

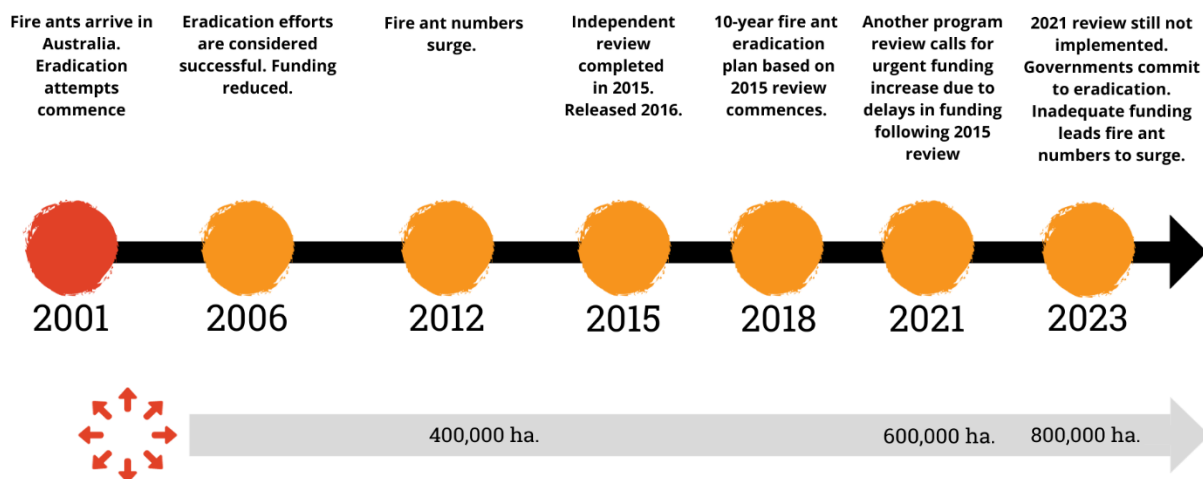
Fire ant background briefing note – December 2023



Australia has been the most successful jurisdiction at responding to invasive fire ants. In Australia, fire ants spread at 5km per year, in the United States the spread is 48km per year and in China, it is 80km. Experience and proven tactics have helped contain and suppress fire ants. This success has occurred against a headwind of uncertain and limited resourcing.

The current fire ant challenge requires funding to increase the scale of work underway to achieve eradication.

Australia's fire ant response timeline



This year fire ants were found 5km from NSW and west of the Great Dividing Range. If they enter the Murray Darling Basin they will spread quickly to most of the country. It is a critical time for fire ant eradication.

Some fire ant impacts on Australia	
Economy	Up to \$2 billion per year economic burden. Agriculture output would be cut by up to 40%. Impacts on other industries like tourism, development, and construction.
Health	140,000 extra hospital visits and potential human fatalities
Infrastructure	Damage to water and electrical utility and infrastructure
Environment	Population declines and habitat loss for native animal populations. Estimated loss of 45% of birds, 38% of mammals, 69% of reptiles and 95% of frogs.

Fire ants would become a burden for farmers, property owners, sporting clubs and local governments.¹

Cost of eradication & alternative plans

The most recent independent review found fire ant eradication would cost between \$200 million and \$300 million per year over 10 years.²

The fire ant eradication response is based on funding of \$133 million in 2023/24 and up to \$593 million over the next four years.^{3 4} This funding is provided by all Australian governments based on risks presented by fire ants. Not all jurisdictions have committed to new fire ant response funding (see table).

Fire ant eradication funding breakdown (in millions)				
	% of total	2023/24 (million)	Total until 2027	Status
Commonwealth	50.00%	\$66.55	\$296.42	FUNDED
New South Wales	16.02%	\$21.32	\$94.94	FUNDED
Victoria	12.92%	\$17.20	\$76.60	
Queensland	10.28%	\$13.68	\$60.95	FUNDED
Western Australia	5.31%	\$7.07	\$31.48	
South Australia	3.56%	\$4.74	\$21.11	
Australia Capital Territory	0.86%	\$1.15	\$5.10	FUNDED
Tasmania	0.59%	\$0.79	\$3.50	
Northern Territory	0.46%	\$0.61	\$2.73	
Total	100%	\$133.00	\$592.85	

¹Star, M., Rolfe, J. 2021. *Assessing the Impacts of the Red Imported Fire Ant Report for Biosecurity Qld*. Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

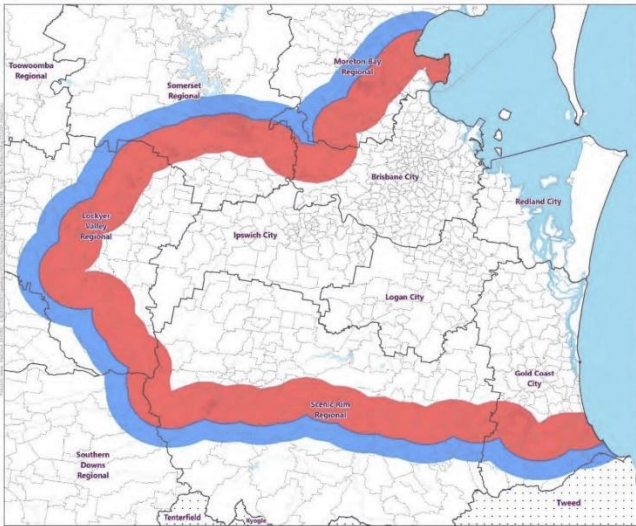
²Scott-Orr, H, Gruber, M, Zacharin, W, 2021, *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review*.

