

National Red Imported Fire Ants Eradication Program

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The united voice of
Queensland agriculture

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To: Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

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

Our members

- Canegrowers
- Cotton Australia
- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Queensland Chicken Meat Council
- Pork Queensland
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallowa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Queensland Oyster Growers Association
- Lockyer Water Users Forum

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation



The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

We are a member-based organisation representing the interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national). Through our members, QFF represents more than 13,000 primary producers across the cotton, cane, horticulture, dairy, nursery and garden, poultry, pork, and intensive animal industries.

We unite the sector to engage in a broad range of economic, social, environmental, and regional issues through advocacy, policy development, and project activity. We work with the government of the day on behalf of industry, farmers, and the community to provide powerful representation and contribution to the policy direction, sustainability, and future growth of Queensland's agriculture sector.

Our Council of member representatives and policy committees set the strategic priorities for policy development and advocacy, while our Executive Board ensures our corporate governance.

QFF draws on the expertise and industry knowledge of our members, and through our commitment to collaboration and considered policy development, we lead Queensland's agriculture sector towards a strong future, ensuring our members are ahead of the game and have a voice at the table on the issues that matter to their members.

Submission

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the National Red Imported Fire Ants Eradication program.

We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Overview

QFF applauds the federal government's substantial \$268 million commitment in the ongoing battle against red imported fire ants (RIFA). As the government pushes for this announcement to 'pave the way for the eradication of fire ants in time for the 2032 Olympics', it is important to acknowledge the continued need for financial and resource commitment beyond 2027 as well. QFF acknowledges the mitigation efforts over the last 20 years but advocates for improvement in eradication border expansion moving forward. It is crucial to extend and enhance eradication strategies in the coming decade.

Fire ants pose a significant threat to the national environment and economy. Their destructive behaviours such as consuming seedlings, preying on pollinating insects, and tunnelling through roots and stems¹ of plant and cropping systems, majorly disrupt ecological systems. The agricultural sector, in particular the sugar, horticultural and nursery and garden industries, bear the brunt of this invasive pest, with substantial economic burdens estimated at \$2 billion annually, including a potential 40%

reduction in agricultural output. Fire ant mounds wreak havoc on earth and soil, further compounding the environmental toll. Fire ants also impact livestock's access to food and water sources but also pose a direct threat to their well-being. Destruction of infrastructure (i.e. irrigation systems) and electrical equipment, is not limited to the agricultural industry and results in massive financial repercussions for landholders and local governments.

To address this invasive species effectively, a forceful and targeted eradication approach is essential, to safeguard the economy from future long-term consequences of these invasive pests. Delays in eradication efforts will only escalate the economic burden. The upcoming election is a crucial juncture, and QFF remains committed to securing funding beyond the initial four-year period. Cost of eradication will only grow with delay and unfortunately to eradicate these invasive pests, a substantial upfront cost will be needed. However, the cost to the national economy would surpass this if eradication efforts fail. In response to the consultation upon the national eradication program, QFF has drafted the below response of recommendations.

Program governance

The national eradication program has held strict protocols for governance over the last 20 years, however despite this, has failed to deliver a successful RIFA program to date. QFF is concerned that delineation of the infection region first established in 2001 has continually failed to be tackled effectively, and there is no longer reasonable confidence about where this boundary is. The RIFA program has received a major independent review every 2 years, despite a lack of progression in eradication, which raises concern about whether the program has been consistently failing since its commencement, and/or whether continuous formal reviews are causing confusion and frustration amongst those running the program. This is not to say that this updated Plan does not allow for a much-needed review of the national program but it is imperative that this revision marks a major turning point in the nation's fight against RIFA.

