SENATE INQUIRY

Red imported fire ants in Australia - summary submission

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About the Invasive Species Council

The Invasive Species Council was formed in 2002 to advocate for stronger laws, policies and programs to keep Australian biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, exotic pathogens and other invaders. We are a not-for-profit charitable organisation.

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Introduction

Australia's governments have underestimated fire ants (Solenopsis invicta) since they were first detected in 2001. Inadequate and often uncertain funding for fire ant eradication has hampered the response to this invasive species.

Despite this, fire ant eradication efforts have:

- Significantly slowed the spread of fire ants in Australia
- Responded effectively to 7 fire ant post border incursions
- Prevented billions of dollars of economic, industry, environmental and health impacts

Investments made in fire ant eradication have so far prevented their spread across much of eastern Australia. However, the stated goal of eradication has remained elusive for the remaining south-east Queensland outbreak.

Fire ants are a devastating threat to Australia's health, tourism, the environment, agriculture, infrastructure, and social amenity. Combined fire ant impacts are estimated to be up to $2 billion annually if they are allowed to spread across the continent. The annual costs of these impacts and managing fire ant inundation far exceed the amounts spent on fire ant eradication since 2001.

The presence of the largest and last remaining fire ant stronghold on the Queensland-New South Wales Border poses an extreme risk to Australia. A single queen undetected in a new location could spark a new infestation. Recent detections and interceptions in Victoria and Tasmania show the risk of Queensland's fire ant population to the entirety of Australia. Eradication must remain the objective.

There is an urgent need for a new biosecurity response funding model that allows for more rapid decision-making for large-scale threats. The response to biosecurity threats like fire ants has historically been led by Agriculture Departments. However, given that the impacts of fire ants are dispersed across a range of sectors, it would be appropriate to consider response funding on a whole of government basis.

In 2017, $411 million was committed to eradication program work until 2027. These funds were already exhausted by 2023 - much faster than the planned 10 year timeframe. Slow government decision-making, a lack of thorough infestation area delimitation informing funding decisions and optimistic predictions about planned treatment work contributed to the failure of this plan. Despite this failure, the infestation had been contained to southern Queensland until November 2023 when fire ants breached containment into northern New South Wales.

In 2023 a new fire ant eradication response plan was agreed to by Federal, State and Territory ministers. Once every state and territory government commits funding the new eradication plan will have $593 million until 2027. This funding is not enough to achieve fire ant eradication, but is a significant step in the right direction.

The 2021 Independent Review determined that at least 10 years and up to $300 million per year would be required to eradicate fire ants. The availability and escalating costs of materials and workforce along with fire ant infestation growth over 2023 are reasonably expected to increase eradication costs above predicted levels. An ongoing transparent evaluation of resource availability for fire ant eradication work would provide community confidence that eradication efforts remain viable.

The commitment to full eradication agreed to by Agriculture Ministers at their July 2023 meeting necessitates a larger commitment over the next four years and beyond 2027 in line with that recommended in the 2021 independent review.

Eradicating red imported fire ants will be a major technical, scientific and governance challenge. Eradication is the only way to prevent the eventual spread of fire ants across Australia.

While eradication is still possible it must be a priority. Australia cannot afford governments to fail on this.

Urgently needed actions to improve fire ant eradication

1. Eradication should remain the goal, the current national response plan should be endorsed and South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania should commit their outstanding share of funds to this plan.

Australia is a global leader in ant eradications and eradication of fire ants from south-east Queensland is still possible, but delays to funding the response plan are a direct threat to its success. Australia's combined federal, state and territory governments have all committed to eradication and agreed to a $592.85 million national project budget for the next four years, as part of a longer 10 year eradication plan.

South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania have yet to commit to their full share of funding and the current combined shortfall over the next four years is $40.35 million, or 7% of the national project budget.

2. Urgently and rapidly review the funding for the national response plan.

The four year funding for the new 10 year eradication plan announced in 2023 provides a window to re-establish fire ant suppression, containment and eradication, however the history of delayed decision-making around funding increases cannot be repeated or eradication will fail.

