



## **Australian Government**

Australian Government response to the  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
References Committee report:

Red imported fire ants in Australia: Don't Let This Come  
Back to Bite Us

October 2024



## Acknowledgements

The management of red imported fire ants in Australia is a matter of great significance for the Australian community. The Australian Government thanks the individuals and organisations who contributed to this inquiry. The development of this response was led by the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, as the lead Australian Government agency, in consultation with relevant Australian Government agencies (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Finance, The Treasury, Department of Defence, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, and the National Indigenous Australians Agency), the Queensland Government, and all state and territory governments as cost-sharing parties.

## Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee report: *Red imported fire ants in Australia: Don't Let This Come Back to Bite Us*, tabled on 18 April 2024. The Australian Government's response is set out below and addresses the recommendations contained in the report.

The Committee's findings support efforts to continue to eradicate red imported fire ants (RIFA) from Australia. The report considers the significant biosecurity threat these exotic ants pose to Australia's economy, environment, and health, together with the current and planned eradication efforts, resourcing, delivery, governance, and transparency as broader matters to be addressed. The Australian Government takes very seriously the significant risk that RIFA pose and is committed to the eradication of RIFA in south-east Queensland (SEQ) and northern NSW.

There are two key initiatives to tackle RIFA in SEQ:

- The Queensland Government led and nationally funded National Fire Ant Eradication Program – which is targeting the eradication of fire ants in a ring around the current infested area – which will move in and shrink over time as the program is delivered.
- The Queensland Government Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (Queensland government providing \$37 million over 2021-26) – who are responsible for suppression and treatment within the ring.

The Queensland Government-led National Fire Ant Eradication Program (NFAEP) is Australia's largest-ever biosecurity eradication program in terms of investment and time. The NFAEP's objective is to contain and control RIFA to eradicate this pest from SEQ by 2032 and prevent it spreading and establishing across Australia. The eradication of RIFA provides a wide range of public benefits, is considered a matter of national significance for national cost-sharing arrangements and is delivered following the principles of the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA).

The total national investment in the NFAEP since 2001 is over \$1.2 billion, with the Australian Government providing 50% of the total investment of \$640 million. The 2023-27 NFAEP Response Plan (response plan) and a new commitment of \$592.8 million nationally cost shared, was agreed by all Australian agriculture ministers in July 2023. The Australian Government and cost-sharing partners have confidence in the plan and its delivery by the Queensland Government.

The response plan recognises the opportunities to strengthen the NFAEP's structure and governance arrangements to reflect the significant increase in funding and the increased scale of the NFAEP. A restructure of the NFAEP has enabled the program to better deliver on the response plan's objectives, including upscaling significantly over the past 12 months to strengthen containment and compliance and intensify program-led community treatment. This includes:

- Almost doubling workforce capacity to facilitate the increased treatment and surveillance area.
- Using a range of targeted treatment methods, including aerial and ground baiting over approximately 300,000 hectares inside the containment band.
- Increasing broadscale treatment capacity through the operation of six helicopters, four drones and a fixed-wing aircraft.
- Establishing two additional storage depots and work hubs in Caboolture and the Gold Coast to reduce travel time each day for the workforce and moving equipment to and from the eradication zone.
- Increasing community engagement and training to support stakeholders to clearly understand their obligations and requirements to minimise the risk of moving RIFA.
- Doubling compliance capacity and reviewing Queensland biosecurity regulations to address human assisted movement of RIFA.

A recently strengthened governance framework, including establishment of a National Management Group (NMG), aligns the NFAEP with other national biosecurity responses. The NFAEP is supported by an integrated planning and performance approach that enhances accountability, and transparency to deliver the response plan.

The Australian Government also recognises that community and industry engagement is critical to the success of the NFAEP, which will take a whole-of-community approach to eradicate RIFA. Work is well underway, with an indicative \$40 million allocated through the response plan for communication and engagement activities. The Australian Government will support communication efforts including building on existing stakeholder engagement forums, support of national communication activities and engagement, including the National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN) to ensure key messaging and engagement is well structured and co-ordinated between all jurisdictions.

