



NATIONAL
Fire Ant Eradication
PROGRAM

23 February 2024

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 address particular concerns raised about the National Fire Ant Eradication Program (NFAEP – herein referred to as the Program) in submissions to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for the inquiry into matters relating to red imported fire ants (RIFA).

The Program acknowledges the time taken to complete each submission and welcomes the input and interest from the broad range of stakeholders.

The Program's vision is that Australia is free from RIFA by 2032 to protect our ecosystem, industries, economy and way of life.

The Program stands united with Australians on the urgency with which RIFA must be eradicated. We echo the concerns over potential catastrophic impacts to our livelihoods, way of life, and economy. Since receiving the 2021 Strategic Review, we have been working to address the 27 recommendations made. Key themes identified among the submissions confirm the work the Program has been doing is aligned with community expectations.

Response

I would like to address particular concerns regarding the Program put forward to the Senate Inquiry. As per your letter, multiple points of interest have been raised and we would like to provide the following additional information.

1. Community and industry engagement

Eradicating RIFA will take a whole-of-community approach. We need the community, industry, and all levels of government to play an active role in RIFA eradication on properties they own and manage.

To assist with this, a mass media campaign will be delivered across Southeast Queensland (SEQ) to engage the community in the fight against RIFA. The campaign will have three key themes:

- Look for, report, and treat RIFA – encourage stakeholders in target areas to check their properties for RIFA and, report and treat them to suppress ant populations
- Let our RIFA teams in – build community rapport to support the delivery of planned RIFA treatment and surveillance work



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- Don't spread RIFA – empower stakeholders so they can effectively comply with the RIFA biosecurity zones and associated material movement controls.

As part of this work, the Program will continue to promote awareness and understanding of the RIFA biosecurity zones and the associated regulatory controls. It will provide online training for residents, workplaces and pest managers and continue to build digital systems that make it easier for stakeholders to support RIFA eradication.

Our engagement activities in **Appendix A** outline the extent of engagement during the current financial year with the community and our stakeholder groups.

2. Authority

Consent

Over the past two years, the Program has treated almost 60,000 properties. The willingness of the community to play their part in RIFA eradication is apparent. Refusals account for 1% and of that, for the safety of our team, we have required Queensland Police support to enter 14 properties (0.02%).

The Program officers are authorised under the *Biosecurity Act 2014* (the Act) section 261 to enter properties to complete activities relating to RIFA eradication. Should enforced entry be required, multiple factors are considered in the action plan, including human rights.

The power to carry out Aerial Control Measures on a property is located at section 294 of the Act. Whilst consent is not required to carry out Aerial Control measures, 48 hours' notice must be given unless the measure is carried out above 350 feet, or it would be impractical due to the measure being ineffective after the end of the notice period.

Permits

The Program is the holder of multiple APVMA permits. The restraints, directions for use, critical use comments, conditions and restrictions are strictly adhered to by the Program.

The aerial application of baits is carried out in accordance with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority's (CASA) Legislation including the *Civil Aviation Act 1988* (Cth), the *Civil Aviation Regulations 1988* (Cth) and the Manual of Standards.

The Program seeks to clarify that it does not spray chemicals in its treatment efforts. Bait, in granule form, is distributed by hand, via all-terrain vehicles and via aerial drops. Direct nest injection is delivered as a liquid form.

Governance

In line with both the 2021 Strategic Review, and the national importance of the Program, the governance arrangements have been restructured to incorporate improved internal decision-making. In addition, the National Biosecurity Committee now has greater financial oversight and input when reviewing Program performance.

Evaluations of the Program will be conducted at regular intervals, with a financial gate review set for 2024-25. This review will measure; the extent to which Program outcomes have been met, the defined objectives and inform the cost-share partners of performance progress.

A Program review will take place during 2026-27 to determine whether eradication of RIFA by 2032 remains feasible.



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3. Our people

Programs of this scale are inherently complex in nature. They are typified by uncertainty caused by the inability to know exactly what might happen next. Our teams deal with ambiguity on a daily basis in conditions that are difficult and challenging. Safety of our teams is central to our mission and values.

Biosecurity Queensland's integrity framework outlines the elements our teams operate under:

- Ethical decision making and appropriate behaviour
- Fraud, corruption, and misconduct control
- Complaints management.

Work health and safety

The Program has a formal and structured approach to adherence of the Work Health and Safety strategy and subsequent policies and procedures. These documents comply with the requirements of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*, *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* and the *Work Health and Safety (Codes of Practice) Notice 2022*.

Standard operating procedures (SOP)

The Program has SOP's to ensure sound governance, compliance, and operational effectiveness is achieved. The SOP's are designed to provide a dynamic framework to accommodate various situations and scenarios. They play a crucial role in guiding our teams in field operations, risk mitigation and ensuring compliance with our legislative obligations and operational requirements.

Regular consultation and review processes are carried out to incorporate feedback mechanisms and to contribute to the continuous improvement of program performance.

Complaints

The Program responds to complaints in accordance with Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) Complaints Management Framework.

We are committed to ensuring that complaints are dealt with in a transparent, responsive, efficient, effective, and fair way.

The Program acknowledges the importance of community and industry engagement in the ultimate success of the Program and the right to question and comment on the Program's approach.

Recently the Program was legally challenged, questioning our scientific principles, bait choices, environmental impacts, and method of application, resulting in the matter being dismissed.



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Summary

Eradicating RIFA requires a whole-of-community approach. The Program acknowledges the role we play and reiterates our commitment to delivering this outcome within our delegated authority.

Our aim is to work collaboratively and transparently with stakeholders to ensure we achieve our vision.

Sincerely

Ashley Bacon

Executive Program Director

National Fire Ant Eradication Program

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries



Appendix A – Engagement activities – from July 2023

Engagement channel	Stakeholder group	Location	Audience
Print media	Households	SEQ and northern NSW	283,000
Email newsletters / e-alerts	Households	SEQ and northern NSW	436,000
Social media	All stakeholders	-	720,000
Website	All stakeholders	-	638,000
Media statements, TV and radio interviews	All stakeholders	National	7,000 media mentions
Face to face events	Community and industry	SEQ	42,000 at 106 events
RIFA training	All stakeholders	Online	8,000
Partnerships	Community, industry, local government	Indigenous corporations Gold Coast Scenic Rim Lockyer Valley Moreton Bay Industry groups Rural sector – primary producers Civil and urban development Council State Government Service providers Waste	40 groups (with unique community reach)