There has been a lack of transparency about the program over the past two decades, with milestones and their progress not clearly identified or communicated, and previous governance structures failing to provide proper oversight and guidance of the program. To be able to come close to achieving a 2032 eradication status, clearer reporting of program progress is needed, to build confidence amongst landholders as well as funding government bodies. QFF urges for, at the very least, *independent* annual progress reporting to be instated, providing a public update on movement of eradication and suppression zone borders (supported by evidence) and a statement regarding any necessary or planned tweaks to the program to improve performance. Transparency of the program is still a source of criticism today, and publicly available updates would allow review to be sought if a lack of progress is evident.

Program management

The current management framework focuses heavily on eradication zones and maintaining the RIFA-free status of these areas. While QFF recognises the utmost importance of maintaining these eradication zones, suppression areas will require a more targeted focus leading up to the 2032 fire-ant-free goal. Existing policies and management of RIFA in suppressions zones is loosely outlined, further guidelines are needed for landholders having to treat fire ants on their own property

including requirements around notification to neighbouring landholders. Whilst Biosecurity Queensland will go into eradication zones to provide treatment, these eradication borders have been stagnant and are not encroaching inwards, indicating a more ad-hoc and responsive strategy to date. Suppression zones have largely been left to landholders and the wider public to maintain. This had led to an obvious neglect in inspection response times to property nest notifications. CANEGROWERS Australia have been vocal about the impact of RIFA on property, highlighting that the inspection response after RIFA notification has months-long delays, leaving landholders to treat infections without much guidance. If the federal government will not fund suppression activities under this plan, they should at the least be responsible for clear policies for movement of materials, methods of treatment, enforcement of movements, roles and responsibilities of landholders and overall plans for priorities. This must change for a cohesive effective response.

QFF understands the revised horseshoe approach to eradication, noting it is a reasonable and realistic approach with the current allocated funding. Ideally, the best approach would be to remove suppression zones and permit a total eradication zone, with intense perimeter surveillance, as suppression area zoning is a strategy that does not necessarily fit a successful eradication model.

QFF can understand this approach was taken because the federal response is concerned with the outer horseshoe edge and controlling state-to state spread, and because Queensland has decided to tackle the inner suppression zone (and funded it) to manage the already infected areas. This hybrid response model does however add confusion and doubt about the probability of RIFA eradication, in that this split management approach between governments is problematic as there are two different groups deciding on strategy and policy, but one operational group delivering on both. Eradication is eradication - there is no place for suppression zones except in an endemic incursion where eradication has been given up on and decisions have been made to minimise impact of the incursion. However, QFF understands the huge amount of resources and investment required to declare an eradication area. Nonetheless, moving forwards in the next 10 years, eradication borders *need* to be encroaching inwards incrementally, to boost confidence in the 2032 eradication target. To ensure these targets are met, QFF advocates for the following changes in program management:

- i. QFF support the governance of a steering group but notes this also needs a technical advisory body to evaluate its effectiveness and ensure program milestones are held accountable. Industry consultation has been haphazard and sporadic at best. Coordinated discussion with all representative bodies is imperative.
- ii. Eradication efforts need to be proactive not ad-hoc. There is not enough surveillance for early detection, which allows infections to get out of hand and spread. The key to successful eradication will be early detection.
- iii. Control and eradication must remain the responsibility of government and not pushed upon landholders. This is not to say that the wider public will not play a vital role in eradication efforts, however current outreach and awareness programs are lacking, despite this being a key part of effective eradication programs. As Queensland's agriculture minister the Hon. Mark Furner MP stated, 'the government always seem to focus on enforcing the rules and penalties', but first there needs to be an acknowledgement of failure of outreach strategies.

QFF would support bounties being offered to the general public to locate nests to incentivise and reward participation rather than solely enforcing penalties during breaches.

