Conducting visual inspections for fire ants

To prevent the spread of one of the world’s most invasive pests, high risk materials in fire ant biosecurity zones must be checked regularly for fire ants.

Fighting fire ants

The National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (program) is responsible for managing fire ant eradication in Australia.

The program’s 10-year Eradication Plan began in 2017 to commence eradication of the fire ant infestation in South East Queensland. By using a staged, rolling treatment program from west to east, it aims to rid Australia of this invasive pest in partnership with the Queensland community. The program is funded by all Australian states and territories, and the Commonwealth Government.

The Biosecurity Act 2014 (Act) aims to improve Queensland’s biosecurity preparedness and response capabilities by managing biosecurity risks and the significant impacts animal and plant diseases and pests could have on our economy, agricultural and other industries, environment and lifestyle.

Fire ants are a category 1 restricted matter under the Act. It is a requirement under the Act to report suspect fire ants to the program within 24 hours.

What’s a biosecurity zone?

There are two fire ant biosecurity zones established under the Act to help control the movement of materials that may carry fire ants. If you are operating or residing in these zones then you are required to undertake risk mitigation activities to prevent the human-assisted spread of fire ants. Not complying with requirements can result in penalties. Find out more about biosecurity zones at daf.qld.gov.au/fireants

What do I need to do?

If you are involved in the movement or storage of high risk materials that may carry fire ants, you have a general biosecurity obligation (GBO) to:

- follow movement controls relevant to the materials you move
- understand what fire ants look like and what materials they can be moved in
- be aware if you are living or working close or within in a fire ant biosecurity zone
- conduct inspections of material for any fire ant activity prior to moving it
- report suspect ants to the program by calling or completing the online form
- ensure all staff, contractors and sub-contractors are aware of and following the movement controls
- check that materials coming to your site or property are being moved lawfully. Ask your supplier for a copy of a current biosecurity instrument permit (BIP) or what risk mitigation measures have being undertaken
- clean machinery and equipment used when working with high-risk materials, before moving the equipment off site.
- treat for fire ants to reduce the risk of spread.

Visit daf.qld.gov.au/fireants for more information about storing and moving high risk materials

What are high risk materials?

Materials that are considered ideal habitat for fire ants are considered high-risk as they are likely to carry fire ants (i.e. be fire ant carriers). There are restrictions on the storage and movement of these materials within fire ant biosecurity zones. Fire ant carriers include:

- soil, including fill, clay, scrapings, and any material removed from the ground at a site where earthworks are being carried out
- mulch and animal manures
- baled hay, straw and sugar cane mulch
- potted plants
- turf and mining and quarry products and compost.
What to look for

Size and colour
- unlike other ants, red imported fire ants have a variety of sizes in one nest (2–6 mm in size), and
- are coppery-brown in colour, with a darker abdomen.

Nests
- look like mounds of loose dirt
- unlike other ants, nests have no visible entry holes
- may be found under logs, rocks, gardening materials and near water.

Behaviour
- exhibit aggressive behaviour when disturbed
- unlike other ants, they swarm and can use collective intelligence to sting together.

Where to look

Commercial or development sites, check:
- anywhere high risk materials are stored
- machinery and equipment used to move or transport fire ant carriers
- the facilities where machinery and equipment used in fire ant biosecurity zones is stored
- the perimeter of the worksite
- anywhere waste material is stored
- areas around buildings, gardens and lawns.

Residential areas, focus your inspections on:
- lawns
- footpaths
- garden beds
- taps
- utility pits.

Rural areas, be sure to check:
- dams
- edges of cultivated land
- crop land post-harvest
- fence lines
- piles of organic matter.

How to look for ants

- Ensure you wear appropriate personal protective equipment, such as boots and gloves.
- Before moving fire ant carriers around or off a site, examine the materials and surrounding area, for fire ants.
- If you find a suspect ant or nest, use a long rod or stick and gently prod the nest, and inspect any ants present. Take care not to overly disturb the nest.

If you think you have found fire ants, leave a minimum of one m² around the nest(s) and report your find to the program on 13 25 23 or via daf.qld.gov.au/fireants

More information

The program conducts free training sessions about the identification of the super pest and high risk material management. Book at ants.daf.qld.gov.au

Visit daf.qld.gov.au/fireants or contact the program on 13 25 23 for further information.