We strongly suspect that funding adjustments will be needed to account for, at a minimum, the impacts of recent inflation on materials and labour costs, the impacts of funding delays on scaling up the program in 2023 and the additional costs of recent outbreaks in NSW. Governments should commit to increased funding in line with recommendations made from the 2021 review.

3. Commit at least $10 million/year for public advertising, education and engagement.

Fire ants are a threat across all areas of society, including in urban backyards and parks, sporting facilities, agricultural settings, bushland, infrastructure and schools. Successful eradication depends upon early detection of new outbreaks and this in turn depends on public awareness and willingness to look for fire ants and notify authorities. Public support for treatment activities is also essential to be able to deliver treatment across all land tenures.

Biosecurity agencies are not best placed to deliver the broad public engagement and education needed across all sectors of society and limited funding has been committed to this under the current program. A scaled-up campaign should use professional creative agencies to deliver high profile and high impact public advertising, including through billboards, letterboxing, media and to culturally diverse communities in south-east Queensland and northern NSW.

The campaign should focus on increasing fire ant surveillance by the public, participation in treatment programs and awareness of biosecurity rules. It should involve broad stakeholder collaboration in delivery, targeted industry based awareness raising and a dedicated schools program.

4. Increase transparency and accountability in program delivery and review through:

a. timely publication of key reports, minutes, priorities and data.

b. formal stakeholder consultation and involvement in the steering committee.

Transparency is an essential part of accountability, and vital for sustaining public and political support for the program. The public are likely to maintain confidence in the program only if they understand the rationale for decisions and are kept well informed.. A lack of transparency will encourage suspicion in the community about cover-ups and stuff-ups, potentially leading to public and media campaigns against the program. The benefits of transparency mean that the default position should be to make all information public unless there is an overriding need for confidentiality

At present, engaged or impacted stakeholders like the Invasive Species Council, farming or environmental representative bodies or local governments are not formally involved in the program's steering committee and consultation is often ad hoc or limited. Formalising this stakeholder engagement would improve on-ground delivery and identification of issues and opportunities.

Transparency has been an ongoing problem for stakeholders. Examples of this include:

- Stakeholders have often relied upon leaks, or media and/or parliamentary pressure to obtain basic documents like the 2021 Strategic review (released in June 2023) or 2023-27 response plan.
- Minutes of steering committee meetings have not been published since December 2022.
- A fire ant interception in Victoria in February 2023 was only revealed through rumours and confirmed to the Queensland and Victorian parliaments months later.
- A KPMG Review of the Program's operations completed in the past 2 years is not publicly available.
- The current risk register, status of these risks and information about the detailed risk thresholds being used are not publicly available.
- There has been no biennial Efficiency and Effectiveness review since 2021.
- There has not been an official response to the 27 recommendations of the 2021 strategic review
- A new steering committee structure is apparently being implemented in February 2024 but stakeholders have not been made aware of the details of this or consulted.
- There is no regular publication of the compliance or enforcement priorities or data, including the numbers of refused entry, biosecurity entry orders, and fire ant related fines.
- The notification of new outbreaks has sometimes been adhoc (e.g. we only found out about the recent Tallebudgera and Currumbin Valley outbreaks by checking the map on www.fireants.org.au)
- The annual report and quarterly reports for 2022/23 and the works plans for 2022/23 or 2023/24 have not yet been publicly released.

5. Urgently increase resources for the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) to support self-treatment by residents in Brisbane City and Moreton Bay local government areas.

Currently, free self-treatment baiting kits are available to all Gold Coast, Ipswich and Logan residents, but not to residents in Brisbane City or Moreton Bay LGAs despite fire ants being present in growing densities.

Self-treatment should be freely available to every resident within the biosecurity zone. Community suppression treatments will limit density and internal spread, a possibility with the horseshoe approach to eradication. This will also assist eradication efforts when the program reaches these areas.

The current cost of FAST in the three local government areas is $8 million in 2023/24 and $12.2 in 2024/25. Including the two extra local governments will at least double the cost of the FAST program based on the number of households. This increase should be covered by a cost sharing arrangement between the Commonwealth and Queensland governments with the local government areas.