The Queensland funded Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) delivers a number of 2021 review recommendations, the status of these is published on the DAFF NFAEP NMG webpage (2023 Program Audit) at [www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/partnerships/rifa-eradication](http://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/partnerships/rifa-eradication). FAST works closely with the NFAEP to support information exchange and cross-discipline cooperation and collaboration. FAST focuses on equipping all levels of government, industry and communities in areas awaiting planned treatment, with the skills and knowledge to self-manage RIFA on land they own or manage. FAST supports engagement and collaboration of government departments across different levels of government (local, state & federal).

The NFAEP is one of the most scrutinised biosecurity programs delivered in Australia and has been reviewed 14 times since 2001, with the most recent independent review undertaken in 2021. All reviews have shown the NFAEP to be scientifically sound, with eradication technically feasible and with a favourable benefit-cost ratio. Implementation and success of the response plan will be independently reviewed in early 2026 to confirm

that the NFAEP continues to be effective. The response plan also includes several triggers that initiate a review of the response if activated. The scope of this review will be expanded to consider the recommendations posed in the senate inquiry report where accepted.

The Australian Government will continue to work with state and territory governments, industry and stakeholders on the eradication response for RIFA and will consider the views of the Committee as this work progresses.

## Response

### **Recommendation 1 (paragraph 2.75)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government in consultation with state and territory governments, work to review the current level of funding for the National Fire Ant Eradication Program and whether this is sufficient to eradicate red imported fire ants by 2032, and if not sufficient, investigate the appropriate level of funding required for eradication.

### **Response**

#### **SUPPORTED**

As part of the National Fire Ant Eradication Program's (NFAEP) existing rigorous governance framework, rolling evaluations will be undertaken throughout the delivery of the 2023-27 Response Plan.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's (DAFF) leadership within the NFAEP National Management Group (NMG), will deliver a Gate review in late 2025. The NMG as decision makers for the program will be responsible for selecting an appropriate independent expert reviewer with relevant subject matter expertise, appropriate financial expertise, and operation experience and determining the scope of the Gate review.

An independent program review (including an assessment of technical feasibility and cost-benefit of eradication) will also be undertaken in 2026-27. This review will provide evidence to the NFAEP NMG to inform future eradication program arrangements and define the continuing national response beyond 2026-27 to achieve eradication by 2032.

**Recommendation 1 (paragraph 2.76)**

The committee further recommends that:

- The Australian Government, and all state and territory governments commit to providing uninterrupted funding required to achieve eradication.
- The Australian Government, and all state and territory governments ensure funds are provided as a whole-of-government response to reflect the seriousness of red imported fire ants on all aspects of Australian life, including health, tourism, agriculture, and environmental.

**Response****NOTED**

In July 2023, all Australian agriculture ministers affirmed their commitment to the eradication of RIFA from Australia by 2032, by approving the 2023-27 Response Plan and a budget of \$592 million for its delivery. The Australian Government is providing \$296.4 million which is 50% of the total cost of delivering the response plan.

All jurisdictions have confirmed their full forward budget commitment to deliver the response plan with the exception of Western Australia which has committed to the first two years with the subsequent years subject to funding approval processes.

Any future funding commitments for the NFAEP will be a matter for all Australian governments as cost-sharing parties.

**Recommendation 2 (paragraph 2.77)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with the National Fire Ant Eradication Program to explore options to improve transparency and accountability mechanisms across both the strategic and operational aspects of the red imported fire ant response. In doing so, the committee recommends this includes:

- Publication of the full 2023–2027 Response Plan, including funding allocations and priorities.
- Timely publication of any outstanding and future key reviews, reports, minutes, and data.
- Formal stakeholder and industry involvement within the National Management Group.
- Increased independence within the governance arrangements, including the reinstatement of an independent chair for the National Management Group.

**Response****SUPPORTED**

Community and industry engagement is critical to the success of the NFAEP, which has a whole-of-community approach to tackling RIFA.

