiring active suppression/eradication under a changed program.
- To treat these areas with existing staff, under the existing service delivery arrangement and employee activities, will place a significant impost on Council activities.
- Resources will need to be redirected to focus on RIFA, with other services that Council provides to its residents likely to be impacted.
- Based on advice from Biosecurity Queensland, the proposed eradication program will not arrive in Brisbane for another 8-10 years. This gap in timing and resources impacts the people of Brisbane, and requires Council to solely fund suppression activities within the city.
- Given that Council has been waiting for the Program to be deployed within Brisbane over the last 20 years, the requirement for the city's ratepayers to fund the suppression activities is concerning, and Council would like to see as a minimum a cost recovery model delivered within the suppression zone.
- Council would also like to see the way data is shared and communicated improved, so that there is regular two way communications and deliberate engagement with all local authorities.
- The lack of regular and clear communication over the last 10 years has severely limited local authorities in the ability to plan, prepare, or engage with their communities in any meaningful way on this matter.

An evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans.

- The Queensland Government advised that a new alternative \$600 million treatment program is going to be rolled out over the next two years.
- Treatment will be directed towards the advancing RIFA front; north, west, and south of Brisbane.
- The Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce will focus on increased compliance as well as additional support to all affected local governments in the form of suppression baits for deployment, advice and communication materials.
- The Invasive Species Council estimates that \$200 to \$300 million per annum will be required to achieve eradication by 2032.
- Council is not currently aware of any financial commitment to continue the Program beyond 2025-26.
- This lack of commitment is a significant concern to Council.
- Council calls for a commitment from all states and territories for ongoing funding and support to achieve complete eradication of RIFA from Australia.
- Should RIFA be allowed to become naturalised, the future cost to the country and every resident impacted by RIFA will by far outweigh the short-term eradication costs.
- Council is willing to engage in this Program if full cost recovery for the Program, with appropriate resources, is able to be applied and managed.

The effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants.

- Please see responses to previous questions.
- The treatment program has been unsuccessful and ineffective in attempts to eradicate RIFA. Data shows RIFA continue to spread across South East Queensland, noting that there has been some progress in reducing spread speed.

Other Comments

- Council acknowledges the efforts of the Program to date and highlights the costs that are being felt by those countries that have not removed this pest.
- Council recognises the need to understand the ecology and behaviours of this pest before effective eradication procedures and processes are available.

- Council congratulates the Program on the outcome of reducing the spread of this pest when compared to other countries where eradication is not the outcome.
- Council would like to see complete commitment from all levels of government to total eradication for RIDA in this region and across the country.
- Council would like to see a significant improvement on the issue of compliance:
 - A focus on the movement of RIFA host material out of the known RIFA area is needed.
 - The penalties applicable for actions that give rise to the spread of RIFA should be reviewed, with consideration being given to significant fines and in serious cases jail terms for implicated corporation executives.
 - The ability for Queensland Government staff to 'police' the movement of host material, within the known RIFA zone, between local government boundaries to reduce the spread and potential reinfection of uninfected areas needs to be reviewed.
 - A better process of 'checking' self-compliance of industry partners should be adopted.
 - Better training needs to be provided for local government compliance staff with stronger powers for local government officers to support the RIFA program.
- Council would like the Standing Committee to note that Council delivers its general biosecurity obligation responsibility through the execution of its RIFA related policies and procedures, and by reporting RIFA to the Queensland Government. Council understands that all agencies, residents, and industries are required to be involved if we are to defeat this pest, however Council is not supportive of the cost burden shifting to local government.
- Whilst Council will continue to cooperate and deliver its legislated obligations, Council is concerned about the medium-term impacts and expectations from the Queensland Government on Council, its operations, and budget. Council seeks a fair approach towards the Program that better reflects the true cost of managing this species and providing the necessary fiscal support to all local authorities towards managing this invasive pest.