

National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (SEQ) Steering Committee
 Risk Management Sub-Committee (Sub-Committee)
 Tuesday 22 September 2021
 Brisbane, Queensland
 (Held by videoconference)

MINUTES – MEETING 7

ATTENDANCE

Attendees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alan Millis, Chair • Irene Sitton, Independent expert • Wendy Craik, Chair, Steering Committee • John Robertson, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Queensland • Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries, NSW • Milena Rafic, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Commonwealth Government
Apologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jo Laduzko, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Commonwealth Government
Presenters/Observers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graeme Dudgeon, General Manager (NRIFAEP) • Mel Blankenberg, A/Strategy Director (NRIFAEP) • Andrew Turley, Strategic Review Secretariat (NRIFAEP) • Brian Bond, Executive Officer (NRIFAEP)
Secretariat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kerrian Nobbs (NRIFAEP)

Agenda Item 1 – Introduction

The seventh meeting of the Risk Management Sub-Committee (RMSC) was opened by the Chair at 10.00am. The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting, including Milena Rafic on behalf of Jo Laduzko who was an apology.

The Chair provided a brief overview of the meeting's agenda and objectives. The agenda was confirmed, noting the significant strategic risk issues to be discussed along with the standard risk items on the agenda.

Minutes of the March 2021 meeting were circulated previously, approved out-of-session and published to the website.

Follow up actions:

- *Follow up with the Communication and Engagement team whether there are opportunities for improvements in relation to spatial strategy triggers and the extension of community self-management participation.*
 - Item to remain open
- *Seek clarity on allocation of departmental internal audits for the Program.*
 - To be discussed in Agenda Item 10
- *Provide further detail on items identified for consideration by external review.*
 - To be discussed in Agenda Item 10.

Actions arising from the minutes:

- *Complete a statistical analysis of the model behind the amount of compliance/field staff required.*
 - Currently looking at other auditing and compliance programs to assist with the analysis. It was suggested to contact the Commonwealth regarding its 'border control allocation' program.

Update: the team have looked at the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator compliance and sampling method. Action is on hold due to the current review of the Program and staff shortages.
- *Concerns in relation to the ownership of the Intellectual Property of the Remote Sensing Surveillance project.*
 - A resolution has been built into the current contract following negotiation with the contractor, including the Program being able to use and drive the system following training.
- *Have the findings of the CSIRO study been incorporated into the Risk Register?*
 - The Program will work on finalisation of proposed changes to movement controls and harmonisation across jurisdictions. There may need to be consultation with another national committee.
- *Has a review of status dates for items in the Risk Register occurred?*
 - The management team have assessed each risk. The new template has been updated with action owners and with specific dates allocated.

- *Suggestion about engaging an external expert to review the clearance and proof of freedom strategy.*
 - A draft strategy has been provided to the Scientific Advisory Group. This could change following the current review of the Program.

The Sub-Committee:

- **CONFIRMED** the agenda as previously circulated.
- **NOTED** the minutes of Meeting 6 were endorsed out of session and published to the website.
- **NOTED** the actions list and the updates provided.
- **NOTED** the pressure the Program is working under with the current review, COVID 19 restrictions and staff shortages.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 2 – General Manager’s Update

The General Manager provided a summary on the progress, challenges and constraints for the Program in 2021-22. The review process and questions about the future direction of the Program have created some uncertainty for Program staff, resulting in the loss of some key personnel. Staff at all sites have recently been briefed on the process of the review to dispel concerns.

There is a financial risk around the continuity of the Program. A brief has been prepared on behalf of the Steering Committee for the Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting being held in early November 2021, to update them on the Program’s position, with three potential options moving forward. The National Biosecurity Committee and the Agriculture Senior Officials’ Committee (AGSOC) have also included the future of the Program for discussion at upcoming meetings.