³ National Fire Ant Eradication Program, 2023, *Response Plan 2023-2027*, Queensland Government,

⁴ Qld Audit Office, July 2023, *Managing Invasive Species*, Report to Queensland Parliament.

<https://www.qao.qld.gov.au/reports-resources/reports-parliament/managing-invasive-species>

Eradication is still possible.



The full fire ant eradication plan is a 10km treatment band and 5km surveillance area. The containment zone is surrounded with six treatments over two years. As eradication is achieved the treatment band is drawn tighter to achieve full eradication. Cost is \$133 million for 2023-24.



The underfunded response implemented in late 2023 – a 5km treatment band on the southern Gold Coast inland along the border. With reduced surveillance. This plan was based on the available funds.

Fire

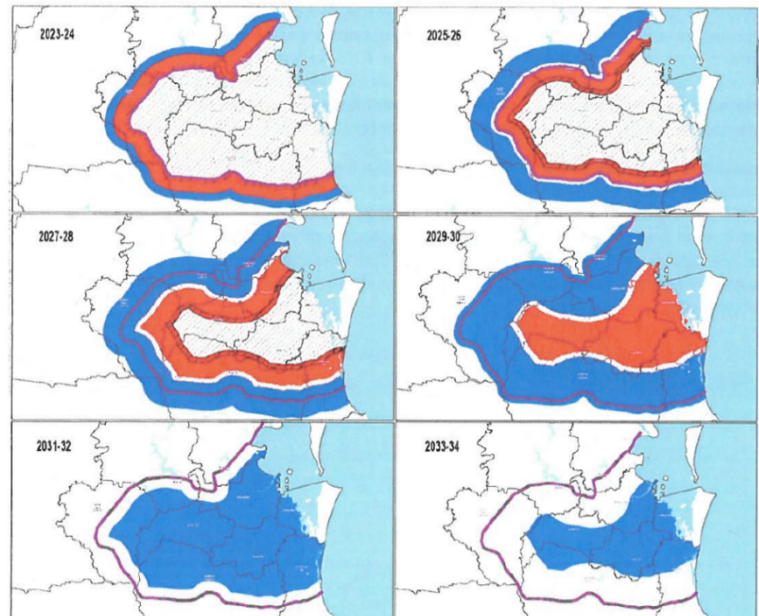
ants don't care about budget cycles.

It is still possible to eradicate fire ants because they have been contained and suppressed.⁵

But containment is being breached with regular new reports of fire ant nests outside the biosecurity zone (see below - June to November 2023 reports).

Delay and underfunding will make the job harder, more expensive and decrease the likelihood of success.

Recently the Commonwealth government announced \$268 million in additional fire ant funding until 2027. This is welcome but will not be enough to eradicate the current infestation in southern Queensland.



Eradication is possible over the coming 10 years under the full response plan. This plan depends on full funding to deploy necessary resources.



A narrowing path to fire ant freedom.

As predicted fire ants have spread since eradication response efforts were wound back through lack of funding. Now fire ants are in northern NSW with a nest cluster found at Murwillumbah. It's time to stop underestimating fire ants and fund fire ant eradication.

Eradication will require significant funding. But the cost will only grow with delay. The cost of eradication pales when compared to a **\$2 billion per year** cost.

Governments have committed to fire ant eradication as a policy. Achieving this policy goal will require funding beyond the 2027 horizon and at higher levels than announced so far.

⁵ Scott-Orr, H, Gruber, M, Zacharin, W, 2021, *National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review*.

Fire ant senate inquiry submission guide for organisations



The senate inquiry is our opportunity to record support for fire ant eradication. Eradication will not be challenging but it is the only way to protect Australia from the impacts of fire ants. Australia has been battling fire ants for 22 years - eradication is still possible over the next decade if the eradication plan is fully funded.

Your submission supports fire ant eradication. Submissions close 29 January 2024.

Senate inquiry terms of reference

On 18 October 2023, the following matter was referred to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by **18 April 2024**.

1. the expected costs and impacts, if red imported fire ants are able to spread across Australia, on human health, social amenities, agriculture, the environment, infrastructure and regional workers;
2. an assessment of the current and any proposed fire ant response plans for achieving the eradication of red imported fire ants;
3. an evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans;
4. the effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants;
5. learnings of Varroa mite in managing red imported fire ants; and any other related matters.

[More information and how to make a submission is located here](#)

Key issues to raise in your submission

The following are key points to raise in submissions to the Senate inquiry. Submissions have greater relevance if original evidence is presented with clear recommendations. Below are some points the Invasive Species Council will be presenting to the inquiry in our submission. Avoid duplicating the exact wording below and please advise us of any strong points of evidence we might have missed. Supporting case studies and references are encouraged. Suggestions for evidence and sources to support your submission are also provided below.

