



PRESS RELEASE

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Dreaded Fire Ant Found in New Zealand

The eastern port city of Napier, New Zealand, has just found a Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA, *Solenopsis invicta*) infestation through a port monitoring system designed to quickly detect new invasive ants around ports of entry (for details, see the NZ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Press Release pasted at end of this release). Hawaii quarantine officials and resource managers have long touted New Zealand's biosecurity system as the best in the world, and one that we need to emulate if we want to keep pests like RIFA, brown treesnakes and other extremely damaging pests from entering and becoming established here.

Red Imported Fire Ants are highly aggressive, colony-forming ants native to South America. They are believed to have entered the U.S. in materials shipped from South America in the 1930s, appearing first in Alabama. Over 300 million acres have since become infested despite federal quarantine measures. In heavily infested areas across the U.S. there can be 300 colonies per acre, with approximately 250,000 workers per colony. RIFA infest areas like yards, school grounds, parks, pastures and golf courses, where they form large dirt mounds. They also tend to infest electrical boxes, causing damage by chewing equipment. RIFA feed on shoots, stems and buds of plants, insects, young animals and birds, and are known to cause death, injury and reduced weight in cattle and poultry. RIFA swarm and aggressively sting when disturbed, causing intense burning or itching, with white pustules forming at each sting site within 24 hours. Extreme allergic reactions to stings may result in death.

The costs of RIFA in the U.S. are staggering, with total agricultural losses estimated at \$750 million/yr, and losses to U.S. households, businesses, schools, government (including medical costs) estimated at \$5 billion/year. RIFA also impact insects, native plants and ground-nesting wildlife.

In Nov. 1998 RIFA were discovered in Orange County, California, and they have spread to Riverside and San Diego despite a \$40 million eradication attempt. Funding for eradication in California was discontinued in 2003, leaving individual counties and property owners responsible for controlling the inevitable spread of this 'supertramp' ant.

This also leaves Hawaii and Pacific islands at tremendous risk. Given that Hawaii receives the majority of its shipped goods from California, the chance that RIFA will be transported to Hawaii is extremely high. Ants could arrive in produce or other agricultural shipments, in equipment, construction materials, in vehicles, moving containers with household goods or even in mail parcels (as occurred in 1991, where the mail parcel was intercepted by postal workers).

Prevention Measures and Needs

Hawaii has a RIFA prevention plan. However, what is lacking is funding and personnel to implement it. HDOA currently conducts inspection of all untreated nursery stock from California and has also received some federal funding to conduct limited port surveys. Hawaii has no formal early detection and rapid response programs, and no set funding goes to any agency to carry out this function. Hawaii also needs to conduct a thorough pathway analysis to determine which non-nursery items should be considered high-risk, and we need to give HDOA the personnel and funding to carry out inspections of these items.

Help may be on the horizon. A part of DLNR's supplemental budget request for \$5,000,000 for the initial year of a four-year funding request and a 1:1 non-state match would provide key funding for HDOA's inspection and monitoring capabilities. This unprecedented budget request would not replace any of the existing state, private, or federal funding, but is intended to complement and expand on existing programs that have suffered decades of no-growth or cutbacks while introductions and spread of invasive pests have increased exponentially.

The public can help by voicing support for the \$5 million supplemental budget request for better protection from invasive pests like RIFA, and also by reporting suspected RIFA to the HDOA Pest Hotline, 586-PEST (7378).

There are lessons we could learn from New Zealand. The first is that RIFA could arrive at any time, almost anywhere. The second lesson is that NZ found the infestation early because they have a comprehensive early detection program. Third, NZ initiated a rapid response effort the very weekend it was found because they were prepared for a high-gear response with the intent to eradicate. Hawaii needs to learn these lessons and prepare for the almost inevitable arrival of RIFA.

For more information on RIFA or for a flyer describing the difference between the tropical fire ant (which is present in Hawaii) and RIFA, visit <http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/ants/Solenopsis/index.html>

****MAF NZ Press Release******

Monday, 16 February 2004, 3:39 pm
Press Release: Ministry Of Agriculture And Forestry, NZ

Red imported fire ants found during exotic ant surveillance

Red imported fire ants have been found at the Port of Napier during surveillance activity undertaken as part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) national invasive ant programme.

Amelia Pascoe, MAF's Programme Coordinator says the finding of approximately 200 red imported fire ant workers over the weekend immediately

triggered a pest eradication response. MAF incursion inspectors are on site today carrying out intense surveillance to find and destroy the source nest/s.

The ants were found in attractant bait traps which had been set in high risk areas including warm sunny sites close to water sources such as open drains and creeks, dripping taps, leaky water mains, grassy areas, the base of trees, under debris, logs, rocks and other areas favourable for ant colonisation.

Surveillance of these areas in the Napier region has been underway for the last fortnight. Although it is not clear how the ants may have entered the country, sea containers are a known risk pathway for the entry of unwanted pests. Since 1 January 2004 six-sided inspection of all sea containers has been in place with further checks at MAF approved transitional facilities during unloading. Additional checks have been put in place since the red imported fire ant find. Amelia Pascoe says red imported fire ants are a serious unwanted pest that will aggressively defend their nest, swarming out and over the mound to repeatedly sting anything that appears a threat. If red imported fire ants were to establish in New Zealand they would pose a serious competitive threat to our native fauna.

A sting from a red imported fire ant is similar to that of a bee or a wasp and results intense burning or itching. A blister forms at the sting site within five hours and a distinctive white pustule develops within a few days. 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.

Based on advice received from the Ministry of Health, Amelia Pascoe says people who show symptoms of a fire ant sting should seek medical advice. Infected stings are treated using antibiotics. If you believe you are having an allergic reaction it is important to seek medical help immediately.

Over the last three years, as part of its national invasive ant programme set up to assist the early detection of red imported fire ants and other exotic ants, MAF has focused surveillance and monitoring activity on high-risk locations such as international ports, transitional facilities, container yards and some nurseries. An isolated find of a single red imported fire ant nest was made at Auckland International Airport in March 2001. The nest was destroyed and ongoing surveillance has found no further nests in the area.

Red imported fire ants are native to South America. They are reddish-brown in colour and their size varies from 3 to 6mm in length, an ant longer than 6mm will not be a red imported fire ants. Red imported fire ants build mounded nests of fine granular soil of variable size and height - up to 40cm. Depending upon colony age, some mounds may not always be obvious.

If you think you may have found a red imported fire ant nest, please do not disturb it, but call the MAF Exotic Disease and Pest Emergency Hotline on 0800 809 966.

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