Fire ants

Plant Health AUSTRALIA

What are fire ants?

Fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta*) are a serious pest originally from South America which have significant social, economic and environmental ramifications.

Their stings are extremely painful and, in serious cases, can result in anaphylaxis. The presence of fire ants in our environment can impact our outdoor lifestyle and businesses through the destruction of infrastructure and trade.

Fire ants are also very aggressive and voracious feeders on small ground fauna, including insects, spiders, lizards, frogs, birds and mammals. Consequently, they may displace or destroy some of Australia's unique native ground fauna.

What do they look like?

Fire ants have brown-black abdomens and coppery brown bodies and heads. They range between 2-6 mm long and all sizes can be found in the same nest. The ants typically nest in cleared or open areas. Their nests are usually loose soil above the ground with no obvious entrance or exit holes.

How do they spread?

Fire ants can spread rapidly. They can fly up to 5 km to establish a new colony or float down waterways by forming a living 'raft' of ants. Humans also assist the spread of fire ants through the transport of nursery stock, soil, mulch, animal manures, straw and other earth or plant materials as well as through the movement of machinery, containers and goods from infected areas.

Where are they now?

Since fire ants were first detected in Brisbane in 2001, the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program has undertaken extensive surveys and treatment to make significant progress towards eradicating fire ants from Australia.

As of early 2019, the fire ant infestation zone is currently restricted to the Brisbane region, including the local council areas of Brisbane City, Ipswich, Lockyer Valley, Logan, Scenic Rim, Redland, Gold Coast, Moreton Bay and Somerset.

Fire ants range from 2–6mm and are copper-brown in colour with a darker abdomen.

Eli Sarnat, PIAkey: Invasive Ants of the Pacific Islands, USDA APHIS PPQ, Bugwood.org

Fire ants are very small and aggressive, aggregating in large numbers they can blind small animals and pets with their venom.

Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries - Biosecurity Queensland

Fire ant nest created in loose soil with no obvious entry or exit holes.

To stop the spread of fire ants, the Queensland Government has implemented **movement controls** in these parts of South East Queensland (fire ant biosecurity zones). Surveillance is ongoing, and treatment and eradication activities are continuing. The successful containment of fire ants within South East Queensland is in large part due to the cooperation of everyone involved in looking out for and reporting fire ant nests in their area.

How can I protect my plantation from fire ants and other harmful pests?

Tea tree producers must remain vigilant as tea tree mulch is a high-risk carrier for fire ants. They are attracted to mulch and infest it in large numbers, increasing their spread to where mulch is transported.

Under the Queensland Biosecurity Act 2014, individuals and organisations whose activities involve the movement or storage of fire ant carriers such as tea tree mulch have a general biosecurity obligation to take all reasonable steps to ensure they do not spread fire ants.

To safely manage your plantation and mulch:

- Be aware of the fire ant biosecurity zones and if your plantation is located within a fire ant infested area do not move any plant material or soil out of that area.
- Mitigate your risk by covering mulch and removing piles of mulch and organic matter from storage as soon as possible.
- Clean your equipment to ensure it is free from fire ant carriers such as soil and other materials that may spread the pest.
- Conduct surveillance on your plantation, taking extra care to observe high risk areas such as fence lines, areas around dams, overgrown areas and recently cultivated land.
- Inspect any seedlings, mulch or any other plant material closely for ants and other pests before accepting it.

How can I find out more?

Biosecurity Queensland conducts **free training sessions** to assist with the identification of fire ants and provides information on movement control requirements. For more information visit **ants.daf.qld.gov.au**

Red imported fire ants can form a raft and travel to new locations via water.

Barry Rice, sarracenia.com, Bugwood.org

Stings from red imported fire ants are extremely painful and in severe cases can result in life-threatening anaphylaxis.

Murray S. Blum, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org

IF YOU SEE ANYTHING UNUSUAL, CALL THE EXOTIC PLANT PEST HOTLINE

1800 084 881

PHA19-050