1. The cost and benefit of fire ant eradication to Australia

- [A range of sectors will be impacted - environment, agriculture, tourism, construction, recreation, sporting, community organisations, schools, workforces and households.](#)
- These costs will run up to \$2 billion per year, alongside human health and well-being impacts and biodiversity losses.
- Impacts to Australia have been limited by ongoing suppression and containment however there are overseas [examples including the United States](#).

1.1. Environmental impacts

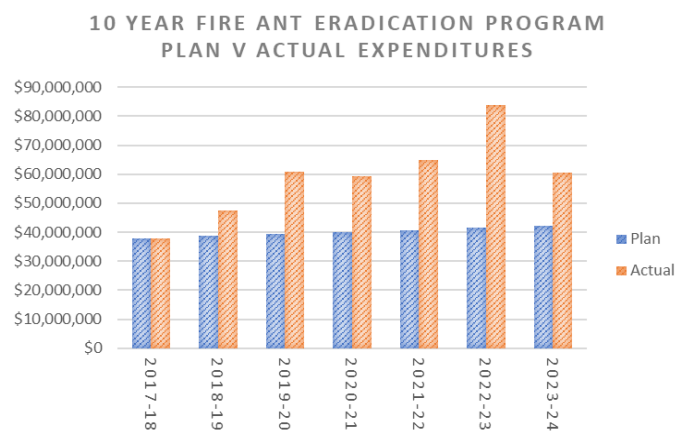
- [Fire ants are listed as a key threatening process under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) in particular ground-nesting birds and small mammals are identified as being susceptible to fire ant infestations
- [Fire ants can spread across the whole country - see appendix 7.2 for modelling.](#)
- [In a Queensland study Fire Ants were found likely to have effects sufficiently severe to cause population declines in 45% of birds, 38% of mammals, 69% of reptiles and 95% of amphibians.](#)
- [Turtle hatchlings are both highly attractive and vulnerable to fire ants.](#)

2. Outline support for eradication

- The 2021 review recommended continued eradication with extra resourcing at \$200 to \$300 million per year over 10 years. [The 2021 review is available here.](#)
- There is a full current response plan (2023-2027) which is projected to achieve eradication within 10 years. Its methodology utilises a biosecurity zone bounded by an eradication and surveillance band reduced gradually over 10 years to achieve full eradication. [The plan is available here.](#) Qld, NSW and the Federal government have currently committed to fund this plan until 2027. This plan is not sufficient to achieve full eradication.

3. Barriers to success

- **The main barrier to fire ant eradication is funding.**
- **New infestation detections will require resources -** the recent NSW fire ant detection distracted resources from the eradication efforts and showed the need for more resourcing.
- [Some risks associated with the eradication plan are outlined in the response plan here.](#) These include - bait price increases, supply chain problems, human resource availability, uncosted responses to infestation expansion from the treatment area, funding delays, extreme weather, lack of community support and new infestations from entry ports.
- **There is no funding certainty beyond 2027** but eradication will take up to 10 years.
- **Not all jurisdictions have committed funding to the 2027 response plan** - which means there is a funding shortfall
- **The 2021 review indicated that \$200-300 million per year would be required over 10 years** - only \$600 million has been allocated over the next four for fire ant eradication. This shortfall risks the emergence of a \$2 billion per year national fire ant burden.



Source: Fire Ant Eradication Program annual reports, Wonder, B, 2019, NFAEP Response Plan 2023-2027 Appendices.

4. About eradication methodology

- Chemical treatments are safe for the environment and humans with limited off-target impacts. The use of these treatments is focussed and directed to achieve maximum fire ant eradication while limiting broader impacts. [Fire Ant Eradication Program guide to their baits and insecticides.](#)
- **Current program funding and timelines rely on technological innovations that might not become reality.** These include drone baiting for a more precise, cost effective delivery compared to helicopters, environmental DNA surveillance for fire ant detection, weather-resistant baits for baiting activities in inclement weather and the use of artificial intelligence predictive models to locate fire ants. [These innovations are suggested in the the response plan.](#)
- The Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) aims to keep fire ant numbers low inside the containment zone to prepare areas for the full eradication program work. Suppression work is currently not funded across the whole infestation zone. Extension of self-treatment in particular to all land managers in the containment area should be a priority. Local governments who have not already done so can engage their own fire ant management teams in support of this work. [Background including areas of FAST self-treatment in 2023.](#)

Other notes about your submission

Organisations and individuals are encouraged to make submissions to the fire ant inquiry:

1. Share with your network including academics, business operators and landholders who are or will become impacted by fire ants.
2. Once submissions are published by the senate inquiry we suggest forwarding them to Agriculture, Environment and Health Ministers and Treasurers in states, territories and the commonwealth government.
3. A media release will help amplify your submission.
4. [Donate to the Invasive Species Council](#) to help us increase our fire ant campaign in the leadup to state and federal elections.
5. Share your submission online and to social media.