Broader industry and stakeholder engagement occurs through the NFAEP's Industry and Council Collaboration Network, which meets quarterly. DAFF will work with the NFAEP to enhance this forum to broaden engagement with other national stakeholders. The forum will continue to meet regularly to improve two-way engagement with key stakeholders and the community.

The NFAEP is delivered as a National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) NEBRA-like approach which supports the NFAEP to be consistent with other national emergency biosecurity response deeds leading to greater understanding across all deeds, and efficient and effective decision-making in emergency responses.

The NFAEP publishes:

- Annual workplans – outlining operational aspects of the program and budget
- Quarterly and annual reporting on program delivery (including budget position)
- Minutes of the National Steering Committee (2017-2023).

Communiqués from the NFAEP National Management Group (NMG) are published on the DAFF website following each meeting to report on program progress and key discussion items. Response plans (and other documentation including minutes) for national biosecurity eradication responses are not published given the confidentiality of information contained within these plans.

Where it does not pre-empt decision-making, compliance actions or confidentiality, NFAEP material will be published. An outline of the response plan (including an indicative budget of the response plan funding) is published on the NFAEP website at [www.fireants.org.au/about-us/fire-ant-response-plan](http://www.fireants.org.au/about-us/fire-ant-response-plan).

As with other national biosecurity response governance arrangements, the Chair of the NFAEP NMG is the DAFF Deputy Secretary for the Biosecurity, Operations and Compliance Group. The NFAEP Consultative Committee, which replaces the National Steering Committee, has an independent Chair – Dr John Robertson.

### **Recommendation 3 (paragraph 2.78)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government undertake an independent, rapid review of the actions and recommendations from the 2021 Independent Strategic Review and what has been completed or is in process to be completed. The committee further recommends that the review should report back to the Commonwealth Minister for Agriculture within three months and that a report of this review should be tabled in both Houses of the Australian Parliament within 14 days of the provision of this report to the Minister.

### **Response**

#### **SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

This recommendation will be addressed as part of the scheduled Gate review outlined in Recommendation 1 (2.75). The review will be undertaken in late 2025.

The NFAEP is also reporting regularly how recommendations from the 2021 Independent Strategic Review have been considered and are being implemented through the response plan. The most recent report (Program Audit 2023) is published on the DAFF NFAEP NMG webpage at [www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/partnerships/rifa-eradication](http://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/partnerships/rifa-eradication).

**Recommendation 3 (paragraph 2.79)**

As part of this review, the committee recommends that the Australian Government, as the primary funder of the red imported fire ant response, investigate alternate models for delivery to reduce bureaucratic process, improve independence and transparency, improve public engagement and improve the delivery of the eradication program. The committee recommends that all models are investigated, including a statutory independent agency and a nationally led commission.

**Response****SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

The Australian Government supports in principle noting that national emergency response arrangements are continually reviewed and refined to ensure they are streamlined and can effectively respond to biosecurity emergencies.

The NFAEP is working to align delivery of the program more closely with other national responses, in line with NEBRA principles, including through the new governance arrangements.

Broader arrangements for all biosecurity response deeds and custodian arrangements are considered by the National Biosecurity Committee.

**Recommendation 4 (paragraph 3.84 and paragraph 3.85)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government and all state and territory governments should commit to further investment in research, development, and innovation to improve understanding of red imported fire ants in the Australian context and improve efficiencies through implementation of new technologies and techniques.

As part of this, the committee recommends: the National Fire Ant Eradication Program commit to quickly progress the development of innovative and new control and eradication methods and techniques, including environmental DNA (eDNA) markers, biological controls, and RNA-interference (RNAi) technology.

**Response****SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

The Australian Government supports the existing allocation of \$17 million (3% of the response plan's budget) for the NFAEP science program underpinning the eradication response. This includes review and research into current and emerging scientific techniques and processes relevant to RIFA detection, diagnosis and treatment to ensure best practice in RIFA eradication.

