

BIOSECURITY SA – Plant Health

**Exotic Plant Pest Hotline:** 1800 084 881 (available 24 hours)

Updated June 2018

BIOSECURITY SA  
PIRSA

## RED IMPORTED FIRE ANT (RIFA)

*Solenopsis invicta*

### THE THREAT:

Fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta*) are considered the most invasive ant species worldwide because of the harmful effects they have on people, infrastructure, agriculture, flora and fauna, and recreational activities.

These ants, which are native to South America, are particularly aggressive and will repeatedly sting anything that appears a threat.

Genetic analysis shows there have been 6 different incursions of fire ants into Australia; 5 recorded in Queensland and 1 in Port Botany, New South Wales.



In Queensland, the first two incursions were discovered in 2001, one in the south western suburbs of Brisbane and the other at the Port of Brisbane. The third and fourth incursions were found in Yarwun, Central Queensland in 2006 and 2013. The fifth and most recent incursion was found at Brisbane Airport in 2015.

The Port of Brisbane, the 2006 and 2013 Yarwun incursions have all been successfully eradicated.

The NSW DPI has also declared the Port Botany incursion discovered in 2014 eradicated.

Spread from the initial Brisbane infestation has led to infestations around the greater Brisbane area, Ipswich, Logan and Redlands. Isolated infestations have also been found in Scenic Rim, Gold Coast and Lockyer Valley.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

The fire ant is reddish-brown in colour, although some have a shiny, opaque black abdomen. Their size varies from 3 to 6mm in length.

### NESTS:

Nests are mounds of fine granular soil and are highly variable in size (from several centimetres across in young colonies, to nearly a metre wide and high). They are often built in sunny, open areas, sometimes against a wall or post or shrub. The insect will also build colonies in electrical boxes and the walls of home and other dwellings.



If a red imported fire ant nest is disturbed, ants swarm rapidly out and over the mound to defend the nest and sting anything nearby.

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## SPREAD:

Fire ants spread naturally through mating flights and budding. A mated female (queen) can fly up to 2km, while a newly mated queen finds a suitable nesting site, sheds her wings and starts a new colony.

Humans can spread fire ants via:

- shipments of infested nursery stock, soil or other fire ant carriers
- materials and containers stored in fire ant biosecurity zones
- machinery that has been used to move soil.

The movement into South Australia of any host material including containerised plants, potting media, soil, organic mulch, turf, hay, straw, agriculture machinery or used containers is prohibited from Queensland unless certified.

## STINGS:

The sting of a red imported fire ant is painful (like a bee or wasp). Symptoms include intense burning and itching which usually subsides over the first hour, but which may return over the next few days. A blister forms at the site of the sting within five hours. This is followed by the formation of a white pustule within a few days.

## IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE FOUND OR BEEN STUNG BY RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS:

Do not disturb the nest (disturbance may cause the red imported fire ant to move a queen out of the nest to start a new colony).

If you suspect red imported fire ants: call the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline on 1800 084 881 or email clear photos with a brief explanation and your contact details to [PIRSA.biosecuritysa@sa.gov.au](mailto:PIRSA.biosecuritysa@sa.gov.au)

If you are stung, do not panic. The stings, although uncomfortable, are not dangerous to most people. However, the pustules can become infected if scratched, and on very rare occasions, people may have a more serious reaction. If you are stung and have concerns, seek medical advice.



Photos courtesy of Department of Entomology, Texas A&M University.

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