

# Queensland's \$400m fire ant extermination effort 'undermined by rainfall, manure'

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-01/queensland-fire-ant-extermination-undermined-by-rainfall-manure/9211660>

By Brendan King and [Tiger Webb](#) for [Background Briefing](#) 1 Dec 2017



**Photo:** [The fire ant eradication program is one of the largest extermination projects in Australian history.](#) (Getty Images: Arthit Thi-Ngakhrua)

The largest pest removal effort in Australian history is mismanaged, favours "not useful" technological solutions, and uses bait not suited to the Queensland climate, say sources close to or formerly involved with the eradication effort.

The National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program, managed by Biosecurity Queensland, aims to exterminate the fire ant: an invasive species whose spread could have major social, environmental, and economic impacts.

A key component of the eradication effort — and the single biggest budget line item, according to one source — is the pellet bait used to destroy ants, which is ineffective if spread on wet ground or in wet weather.

"The minute [the bait] gets wet, [the ants] won't touch it," Rob Burton, a former regulatory officer with Biosecurity Queensland, said.

**"Farmers have reported back to us that they've seen the helicopters spreading bait over their properties while it's been raining."**

A source close to the eradication program said the inability to consider weather means "at least one" additional round of baiting will be needed, even in areas that have already been baited, to ensure successful eradication.

According to the source, processes such as "looking at the weather forecast" are in place for aerial baiting. Many of the sites where baits were spread had above national average rainfall in 2016.

Geoff Kent, the head of the eradication program, said the program was working to improve its quality control systems.

"We need to tighten up our operational procedures in terms of how helicopters work and where they work and where our staff work," he said.

## AERIAL SENSING DETECTS COW MANURE

One of the methods used by Biosecurity Queensland to identify fire ant locations is aerial sensing: helicopters, equipped with infrared technology, scan large open spaces for heat signals that might indicate a nest.

Some locals remain sceptical about the technology's efficacy.

"They had some calibration at the start," Brad Bales, a fifth-generation grain and beef farmer, said.

"They were flying around and picking up all these warm spots on the ground ... [Biosecurity Queensland] sent teams out to inspect it and they came up with warm piles of cow manure."

Academics close to the eradication program have told Background Briefing the aerial sensing technology is "not where it needs to be to be useful".

One current Biosecurity Queensland worker said that after looking at thousands of hot spots identified through aerial sensing, they found two fire ant nests in three years.



**Photo:** Fire ants range vary in size but are distinct in their coppery-brown colour. (Supplied: Qld Department of Agriculture and Fisheries)

Salah Sukkarieh, a robotics expert who designed parts of the software used in the aerial sensing, said expecting instantaneous results to the complex problem of fire ant infestations is the wrong approach.

"It's a difficult problem. We are talking about mounds 20 to 30 centimetres in diameter. You have to use different algorithms for different terrain types. It just depends on the environment," he said.

Mr Kent maintained aerial sensing was a cost-effective strategy to eradicate fire ants.

"The work has done a great job at containing the population. If it had moved at the same rate that it has done in southern America, it would be in an area from Mackay to Wollongong," he said.

## 'ABYSMAL' MORALE, POOR STAFF RETENTION

Since the eradication program was established in 2001, the fire ant has spread from the Lockyer Valley to the Gold Coast. In the last four years alone, the total area of infestation has increased by 31.6 per cent.

The majority of nest detections for the program come from members of the public contacting Biosecurity Queensland.

Stuart Webber, a Logan resident and volunteer park ranger, said "thousands" of nests remain untreated, and that program staff are missing many of them.



**Photo:** [The Federal Government recently committed \\$400 million to fire ant eradication.](#) (Supplied: Qld Department of Agriculture and Fisheries)

Mr Burton, the former regulatory officer, said mismanagement has been a factor in the program's lack of success.

"There's been some human failings at the senior management level," he said.

As a result staff retention has suffered, he said.

**"Good people in the program generally burn out ... morale was terrible. It's absolutely abysmal," Mr Burton said.**

An independent report commissioned by the Agricultural Ministers' Forum in 2016 said "eradication remains technically feasible, efficient and cost-beneficial".

Earlier this year, the Federal Government [announced nearly \\$400 million in funding](#) for eradication over the next decade, with an independent committee established to oversee the attempted extermination.

### **FIRE ANTS COULD HAVE 'MASSIVE' IMPACT**

Fire ants are native to South America and have been observed in Australia since 2001.

Their stings are painful, and can be lethal in rare cases — though no fatalities have been observed in Australia.

The insects are widespread across the southern United States, with one 1998 study estimating 33,000 people seek medical consultation for fire ant stings annually.

They are highly predatory, and can have damaging effects on ecosystems they are introduced to.

Invasive Species Council chief executive Andrew Cox said their spread could pose a huge threat to the Australian way of life.

**"If we don't eradicate them from southeast Queensland ... modelling shows that 99 per cent of Australia is susceptible," he said.**

"Ultimately it will impact massively on our natural environment and our economy."