The NFAEP also recognises the importance of the ongoing development of new and innovative control and eradication methods and techniques for RIFA and supports ongoing innovation to deliver outcomes to improve program effectiveness and efficiency.

Under the response plan, \$2 million is currently allocated for innovation including:

- use of drones and fixed wing aircraft (in rural areas) for bait dispersal and surveillance,
- progressing the use of environmental DNA (eDNA) to identify infestations and provide evidence for the absence of RIFA,



- applying big data analytics, bioinformatics and AI to inform operational efficiencies and monitor operational effectiveness.
- developing more effective types of bait (including weather-proof), and working with Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) to develop a novel RNA-interference bait.

#### **Recommendation 5 (paragraph 3.86)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish and fund a Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) encompassing independent researchers and academics, private business, industry representatives and governments to bring together the necessary diverse expertise for understanding red imported fire ants in Australia.

#### **Response**

##### **NOTED**

The Australian Government recognises the importance of researchers, academics, private business, industry representatives and governments in delivering the NFAEP.

CRC establishment requires a competitive and extensive bidding, negotiation and establishment process, which if successful, could take years and significant resources before it would be functional and delivering research outcomes.

There are existing bodies and partnerships which already efficiently and effectively deliver collaborative and multi-partner research activities with relevant expertise, such as the multi-partner *Catalysing Australia's Biosecurity* partnership, recently established by CSIRO with DAFF.

A CRC would potentially duplicate existing work the NFAEP already supports, including bringing together experts on research and science aspects including:

- University of Canberra – National eDNA Reference Centre
- Murdoch University – highly innovative (artificial intelligence base) ant identification platform that builds on the latest advances in object detection and recognition from images and videos (supported with funding from DAFF \$800,000 over 2021-2024)
- CSIRO – development of novel genetic bait that is highly specific to RIFA, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle capacity for aerial utilities associated with eradications, novel RNA-interference (RNAi) management tools.

**Recommendation 6 (paragraph 3.87)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with the Queensland Government to urgently review the funding and outcomes of the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST), with a particular focus on increasing FAST activities in areas not receiving any eradication or suppression activity. The committee recommends Australian Government work closely with the Queensland Government to commit to additional funding for the FAST to support self-treatment by residents, local governments, and landholders and ultimately, support the delivery of the 2023-2027 Response Plan and the 2022–2026 FAST Plan.

**Response****NOTED**

The Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) is a Queensland funded initiative (not nationally cost-shared) established in 2021 with the Queensland Government providing \$37.1 million in funding until 2026 for FAST.

The 2021 Independent Strategic Review recommended the suppression zone be managed separately to the containment and eradication program. Since 1 July 2024, local councils, state and federal agencies within the suppression zone responsible for treating RIFA on the land they own or manage within the RIFA suppression area. The taskforce provides bait and training to do this.

**Recommendation 7 (paragraph 4.65)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with the Queensland Government, collaborate with affected councils within the biosecurity zones and neighbouring areas to ensure community members, residents, landholders and businesses are engaged and understand their General Biosecurity Obligation. This should incorporate community notices having a particular focus on identification, reporting and movement controls.

**Response****SUPPORTED**

The Australian Government recognises that community and industry engagement is critical to the success of the program, which takes a whole-of-community approach to tackling RIFA.

The NFAEP has a well-established education and communication campaign. The response plan has allocated nearly \$40 million to communication and engagement strategies (marketing campaign, industry and stakeholder engagement and digital enhancement), and includes:

- A year-round multi-faced mass media fire ant campaign across the entire operational area in SEQ (eradication and non-eradication areas) targeting key audiences including primary producers and the building and development sector.
- Market research across target groups and adapting the campaign approach to address compliance concerns and knowledge gaps.

- Self-paced online RIFA training for residents, workplaces and pest management technicians.
- Engagement events targeting local communities and residents, and hosting stalls at popular locations and events including agriculture shows, sporting events and shops.

