



**Greenlife
Industry Australia**

Submission

The Senate

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

References Committee

Introduction

Greenlife Industry Australia (GIA) is pleased to contribute to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants (fire ants) in Australia. We welcome the government's recently announced commitment to addressing the fire ant crisis and we are encouraged by the scope of this inquiry. However, as we will aim to demonstrate in this submission, these commitments will not succeed in removing fire ants from the Australian landscape. All the evidence indicates that eradication is the best – and only – response to fire ants. GIA believes there is no single more important invasive species deserving of our national focus.

Fire ants pose serious threats to the Australian way of life, including on the economy, environment, community, native flora and fauna, businesses and human health. The potential impact is enormous: for example, if fire ants become endemic in Australia, almost 700,000 people are likely to seek medical attention for fire ant stings annually. Compare this with 3,500 people in total requiring hospitalisation from all animal and plant stings in 2018.¹

Fire ants have been present in Queensland for many years and notwithstanding the significant investment in containment strategies, their presence has increased. With the well-publicised recent appearance of fire ants in New South Wales, this threat is growing and urgently requires national intervention to resolve. The expansion of fire ants across state borders demonstrates why containment is an adequate approach to this pest.

At the time of writing, there still exists a genuine opportunity to support our experts to achieve the complete eradication of this invasive pest. Every available report to date agrees the benefits of eradication still outweigh the costs - provided investment is increased, governance of the process is improved and timeline for implementation is shortened.

Hesitation, delay or anything less than a fulsome commitment to eradication threatens the efficacy – and cost – of any government response. It is no exaggeration to say that time is of the essence and urgent action is required. The nation is relying on the federal government to demonstrate leadership to avert the national crisis posed by the spread of fire ants in Australia.

Background

GIA is the peak national body representing producers, retailers and allied trades involved in the production of plants across all states and territories of Australia. The nursery industry is a significant sector of the Australian horticultural industry employing over 30,000 people in more than 20,000 businesses. The farm gate value of nursery production is \$2.8 billion annually with a combined supply chain market value in excess of \$15 billion.

Nursery production in Australia has a diverse and broad supply chain with multiple end users requiring a huge plant base grown across a range of cropping systems including glasshouse, greenhouse, open bed and in-ground. The industry is a provider of nursery stock for many other horticultural industries including forestry, revegetation, pharmaceutical, urban retail, landscaping and food farming.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/2021-1/march/bees-responsible-for-most-venomous-bite-and-sting>

Production nurseries are the cornerstone in the supply of starter plants for the majority of horticultural crops, growing 30,000 + different species and cultivars, producing almost 3 billion plants every year.

Our experience in pest management

GIA is a signatory to Australia's Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed administered by Plant Health Australia and we are a member of the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests and the National Management Group.

Supported under the levy-funded biosecurity program, GIA coordinates the national response of the greenlife industry to pests and diseases that threaten Australian plantlife. We have been engaged in this work for over twenty years and consider ourselves to be experts in this field. Whilst we recognise that fire ants are not a plant pest, we do consider that our experience in assessing the risks and advising on the management of biosecurity threats to Australian plantlife is directly relevant to the challenges presented by the presence in Australia of Red Imported Fire Ants.

Red Imported Fire Ants

GIA has been proactively involved in the response to fire ants from 2001 to the present day. This involvement has been both strategic and operational, including contributing to RIFA Industry Reference Groups, Advisory Groups, feedback and review groups developing mitigation measures, market access procedures through to on-site education and training of growers across the fire ant infested zones.

With a focus on Queensland as the main state impacted by fire ants, GIA has lobbied the Queensland government to recognise the importance of controlling fire ants. We have played our part in this goal by working closely with other bodies and growers to develop a holistic systems approach to managing the risks associated with fire ants through Approved Risk Management Plans.

The greenlife industry has supported this work and contributed to it at a level that would be hard to match in any other pest management program in Australia. Notwithstanding these efforts, the presence of fire ants is increasing which illustrates why control and containment is inadequate.

Turning to the scope of the Senate inquiry and the advice it seeks:

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.*

Fire ants are known to be aggressive pests that can inflict multiple painful stings on humans. The estimated health impacts if fire ants were to become endemic in Australia are staggering:

- 98.5% of the Australian population are likely to come into contact with fire ants
- One third of the population encountering fire ants are likely to be stung
- Based on the experience of other countries, one quarter of those stung are likely to develop allergic sensitisation
- 2% of those experiencing a reaction will require medical attention
- On current population numbers, 652,000 people would seek medical attention for fire ant stings

- Compare this with 3,500 people in total requiring hospitalisation from all animal and plant stings in 2018.²

GIA notes the reported annual cost to the Australian economy, if fire ants are not eradicated, sits at a conservative \$2 billion each year going forward. We believe this will be significantly higher when values are attached to restricted access of the general population to parks and gardens, creeks, dams, camping areas, beaches, sporting fields, walking trails, golf courses, and school yards all limiting our community use with the associated health, well-being and social benefits. Impacts on our domestic pets and the ability for people to keep them in fire ant infested areas will have further significant impacts on our communities.