AGSOC previously agreed that the Program should continue through to at least the end of the 2021-22 financial year. However, they do not have the authority to approve the funding. The Commonwealth Government is very supportive and has agreed to bring forward funding, with other jurisdictions currently considering their commitments. There is some concern within the jurisdictions about committing to bring forward funding without knowing what the longer-term agreements will be, the potential differences in the funding model and that the Queensland Government is making a significant commitment that the new model will work. A further risk to the Program is creating a hiatus if the current operations are not continued pending decisions on these matters.

Remote Sensing Surveillance (RSS) is a critical aspect of the Program moving forward as it is not possible to do broadscale surveillance of the large areas affected by fire ants. RSS is the only feasible means for surveillance at a landscape scale. The team are on track to do 40,000 – 50,000 hectares of RSS this season. The Program is planning to upscale RSS capability significantly, to three operational cameras in 2022 and possibly three more in 2023, to allow for 250,000 hectares of RSS each season. An RSS report is currently being drafted for submission to the Steering Committee.

The Sub-Committee:

- **NOTED** the update on the Program and strategic risks provided by the General Manager.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 3 – Business Improvement Register

Brian Bond provided an overview of the Business Improvement Register and a summary of the tasks identified; the upgrades to the Risk Register, the reporting capability and the summary automatically generated from the Risk Register; and a summary of the Issues Register, including high level risks:

- short term bring-forward of funding
- longer term funding and program continuity
- review negotiations
- bait delivery.

The Program is working with the current bait supplier to ensure there is a consistent supply for the treatment season. However, the Program is also currently assessing procurement processes to enable a strategic procurement capability to review the markets for the opportunity to have competition between multiple bait suppliers. The Program is the largest consumer of the bait in the world and should have leverage.

High level strategic risks highlighted in the Program review and the assessment of those risks were discussed, including:

- the risk of a hiatus in treatment due to timeliness and value of bring-forward funding
- staffing issues
- political risks
- fire ant build-up in residual (non-treatment) areas and the effect on the health and well-being of the population
- operational/strategic risks – gaps experienced with aerial baiting, due to organic crops or failure to allow access
- strong development growth within South East Queensland, creating increased habitat and movement opportunities for fire ants
- COVID implications
- reporting high level strategic issues within quarterly report.

The Sub-Committee:

- **DISCUSSED** and **NOTED** the update on the Risk and Issues Registers
- **NOTED** that Brian Bond will update the Registers following the review and consistently as risks/issues arise.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
1.	Brian Bond to regularly update the Risk and Issues Registers on behalf of the Program.	Brian Bond	Ongoing BAU

Agenda Item 4 – NRIFAEP Strategic Review Report – discuss ‘Future Options’ suggestions

The Chair of the Steering Committee updated the sub-committee on the Strategic Review Report and future options. The Steering Committee is currently drafting responses to the 27 recommendations within the Strategic Review Report but fundamentally support all recommendations. Extraordinary Steering Committee meetings have been held to discuss the recommendations and the three potential options for the Program’s future. A briefing paper with the recommended option will be submitted to the Agriculture Ministers at the meeting being held in November 2021.

It is intended that the Program will continue its normal operation until a decision is made on the future model of the Program. Negotiations will take place with local government and industry to assist with the suppression of dense populations of fire ants in the suppression zone and the residual area.

The Sub-Committee discussed the benefits, risks and implications of the three potential options, including, budget constraints, the risk of spread in an operational hiatus, negative impacts of the spread of fire ants on the economy (including Medicare and medical costs) and health and well-being of residents and pets.

The Sub-Committee:

- **DISCUSSED** the NRIFEAP Strategic Review August 2021, in particular the options, and the risks and constraints discussed in the review.
- **CONSIDERED** if other risks and constraints need to be considered in the development of more detailed options for proposal to AGSOC/Agriculture Ministers.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 5 – Funding and Program Continuity

Graeme Dudgeon provided an update on funding and Program continuity. AGSOC has agreed that the Program maintain its current effort ahead of the outcomes of the Strategic Review of the Program. The Program is currently seeking a bring-forward of \$33.3M into 2021-22 from cost share partners. This approach presents significant operational risks, should not all jurisdictions agree to bring forward funding from outer years, and also should there be delays in receiving the funds from jurisdictions agreeing to bring forward funding. Contingency planning is in place. However, should the Program have to wind down operations, there would be contract implications with the bait supplier, the aerial company and the contractor workforce. The bait supplier has taken the risk of pre-ordering a shipment of corn grit without any contractual agreement from the Program. All three contracts are up for extension around November 2021.