The Australian Government is supporting the NFAEP to deliver communication and engagement activities and build on existing engagement forums with industry and stakeholders, including the Australian Local Government Association. To date, DAFF has held two open national online webinars in August 2023 and July 2024 to improve engagement with national stakeholders. DAFF has seconded a senior public affairs officer to work with the NFAEP to support this work.

#### **Recommendation 8 (4.66)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with state and territory governments:

- Undertake an assessment of current public understanding and awareness of red imported fire ants, and their obligations.
- Allocate additional funding and resources to undertake a national awareness campaign and achieve greater understanding. The campaign should focus on advertising, education, and engagement on a national approach, with higher resources apportioned according to the level of outbreak and risk.

#### **Response**

##### **NOTED**

The Australian Government notes the extensive education and awareness activities already being undertaken by the NFAEP. A summary of these activities is outlined in the response to Recommendation 7.

Consistent with Recommendation 7, DAFF's senior public affairs officer is working with the NFAEP to develop a national communication and engagement strategy to increase awareness of RIFA and the importance of eradication. These messages will be delivered through the National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN) to ensure key messaging and program engagement is co-ordinated and well structured.

The NFAEP is also working with Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet on research and behavioural analytics around compliance and behaviour to improve community understanding and cooperation.

**Recommendation 9 (4.67)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with the Queensland and New South Wales governments, work to increase compliance with movement controls, including increasing biosecurity spot checks at border crossings. As part of this, all governments should commit to releasing regular reports on identified breaches, including responsible industries and penalty outcomes.

**Response****SUPPORTED**

The Australian Government recognises the Queensland (Qld) and New South Wales (NSW) governments have legislative responsibility for compliance and movement controls. They continue to work to increase their presence at the NSW/Qld border, including through the NSW Government's [Operation Victa](#). This supports implementation of Recommendation 14 of the 2021 Independent Strategic Review – improved consistency of compliance approach for interstate and intrastate movements.

The NFAEP has a QLD/NSW Communication Coordination Working Group who meet regularly to coordinate and share resources to strengthen awareness and understanding of RIFA surveillance and movement compliance along the border. This arrangement has been further expanded and relied on as detections in northern NSW were found.

The Australian Government participates at all levels of the program's governance to support the delivery of the program including supporting work to deliver the Plant Health Committee's Sub-Committee for Market Access, Risk and Trade task to improve domestic movement controls for high-risk carrier material. Given the urgency, the task is now being implemented with the support of the NFAEP, with the NMG approving the use of NFAEP funds for the Pest Risk Analysis.

The NFAEP's Compliance and Enforcement Strategy 2023–27 establishes the approach to compliance and enforcement. The NFAEP is continuing to build its professional capacity in compliance, almost doubling compliance officers to over 40, to enhance intelligence and reduce the risks associated with human assisted movement, and support, and/or enforce the General Biosecurity Obligation across community, local government areas, and industry stakeholder groups. Quarterly and annual reports published by the NFAEP on its website report on regulation and compliance activities undertaken as part of the Program, including non-compliance metrics for industry, business and residential householders.

**Recommendation 10 (4.68)**

The committee recommends that the Australian Government conduct a review process of the Varroa mite incursion and response, in partnership with the New South Wales and Queensland state governments to identify and study tension points that also exist in the red imported fire ant response, with a view to actively adopt learnings and adjust the response plan accordingly.

**Response****SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

During and after an eradication response, a formal review or debrief of the response occurs. This is an essential exercise to reflect on the response and capture key learnings to inform future biosecurity prevention, preparedness and response activities.

Plant Health Australia as custodians of the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed, worked with cost-share parties to complete the varroa mite response debrief. The key findings from the varroa mite response will be considered in the context of the ongoing responses to RIFA and other biosecurity responses.

Relevant key features of the varroa response have included the value and importance of transparency and engagement with key stakeholders, and the need for effective compliance and associated assurance programs in support of eradication activities.

As outlined by DAFF officers' evidence provided at the inquiry hearing in Canberra, there are significant differences between the Varroa mite and RIFA responses.