National Farmers Federation

29 January 2024

Committee Secretariat
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretariat,

RE: Senate Inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into Red Imported Fire Ants in Australia (the Inquiry). Red Imported Fire Ants (RIFA) present a significant risk not only to Australian agriculture, but the environment and society at large.

The NFF was established in 1979 and is the authoritative voice of the Australian agriculture industry. The NFF serves as the national peak body representing the broad interests of farmers across geographical and commodity borders. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations in turn form the NFF.

Background

The NFF is extremely concerned about the ongoing spread and proliferation of RIFA and the need to urgently and adequately resource eradication activities before the invasive species becomes entrenched and endemic. Current eradication efforts are clearly under strain and lack the resources necessary to prevent additional detections and outbreaks.

When this inquiry was announced, new RIFA detections throughout South-East Queensland (SEQ), west of the Great Dividing Range in Toowoomba, and near the New South Wales border led to significant concern that the existing SEQ containment zone was vulnerable to breach and that the opportunity for successful eradication was dwindling.

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These fears were only exacerbated when RIFA were identified just south of the Northern NSW/Queensland border in late November and again in January this year when an outbreak was identified a further 85km south in NSW. These outbreaks clearly highlight the increasing risk of RIFA proliferating throughout Australia.

Against this context, as well as the long-held concerns of the sector with respect to RIFA, the NFF welcomed the establishment of this inquiry.

Demonstrating the broad nature of RIFA's current and potential impacts, the NFF has worked closely in conjunction with the Invasive Species Council (ISC) on this issue. In particular, we have sought to present a unified position from the agricultural and environmental sectors concerning the need to adequately resource response plans and initiatives. Further information on this is provided later in this submission.

Along with NFF member submissions, including those of relevant jurisdictions NSW and Queensland, and directly impacted commodities such as the cane and broadacre cropping industries, we encourage the Committee to closely consider the submission made by the ISC.

Impacts of RIFA proliferation on agriculture, the environment and society

RIFA poses a significant risk to Australian agriculture and regional communities. Our plant and horticultural industries are extremely exposed, with RIFA having the potential to reduce gross margins of the wheat crop by 10% or $200 million[1]. Further, RIFA is known to impact over 50 other commercial food crop varieties in Australia through loss of crop yield, plant mortality, equipment damage, increased labor costs and market access (equating to a total cost of $130 million)[2].

RIFA also presents risks to the Australian livestock industry, impacting production and animal welfare outcomes. Stings on livestock cattle (i.e., stings to an animal's eyes and/or nostrils) can result in blindness, swelling, and suffocation. Multiple stings have the potential to trigger premature death (particularly amongst younger animals) and malnourishment of cattle if feed and water supplies are infiltrated. According to projections published in the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program Strategic Review (*NRIFAEP Strategic Review)*, RIFA have the potential to trigger $300 million or greater in loses to the national cattle industry.

The NFF also notes the significant impact on Australia's natural flora and fauna. As identified by the ISC, RIFA have the potential to significantly impact species ranging from ants and other insects, amphibians and reptiles as well as larger mammals, causing direct impacts to Australia's natural environment. The NFF refers the Committee to the submission made by the ISC which highlights these impacts in greater detail.

[1] Strategic Review of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program August 2021, Scott-orr et al.
[2] Strategic Review of the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program August 2021, Scott-orr et al.

Beyond the impacts on the agricultural sector and environment, unlike many other biosecurity challenges that the agricultural sector faces, RIFA also presents an acute risk to human health. As detailed in the NRIFAEP Strategic Review, unchecked national proliferation could lead to approximately 140,000 additional medical consultations each year due to the anaphylaxis treatment and subsequent clinical observation caused by RIFA sting events. Beyond the direct impact on people's health, this could have wide-ranging impacts on Australia way of life, as has been observed in other nations where RIFA are endemic.

To further understand the impacts of RIFA on human health in Australia, and to ensure the most contemporaneous information is being used to inform decision-makers, the NFF along with other environmental and agricultural groups have supported work being undertaken by the University of Melbourne. Stage one of the work, undertaken by the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, has involved a science and literature review seeking to make determinations based on international experiences as to the likely health impacts of RIFA should it continue its Australian expansion.

The NFF understands the researchers leading this work have engaged with the Inquiry and the NFF encourages Committee members to consider this work in preparing their report.

The importance of adequately resourcing response efforts

The NFF and its members have closely followed efforts and programs aimed at responding to RIFA, in particular under the National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program. Successful eradication of RIFA populations following detections in the Port of Fremantle and Gladstone demonstrate that existing eradication techniques and methodologies can successfully work. These demonstrated successes indicate an achievable pathway toward national eradication if funding is sufficient.

To this end, the NFF took strong interest in the findings of the NRIFAEP Strategic Review, which undertook an assessment of the program 4 years into the 10-year response plan. The NFF shared the frustration of many stakeholders that approximately two years passed between the completion of the review and it being made public. This does not accord with the notion of biosecurity being a shared responsibility and genuine partnership between all impacted stakeholders.

Nonetheless, the NRIFAEP Strategic Review indicated that it remained possible to successfully eradicate RIFA from the SEQ zone (noting that since the completion of the report, as well as since its public release, the SEQ zone has expanded and interstate incursions have occurred). As detailed on page 10 of the review, three funding pathways existed towards addressing RIFA proliferation in Australia. Options range from a ‘do nothing’ approach resulting in unchecked nationwide proliferation, containment to SEQ, to elimination from SEQ by 2032.