6. Ensure any additional outbreaks in NSW are detected and the risk of new outbreaks in NSW is limited by:

a. Extending the Queensland fire ant biosecurity zones south to the Queensland-New South Wales border, including key cross border freight corridors.

b. Auditing the movement of construction materials from south-east Queensland to NSW in 2022 and 2023 and systematically checking all high risk sites identified.

c. Increasing ongoing biosecurity spot checks at Queensland border crossing points.

Human assisted movement of fire ants in high risk materials is the main contributor to infestation spread outside the biosecurity zones. In 2023, several significant fire ant detections resulted from the movement of fire ants in carrier materials. These include:

- Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) and Macleay Island, likely from mulch.
- The interception of a fire ant Queen with a pot plant shipment to Victoria.
- Kleinton north of Toowoomba, likely from soil.
- Tallebudgera southern Gold Coast, likely from hay.
- New clusters at development sites at Morayfield and Burpengary north of Brisbane, likely from soil.
- Murwillumbah, northern New South Wales, likely from turf or soil.
- Wardell south of Ballina in NSW, likely in soil or garden supplies.

The imposition of biosecurity restrictions must be balanced against the risk of loss of public support, we believe that the outbreaks on the Gold Coast and in northern NSW in 2023 and 2024 suggest that not expanding the biosecurity zone to the NSW border exposes communities to a high risk of fire ant spread.

Longer term actions needed to achieve eradication and improve biosecurity preparedness

7. Extend ministerial responsibility for fire ant eradication to include environment and health ministers, in addition to agricultural ministers.

Fire ants will have considerable direct impacts on public health, electricity and other infrastructure, and Australia's biodiversity and environment. The cost of these impacts rivals the considerable agricultural impacts of fire ants if they spread across the country.

Ministerial responsibility for biosecurity matters sits commonly within the Agriculture portfolio, but given the broad social and environmental impacts of fire ants, other Ministers and their departments should be included in oversight and decision making to ensure a whole-of-government response commensurate with the threat.

8. Ensure eradication funding decisions are made as part of a whole-of-government response, and not just as part of the biosecurity or agriculture budget.

The scale of the biosecurity response to fire ants is huge when compared to biosecurity or agricultural agency budgets, but it is often considered by cabinets and treasurers in the context of the overall size of these agencies. This is a mistake, given the impacts will be felt across all sectors of society and in particular by the health and local government sectors.

The scale of the fire ant response compared to departmental budgets is directly impacting on the response capacity of biosecurity agencies to other outbreaks and the willingness of the agricultural minister to bring forward ambitious funding proposals.

Eradication funding should be considered in respect of the economic impacts and avoided costs across a range of sectors and not just as an expensive line item in the agriculture budget.

9. Commence development on a funding package for fire ant eradication beyond 2027, led by the Commonwealth Government.

Under the current response plan, it will take ten years to eradicate fire ants followed by a lengthy surveillance period. Currently, national funding is only committed until 2027.

Delayed decision-making by governments over new funding proposals has directly impacted the effectiveness of eradication, the scale of work on the ground, planning and workforce retention. Work should begin on a long-term fire ant eradication funding package for beyond 2027 that can be in place before the current funding runs out.

10. Consider establishing a stand alone fire ant response authority to run the eradication program.

The national eradication program currently operates under Biosecurity Queensland, with guidance and support provided by a national steering committee made up of representatives from the federal, state and territory governments.

To build on the commendable work undertaken so far and maintain focus on the scale, complexity and cross-jurisdictional nature of this eradication program a statutorily independent agency would be a superior governance model.

The new agency would be solely focussed on delivering the eradication program, with a mission to ensure whole-of-government engagement, the removal of bureaucratic or financial obstacles to the work and to improve public engagement. It would also allow for clearer national oversight of the program.

Ensuring the program is delivered by an independent or semi-independent body can bring greater efficiency and focus than embedding it within a large government department. The levels of approval required within a government department can slow decision-making, stymie public communication and can lead to political or bureaucratic interference. We remain concerned that under the current structure internal state government decisions, such as a department-wide staff freeze or other state government

edict, could hamper program implementation despite the availability of funds and long-term program approval.

11. Undertake a comprehensive study of the predicted biodiversity impacts of fire ants and develop key strategies to minimise their impact on Australia's environment if they spread beyond south-east Queensland.

