

Pest Alert: Red imported fire ant

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Plant Biosecurity & Product Integrity, Orange

Red imported fire ants were detected at a port facility in Sydney in 2014.

If found, report to the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline
1800 084 881

Red imported fire ant

Red imported fire ant (RIFA), *Solenopsis invicta*, is a serious public nuisance and pest of agriculture in South America and the United States of America.

RIFA was detected in Brisbane in 2001 and Sydney in 2014. Eradication programs are underway in both areas.

Why is RIFA a concern?

Red imported fire ant is very aggressive. When a nest is disturbed, RIFA will repeatedly sting the human or animal intruder (Figure 1).

Its bite produces a painful fiery sensation, similar to but worse than a wasp or bee sting. RIFA will move and sting again and again leaving a line of blisters.

In the United States, RIFA is a significant economic pest in orchards, crops and pastures. A well established RIFA nest usually takes the form of a mound which can interfere with farm activities.

Description

Red imported fire ant is reddish-brown in colour and 2–6 mm in length (Figure 2).

In New South Wales RIFA may be confused with the common coastal brown ant but can be distinguished by its aggressive behaviour.

In uncultivated areas, such as in lawns, pastures, unused cropland and roadsides, RIFA nests may be dome shaped and up to 40 cm high (Figure 3).



Figure 1 Red Imported Fire Ant stings on the arm of a victim.



Figure 2 RIFA showing the colour and small size of the ant.

How does RIFA spread?

Mated queens fly and will spread RIFA colonies over short distances. In south east Queensland, a queen can fly about one kilometre.

Queens can also travel long distances to start new colonies by being present on containers or machinery or through movements of infested nursery stock or soil.

Red imported fire ant was discovered at a port facility in Port Botany in 2014. Five nests were destroyed and surveillance undertaken in the surrounding area as part of an eradication program.

What if I am stung?

If you are stung by RIFA, small blisters may form on your skin (Figure 1). The following guidance is general information and if in doubt, seek medical advice. Leave the blisters intact, wash with soap and water and apply a cold compress or ice to relieve the swelling and pain.

Stings are very rarely life threatening. People prone to allergic reactions could experience severe symptoms and should seek immediate medical attention.

How can I help?

To protect New South Wales from RIFA, do not bring onto your property any item that could contain ant colonies. Items to check are soil, mulch, pot plants, turf and goods. Movement of these items from RIFA infested areas in Queensland is restricted by legislation.

NSW DPI needs your help to find RIFA. If you think that you have seen it, do not disturb the nest. Immediately call NSW DPI's Exotic Plant Pest Hotline on **1800 084 881**

Reporting

If you suspect red imported fire ants:

- call the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline on 1800 084 881
- take photos not samples to minimise the risk of spreading this pest or exposure to bites
- email clear photos with a brief explanation and your contact details to biosecurity@dpi.nsw.gov.au

More information

<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/pests-weeds/insects/fire-ants>



Figure 3 RIFA nest showing typical mound formation



Figure 4 Comparative size of RIFA against an Australian ten cent piece

Acknowledgments

This Primefact replaces Primefact 521

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Figure 2 is courtesy of Peter Green.

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