Noting the anticipated negative consequences of unchecked RIFA proliferation on the agriculture sector, natural environment, and the national public healthcare system, the

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NFF strongly supported the option to contain, suppress, and eradicate RIFA from SEQ by 2032.

The NRIFAEP Strategic Review makes clear however that such an option is dependent on requisite funding being provided to the program. The successful execution of this option will require approximately $200-$300 million in annual NRIFAEP funding and an additional $100-$250 million in annual costs shared amongst Queensland and other Government agency bodies.

Given this, the NFF has focused the majority of its efforts on advocating for all jurisdictions to provide the resources required to achieve such eradication efforts. Prior to the July 2023 Agricultural Minister's Meeting, the NFF wrote to all Agriculture Ministers calling on them to make, and action, commitments to provide funding to the response efforts. To this end, the NFF welcomed the meeting joint communique which outlined that:

"Ministers were unified on the need to continue eradication efforts and maintain momentum under a new response program.

Ministers committed to work within their jurisdictions to bring forward previously agreed future year budget allocations to further support eradication, noting that many jurisdictions have already done so, while future funding arrangements are considered."

The NFF welcomed the October 2023 announcement by the Commonwealth Government to bring forward $411 million in remaining funding under the ten-year NRIFAEP to 2023 and provide an additional investment of $268 million over the next four years to support the plan.

The NFF, in conjunction with the ISC, has continued to call on all jurisdictions to materialise their respective resourcing commitments. Pleasingly the majority of states and territories appear to have now done so.

However there remains significant questions around the provision of future resourcing requirements, both with respect to the amounts identified by the Review, as well as in light of recent NSW incursions. We encourage the Committee to review these requirements and make appropriate recommendations.

The need for risk creators to contribute more to biosecurity resourcing

In the NFF's view, the case of RIFA's incursion and spread is a clear example of the need for risk creators to contribute more to biosecurity funding. As noted above, appropriations from taxpayers, provided in an often ad hoc manner, represent the near-exclusive source of response funding. This is despite, as stated by the ISC, that RIFA were first introduced to Australia via shipping cargo.

Numerous reviews have identified that risk creators, such as importers, have a clear responsibility to contribute commensurate with their risk profile. As noted in the Craik review:

'Much of the material of concern to the national biosecurity system, including of environmental concern, arrives via vessels and containers—either in the contents of the container or on the external surfaces of the container itself'.[3]

As noted by Frontier Economics:

"From an economic perspective, the funding hierarchy for biosecurity requires that funding be first sought from risk creators/impactors, then beneficiaries, and finally, government".[4]

The NFF publicly welcomed the measures contained in the *Sustainable funding for a strong biosecurity system package* announced in the 2023 Commonwealth budget which contained increased contributions from importers. However, the NFF has expressed concern that the majority of these increased charges relate to the cost of administering existing cost-recovered activities, rather than funding proactive and additional activities.

The NFF sees the funding required to manage and respond to RIFA, especially given its understood source of origin, as a clear example of funding requirements that sit outside of cost-recovery activities of importers.

Given the potential use of the revenue raised from the Government's proposed Biosecurity Protection Levy to support non-cost recovered biosecurity activities, we urge the Committee to consider opportunities for increased contributions from risk creators to the management of pest and disease outbreaks such as RIFA.

Learnings of Varroa mite in managing RIFA

The learnings of Varroa mite in managing RIFA are somewhat limited due to the failure to eradicate Varroa mite and the relatively quick timeframe by which Varroa mite went from first detection to the discontinuation of eradication efforts. Significant work is required to assess the events of Varroa mite during 2022-23 in order to draw evidence-based inferences, conclusions and lessons. However, there are some identifiable high-level themes shared between the two biosecurity incidences.

Both incidents demonstrate the value in investing in pre-border and early detection activities. Investments at these stages of the biosecurity continuum provide a significantly greater return on investment than response and containment efforts, and certainly greater than the costs should they become endemic. Should these pests

[3] Priorities for Australia's biosecurity system: An independent review of the capacity of the national biosecurity system and its underpinning intergovernmental agreement, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources.

[4] Sustainable funding for biosecurity – an evaluation of funding options, Frontier Economics.

become entrenched, the estimated cost of Varroa mite to Australia is $5.2 billion over 30 years[5] and the estimated cost of RIFA to Australia is $45 billion over 30 years[6].

Given these potential impacts, the examples show that eradication must be prioritised as a response whenever possible. For pests of this nature, there exist immense challenges with containment-only strategies.

Both examples also demonstrate the need to adequately understand and control vectors of movement as quickly and thoroughly as possible. The spread of Varroa mite is understood to have been expediated due to the movement of infected beehives. Similar concerns exist for RIFA, with reports indicating soil and mulch movements may have played a role in containment zone breaches.

Finally, as mentioned earlier in this submission, both examples demonstrate the overall need for risk creators to contribute more to non-cost recovered biosecurity costs. Both examples are generally understood to have arrived via international shipping routes, however, the agricultural sector and the community at large will shoulder much of the impacts of these pests.

Conclusion

The NFF appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact Greg Hosking, Senior Policy Officer via e-mail: ghosking@nff.org.au or phone (02) 6269 5666 should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

TONY MAHAR
Chief Executive Officer

[5] National Biosecurity Strategy – Consultation draft, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources. Sustainable funding for biosecurity.
[6] National Biosecurity Strategy – Consultation draft, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources. Sustainable funding for biosecurity.