Implementation of a strategy for procurement of bait was discussed, including the possibility of a central agency within the Queensland Government managing the larger procurement arrangements for both the Program and affected local governments moving forward. The demand for bait will increase significantly. The current supplier is looking at substitute ingredients for the bait due to dramatic price increases through COVID and other market pressures. There is also another supplier in the United States that has a slightly different bait formula who may import to Australia and sell at a better price.

The Sub-Committee

- **ENDORSED** the general principles for proceeding during the current period of uncertainty, outlined in Attachment A
- **NOTED** and provided feedback on the draft contingency plan for a 'life support' mode of operations, outlined in Attachment B
- **NOTED** and provided feedback on other priority actions which may be required if there is a change in Program direction, outlined in Attachment C.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
2. Advise the Steering Committee that the general principles outlined in Attachment A have been endorsed.	Secretariat	October 2021	Provided in update to SC for Nov meeting.

Agenda Item 6 – 2021-22 Work Plan Risks

Graeme Dudgeon provided an overview of the 2021-22 Work Plan, including the planning for the 2021–22 treatment season; the risks involved in undertaking the work plan and the risk mitigation strategies implemented.

A ‘No More Gaps’ working group has been established to mitigate the risk of treatment gaps which result in reduced efficacy. A contingency of an extra 5% of clearance treatment costs has been budgeted to enable extra ground teams to complete gap treatment.

Strategies are being negotiated with property owners to be able to bait cropping land during fallow or provide bait for self-management. The risk with self-management is having the confidence that the treatment regime is adequate.

Access is denied in some instances due to bait permit restrictions over crops, livestock or other free-range animals. The Program is working with the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority regarding amendments to permit conditions associated with maximum residue levels in crops and post-treatment requirements. Alternatively, property owners may not be able to crop during treatment of their land, which could become a compensation issue.

The Sub-Committee:

- **NOTED** the update on the 2021-22 Work Plan Risks and the mitigation strategies involved.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 7 – Self-treatment Progress

Mel Blankenberg provided an update on the progress of self-treatment, highlighting the significant economic, regulatory and operational implementation challenges. Recommendations from the recent strategic review of the Program suggest that self-management could become the default mode for dealing with incursions in the urban and peri-urban areas in South East Queensland under a new funding model.

Negotiating and legislating the new service delivery arrangements, monitoring effectiveness and maintaining the effort over a longer period will be challenging risks for the Program.

The Program continues to develop self-treatment pilot programs for councils, schools and residential community groups navigating through issues such as bait supply, participation rates, competing objectives and commercial developers.

The Gold Coast City Council now has fire ants on its corporate risk register and plans to bait approximately 50% of its own land, supplementing the Program’s aerial treatment. The Logan and Ipswich City Councils have also been willing to assist with community led initiatives.

Registration issues from previous pilots have been rectified and plans are being developed for a sticker-based system for residents to show their willingness to participate and have bait supplied to them, in line with Queensland Health regulations.

The Sub-Committee:

- **AGREED** to maintain confidentiality around the self-management aspects of the Strategic Review and note that a proper co-ordinated approach to engaging councils will be required
- **NOTED** the range of strategic risks raised in the review panel’s recommendations that the Program divest itself of responsibility for self-management

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NOTED progress with the operational trials currently being delivered by the Program. 			
Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 8 - Community Attitudes, Compliance and Enforcement

Mel Blankenberg gave an overview of the paper outlining the Program’s approach to compliance for the year 2021-22, the current risks to voluntary compliance with the Biosecurity Regulation 2016 and mitigation measures to address the potential subsequent spread of fire ants.