The level of information and research about the expected impacts of fire ants on Australia's biodiversity is limited and, where it does exist, is often based upon quite old data or restricted to south-east Queensland.

While eradication remains the aim, strategies to mitigate the impacts of fire ants on Australia's biodiversity should also be prepared in anticipation of the fire ant expansion beyond current infestation boundaries. This should be based on a contemporary analysis of the possible biodiversity impacts across the country.

12. Reform and increase national biosecurity funding to ensure that risk creators, like goods importers, pay their fair share so that we can fund the measures needed to prevent high risk invasive species from arriving and spreading in Australia.

Fire ants have been imported to Australia at least 8 times. Fortunately, they have been successfully eradicated in all instances except for the persistent outbreak in south-east Queensland. This highlights the reality that even if we are successful in eradicating them in Queensland, importers of goods to Australia will continue to pose a risk that new invasions will occur which will require a response.

These future responses, and the responses to many other incursions of new highly damaging invasive species from overseas, will require significant resources for eradication, preparedness, surveillance and compliance.

Unfortunately, at the moment the level of allocated resources is not reflective of the level of risk or cost to Australia's environment, economy and society. A 2017 independent review of Australia's combined governments of biosecurity in Australia and a 2021 review by the Inspector General of Biosecurity both concluded that without additional funding Australia's biosecurity system will not stop new invasions by high risk species like fire ants.

In order to source this extra funding, we strongly encourage the Australian Government to explore all options for increased and sustainable funding. We support many of the potential mechanisms listed in "Sustainable funding and investment to strengthen biosecurity: discussion paper" released by the Department of Agriculture in November 2022 – in particular risk creator options such as the container levy proposed in 2018, which was supported by most biosecurity stakeholders.

13. Increase funding for research and development into technologies targeting invasive insects, such as eDNA marker surveillance.

One of the biggest problems with invasive ants like fire ants is finding where they are before they have the chance to spread and establish new colonies.

eDNA is a proven surveillance technology that could significantly improve and accelerate our early detection capability for fire ants, but also for other ants like yellow crazy ants or argentine ants. Research to develop species specific markers and into applications in different environmental conditions is required before this can be rolled out as part of the fire response program.

Other research priorities include:

- New bait delivery systems, as aerial treatments currently depend on the availability of helicopters and are constrained by weather is a constraint (wind/storm/lightning).
- Weather resistant bait to increase the opportunity for wet weather fire ant treatments.
- New surveillance methods including drones with remote sensing technology that detects fire ant colony heat signatures, and deployment of predictive AI as a guide to likely fire ant locations and high risk movement corridors.

14. Establish a permanent national body to coordinate national actions on invasive ants and provide dedicated funding for the National Invasive Ant Biosecurity Plan 2018-2028.

Invasive ants are amongst the most serious global invasive pests and there are many ant species which, like fire ants, could threaten Australia's environmental, economic, and social wellbeing. There are currently two other invasive ant species under national eradication programs, four under localised management or eradication programs and a further nine species identified as high priorities to prevent entering Australia.

Australia cannot afford to allow in any more invasive ant colonists like red imported fire ants, electric ants, browsing ants, yellow crazy ants or Argentine ants and to this end a comprehensive National Invasive Ant Biosecurity Plan (NIABP) 2018-2028 has been developed by the federal government.

In recognition of the seriousness of this threat, the NIABP recommends (6.5) the establishment of a permanent national body to coordinate national actions on invasive ants as a high priority for Australia. The mission of this body would be to preserve the accrued knowledge, scientific skills and expertise from various ant surveillance, eradication and containment programs for transfer to other programs. Currently, there is no dedicated funding for the NIABP.

15. Undertake a comprehensive study of the health impacts of fire ants and their predicted cost impacts on Australia's health system.

There is a lack of primary research supporting government decisions related to fire ant eradication. Information underpinning decisions is often sourced from the United States, Taiwan or research conducted in Australia that is decades old. We suspect this is leading to underestimates of the potential health costs of fire ants. Considerably more is known about fire ants now and this information must reach decision makers in a public and transparent manner

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