

Bushwalking NSW

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

INQUIRY - RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS IN AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

Bushwalking NSW Incorporated is the peak body for bushwalkers in NSW and the ACT. It represents the interests of over 11,000 bushwalkers from over 70 bushwalking clubs throughout NSW and the ACT, and provides a united voice to local, state and federal government agencies and other bodies on issues affecting bushwalkers.

As you would be aware, the arrival of the Red Imported Fire Ant in Australia represents an extremely serious threat to the environment, agriculture and our use of public lands such as national parks and playing fields.

Our members thrive in the great outdoors of Australia, enjoying plenty of exercise, social time, superior mental and physical health, and less loneliness. We would be devastated to lose access to public lands such as national parks if these places were infested with Red Imported Fire Ants.

According to the Invasive Species Council, a fire ant invasion will be much worse than the cane toad. It would devastate our native wildlife and cause billions of dollars in lost agricultural production every year. Experience from countries like the USA, where Red Imported Fire Ants have been present since last century, indicates that access to open space areas such as parks and reserves as well as family backyards will also be restricted as the ants are aggressive with a painful sting. This is now happening on sports fields, farms and beaches in Queensland, and we were dismayed to read that the outbreak has now spread to the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

As well as all the other threats that the Red Imported Fire Ant poses in Australia, we consider that our capacity to use and enjoy the wonderful public lands in Australia will be marginalised if the Red Imported Fire Ant is not eradicated.

We know from experience with other invasive species that early action to eradicate the problem is the most cost-effective solution. We hope that the consequences of insufficient early action with other invasive species are not repeated with the Red Imported Fire Ant.

In relation to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry, Bushwalking NSW offers the following response:

- 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;

Response: amongst the multitude of costs associated with the loss of agricultural production, disruption of outdoor activities and the increased usage of the health system, are the many intangible costs of impact on native species including threatened and endangered species, the

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closure of public lands such as reserves and national parks and the loss of amenity and exposure to natural areas which provide opportunities for physical and mental enjoyment. In sum, the 'Bush' is a place for healing, exercise and enjoyment. We must not close it off because of inadequate action to eradicate a feral pest.

- an assessment of the current and any proposed Red Imported Fire Ant response plans for achieving the eradication of Red Imported Fire Ants;

Response: current and future response must retain a focus on eradication, rather than control or suppression. According to the Invasive Species Council, Australia has been the most successful jurisdiction at responding to Red Imported Fire Ants. Experience and proven tactics have helped contain and suppress Red Imported Fire Ants. This success has occurred against a headwind of uncertain and limited resourcing. Eradication must remain the goal of the response strategy and funding must be sufficient to meet this goal.

- an evaluation of funding provided for the current or any proposed fire ant response plans;

Response: The most recent independent review found Imported Red Fire Ant eradication would cost between \$200 million and \$300 million per year over 10 years. It is imperative that this funding commitment is fulfilled. If there is a shortfall resulting from recalcitrant States and Territories, then the Commonwealth should augment this. We must not be half-hearted about funding. Failure to eradicate this pest, will just build in costs and trauma to individuals, business and society for years to come.

- the effectiveness of eradication efforts and the spread of fire ants;

Response: as mentioned above, Australia has been effective at slowing the rate of spread. However, recent outbreaks in Northern NSW suggest we may now be at a tipping point beyond which the rate of spread dramatically increases. We must not give up on eradication.

- learnings of Varroa mite in managing red imported fire ants; and

Response: we have now moved to a control regime and the Varroa mite is here to stay. The failure to eradicate the mite in the early stages means it has now become an operating cost for the agricultural sector and society more broadly. Do we want to add Red Imported Fire Ants as another operating cost?

- any other related matters.

Response: Red Imported Fire Ants are one of the world's worst invasive species. They are an economic and environmental pest, responsible for killing people in the southern half of the United States where they are a prolific invasive species. They severely impact natural habitats, parks and sporting fields, farms, and livestock. Nearly all of Australia is vulnerable to Red Imported Fire Ant invasion, including all major cities and towns. More than 99% of the mainland and 80% of Tasmania are suitable to these pests.

Why would we hesitate to spend \$300 million a year on eradication when our only alternative will cost billions per year?

Yours sincerely,



David Bell
President, Bushwalking NSW Inc
27 January 2024