The Program is decreasing the number of random checks on industries/people and increasingly moving to intelligence-based compliance, focussing on targeting non-compliant operators based on gathered intelligence.

Adopting learnings from the previous year, the number of industries targeted will be reduced to effectively engage a cross-section of an industry for a more quality-based approach to compliance audits. The key industries that will be the focus for compliance audits in 2021-22 are hay producers and civil, earthmoving and haulage operators.

Communication and engagement play a very important role in assisting voluntary compliance. For example, when the zones were extended, some hay operators were caught who were previously outside of the zone, in particular opportunistic producers of hay who were unaware of the requirements in the Regulation. There was a level of leniency in approach for those caught in the zone change while engagement processes and awareness campaigns took place. The Program will review the process to identify any risks over the next 12 months.

In addition, the turf industry will be targeted to check on the transition to the use of Bifenthrin, which is now the appropriate chemical to use, and compliance with regulations. A communication and engagement strategy is being developed and there appears already to be an improvement in compliance within this industry.

There have been additional pressures on producers with higher priority to them than fire ants, such as labour shortages, interstate market access and reduced demand for product. The Program is currently working with the Department’s Agricultural Liaison Group, who have existing relationships with the producers, to assist with the Program’s messaging.

Changes to Queensland Health regulations will come into effect on 27 September 2021 to allow self-treatment by pest managers who are trained and authorised by the Program. Pest Managers are advised during training that they are required to report any treatments through a Program portal set up for this purpose. This will be monitored by the Program.

The Program will be urging residents in the treatment area not to self-treat, as the Program’s treatment will be more effective and monitored for residual infestation.

The Sub-Committee:

- **NOTED** the Program’s approach to compliance for the year 2021-22
- **DISCUSSED** the current risks to voluntary compliance with the Biosecurity Regulation 2016 and mitigation measures to address the potential subsequent spread of fire ants.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 9 - Efficiency and Effectiveness Review 2019 Implementation Update

Minutes of the Efficiency and Effectiveness (E&E) Review Implementation Sub-Committee meeting held on 23 August 2021 were provided, noting that three of the four outstanding recommendations reported at that meeting have now been completed. The final recommendation, #29, relates to a follow up audit of operational planning, governance and procurement, which will be considered following the current review of the Program.

The Sub-Committee:

NOTED:

- the updates made in relation to the four outstanding items of the E&E Review
- the most recent E&E update status as of May 2021 will be published on the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment website following approval by the Steering Committee
- that some of the outstanding recommendations may be superseded by new approaches or strategies after the Agriculture Ministers’ consideration of the independent review of the Program.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 10 – Update on Audit Program

Brian Bond advised that the audit schedule for the Program has been deferred until the completion of the strategic review of the Program.

The Program is implementing business improvements in audit areas such as procurement, contract management and over-expenditure. These items will be added to the Business Improvement Register.

The Sub-Committee:

- **NOTED** the update provided on the audit program.
- **AGREED** it is reasonable not to seek any external audit review processes until the current strategic review of the Program is completed.

Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 11 - Other Business

The Chair summarised the meeting, including the actions and decisions made, noting that the minutes of the meeting will be approved out of session prior to being published to the web, and also their sensitivity in the period prior to Governments’ decisions on the future of the Program.

He also thanked attendees for their participation and acknowledged the difficult circumstances the Program is currently working under.

The risk experts sought feedback from the Steering Committee on the ongoing value of the RMSC.

The Sub-Committee:

- **AGREED** to request feedback from the full Steering Committee on the value of the RMSC.

The next meeting is to be held in March 2022.

Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
3.	RMSC minutes to be endorsed out of session and published to the web.	Secretariat	February 2022	To be endorsed at March 2022 meeting.
4.	Request feedback from the Steering Committee on the value of the RMSC	John Robertson	30 September 2021	Completed