- iv. QFF highlights that the Queensland government will need to invest in suppression activities in those areas waiting for eradication activities (i.e., the inner areas of the horseshoe). Priority should be given in particular to those areas (e.g. Rocky Point district cane growers) that have suffered long term economic, health and lifestyle impacts from dense infestation of fire ants, and that will need to wait another 5-6 years before eradication efforts reach them. Such areas should receive two aerial treatments, 12 months apart, and provision of enough bait for landholders to cover the areas unable to be aerially treated. It must remain the government's responsibility to bear the cost of this management strategy, to prevent additional burden on landholders who will be disadvantaged by these eradication timelines.
- v. QFF however stresses the absolute need for all proposed aerial treatment of farming areas to provide prior notification to the landholder (at least a minimum of 7 days). Failure to do so will make farming practices such as harvesting, irrigation, spraying and cultivation problematic and place undue constraints on farming businesses. QFF is particularly concerned over a recent incident in the Lockyer Valley, where a producer received the below text on 9 November, 2 days prior to the proposed commencement of aerial treatment:

"Fire Ants 13 25 23 – Aerial Fire Ant treatment will be conducted in the area of Gatton From 11/11/23 to 18/11/23. You must not irrigate/water or disturb the area after treatment for 48 hrs. For any concerns please contact Biosecurity QLD on 13 25 23."

Producers cannot reschedule their business with such abrupt notice and these notification timeframes are not acceptable. Producers have to navigate a variety of factors when planning whether to irrigate, spray or harvest (i.e. weather) and cannot afford to add additional constraints to their business.

- vi. There is currently a huge gap in policy for the movement of hay, with many smaller producers advertising on sites (i.e. marketplace) seemingly flying under the radar and increasing the risk of spreading fire ants. Industry stakeholders are calling for clearer requirements and protocols for the movement of hay from RIFA regions to other areas to continue safely providing stock (i.e. feed at feedlots), especially during periods of drought.

Program funding

QFF expresses support for the current \$268 million funding investment from the federal government. This investment signifies a serious commitment to make significant progress in eradication in the next 10 years. QFF understands the hesitation of state governments to contribute additional funding considering the moving end date the eradication program has communicated to date, and the consistent request for increased and long-term funding. QFF highlight that the suggested annual reporting and transparent communication changes outlined above will aid in achieving a nationally funded program. State governments also need to be heavily involved and led through the new

program plan to understand why the original 2027 goal is no longer feasible and how this new updated plan will achieve outcomes.

Delays in funding commitments in previous reviews (i.e. the 2017 ten-year plan) have made progress difficult while programs remain inadequately resourced. While a large part of the funding has been allocated and is based upon the horseshoe approach, with effort focused on eradication in the outer ring, additional funding targeting suppression zones will be needed sooner rather than later. Resourcing for eradication zones is secured and funded by the federal government; however suppression zones are left to the Queensland government. Convincing all state governments to fund RIFA eradication is problematic, and working to negotiate with states individually has resultant delays in the program and has contributed to its failures. Ending the lag in other states committing to funding is an immediate issue to be tackled, and perhaps requires a response timeline to be instated. Updated eradication plans become out of date by the time discussions about universal financial support are coordinated across different states. The RIFA program needs to know how to tailor and adjust their eradication plans rather than going on in uncertainty in the hope that the funding will come through.

It is vital to acknowledge that for eradication to be possible, all states will need to commit to funding. The threat from fire ants is serious, and the cost-effectiveness of eradication is beyond dispute. The threat is not only to Queensland and NSW but all states, given how quickly RIFA can potentially spread, and the impact they have on state and national economies. There should be full disclosure of the cost-sharing arrangements, as well as any instances of reluctance to fund from one or other of the state entities. The benefits from eradication are overwhelmingly public good (natural environment, health) so 100% of the funding must remain the responsibility of government.

Summary

The eradication of red imported fire ants will require a targeted and coordinated approach across state bodies (i.e. eradication methods and funding). Mitigation and eradication frameworks need to be incorporated into state plans (i.e. Shaping SEQ and FNQ) and communicated to the public to a higher standard. It is crucial that within the next 5-10 years, suppression borders encroach inwards and not remain stagnant. This will require a heightened focus on suppression areas, not only eradication borders, and continued funding past the 2027 mark. QFF is eager to participate in continued consultation regarding the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication program and welcomes further discussion.

Yours sincerely

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