The cost to our environment and loss of native species is difficult to value but is potentially devastating. Wylie and Janssen-May (QDAF 2016) reported that RIFA is likely to have effects sufficiently severe to cause population declines in 45% of birds, 38% of mammals, 69% of reptiles and 95% of amphibians within infested areas. This is an unacceptable risk to our native fauna with significant repercussions for our landscapes, leaving a legacy debt difficult to comprehend.

The tourism economy will undoubtedly suffer, and the continued employment of regional workers is bound to be affected if fire ants are not eradicated.

Fire ants are a major pest of both our urban and regional landscapes and must be considered within this context. The assumption that fire ants are a pest of agriculture is flawed and we need to accurately recognise this pest as a clear and present threat to Australia's very way of life, our communities and to our environment.

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

The efforts to control fire ants in Queensland have failed: over twenty years, we have seen the infested area climb from 40,000 ha to close to 800,000 ha which clearly demonstrates that the current plan is not working. This failure has had an exponential cost to nursery production due to the disconnected and complex trade protocols estimated to cost the industry millions of dollars annually as we see more and more growers captured within the expanding infestation zone.

GIA draws to the attention of the Committee to a very well-constructed independent report on the NFAEP in Queensland (*National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review August 2021 Report for the Steering Committee by Helen Scott-Orr, Monica Gruber and Will Zacharin (the Review Panel)*) released in 2023. This report has outlined a number of key fail points of the current program and makes 27 recommendations including funding required, timelines to target, strategies to implement and governance and oversight all aimed at achieving RIFA eradication. GIA recommends governments adopt these recommendations, with haste, and implement the governance and oversight to allow for a reworked response plan within the next 3 months.

c) *An evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans*

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/2021-1/march/bees-responsible-for-most-venomous-bite-and-sting>

The *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review Report August 2021* has provided critical cost estimations for eradication of fire ants by 2032 at between \$300 to \$500 million per year. Current funding commitments fall well short of this estimate. It must be stated that we are now in this position due to the successive failure of all levels of government to adequately fund the control of fire ants. There is now an opportunity to rectify this. Research undertaken by Texas A&M University to quantify the economic impact of fire ants in Texas (USA) provided the following summary:

- The total annual cost to the state's economy is estimated to be \$1.2 billion
- Impact on the electrical and communications sector: \$146.5 million
- Impact on agriculture: \$90.6 million
- Impact on other sectors (airports, schools, commercial businesses, councils, etc): \$256 million

This information clearly shows the cost of fire ants, if established, has the potential to negatively impact the entire economy. Clearly, the Australian government's current funding commitment is demonstrably inadequate for the purpose of eradicating fire ants. What is required is a fully funded, completely committed and strategic eradication plan for the next 5 years. This will cost approximately \$3 billion.

d) *The effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants*

Based on the current situation in Queensland, with the fire ant infestation area growing in size year on year, it is clear that the containment strategies of the past twenty years have failed.

There have been a number of independent reviews of the program offering comment on strategies and processes and making recommendations. Unfortunately, many of these have been based on information from the incursion of fire ants into the USA in the period 1930 -1970. We must assess the situation in Australia as it is in 2024 and align our strategies and methodologies to that data as opposed to looking back close to 100 years ago.

This systemic failure to capture significant scientific data has the potential to see the eradication program continuously focusing on the wrong areas whereby these high-risk pathways are not managed in a manner to prevent the spread of fire ants. From GIA's observations, so many of the new detections driving the growth of the infestation area, via large leaps, have been on new housing, industrial developments, or road infrastructure projects. The most likely common carrier here is soil and soil moving equipment. If these detections had had closer scrutiny applied, we could have greater insight into this level of risk and more efficacious mitigation measures in place to reduce the threat.

Governments must commit to an aggressive and intensive eradication program that attacks the pest on all fronts, including within the infested zone, to drop the infestation rate as quickly as possible as the risk of re-infestation of treated areas, from high rates within the zone, is likely.

In summary, GIA urges the federal government to:

- 1. Recognise the real threat that fire ants pose to the Australian way of life and national economy**
- 2. Commit to nothing short of eradication of fire ants from the Australia landscape**
- 3. Allocate \$3 billion over five years to this work**
- 4. Work with states and territories to agree cost sharing**
- 5. Form a new statutory body to run the fire ant eradication program**