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National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (SEQ) Steering Committee
Friday 16 July 2021
Teleconference
10.00am – 12.00pm

ATTENDANCE

Attendees	Wendy Craik, Chair Jo Laduzko, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (C'wealth) Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries (NSW) Nigel Ainsworth, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (VIC) Marcelle O'Brien, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS), John van Schagen, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA) Anne Walters, Department of Primary Industry and Resources (NT) John Robertson, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) (QLD)
Program Presenters	Graeme Dudgeon, General Manager Mel Blankenberg, A/Strategy Director Andrew Turley, Review Secretariat Brett Turville, Operations Director
Strategic Review Panel	Helen Scott-Orr Monica Gruber Will Zacharin
Observers	Malcolm Letts, Deputy Director-General/Chief Biosecurity Officer, Biosecurity Queensland, (DAF) Heather Leeson, Strategic Policy Manager Sharon Janssen, Planning and Quality Management Manager Barry Cooper, Operations Manager Ross Dorward, Senior Planning Officer Chris Hollingdrake, A/Communication and Engagement Manager Mark Winter, Business Systems and Intelligence Manager Phillip Hennig, Senior Policy Officer



Secretariat	Kerri Nobbs, Senior Policy Officer, (NRIFAEP)
Apologies	Rae Burrows, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS)

MAIN DISCUSSION

The meeting opened at 10.00am.

INTRODUCTION

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees, noting Marcelle O'Brien was in attendance on behalf of Rae Burrows, who was an apology for this meeting. The Chair also welcomed Mel Blankenberg who is currently acting as the Program Strategy Director while Andrew Turley is assisting the panel with the Strategic Review. Justine Clarke, DAF Chief Finance Officer has advised that she will step down as a member of the Steering Committee effective immediately.

The Chair provided an overview of the extraordinary meeting agenda, including the 2021 Work Plan Strategy / Bring Forward of Funding and an update from the Strategic Review Panel on the progress of the review of the Program.

2021 WORK PLAN STRATEGY / BRING FORWARD OF FUNDING

Graeme Dudgeon acknowledged that it is a challenging time for the Program with a considerable number of significant detections found during surveillance season that required additional treatment. Due to the location of these detections being in the Western Boundary and Area one, the Program recommends consolidation and additional treatment that is outside of the scope of the original Work Plan. This extra treatment will require the Work Plan to be amended, and a request to bring forward of additional funding as to what was previously advised in the brief to the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC) and the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC) in April/May 2021.

Mel Blankenberg presented the Steering Committee with the two Work Plan options designed to continue clearance and protect areas that have already received eradication treatment and to mitigate the risk of fire ant spread. The Program advised that there will be no capacity to move to eradication treatment of Area 3 as previously advised and that the Program recommended two treatment options be considered.

Both options will include clearance treatment in eradication areas and treatment of detections adjacent to eradication areas. Option 1 would receive three rounds of treatment at a cost of approximately \$66.7M (bring forward funding of \$33.3M) and Option 2 would receive four rounds of treatment at an approximate cost of \$74.82M (bring forward funding of \$41.42M). The original advice to the Steering Committee was for a bring forward funding of \$26.6M. Option one was endorsed over option two for the reasons outlined in the Steering Committee briefing paper.

Extra effort required this year is mainly due to significant detections, with each significant detection requiring 10,000ha of treatment. It was explained that the significant detections are most likely due to treatment gaps in the treatment areas during the first two years of the Program. During this time the



Program field treatment was not as effective as it has been in the last two seasons. Genetic testing undertaken on the fire ants at the significant detection sites also provide evidence of either human assisted movement or flight spread. Discussion was had about the importance of the remote sensing surveillance (RSS) in operation this surveillance season and how RSS will potentially reduce the amount of sentinel surveillance that will need to be conducted.

Malcolm Letts noted that the challenge for any large-scale operational response was how to adjust and manage to budget. He also acknowledged that the Steering Committee has been very responsive to meeting the needs of the eradication response and the adjustments required. The Program is now in a better position to provide a more accurate estimate on costings. Boundary remote sensing will also assist in giving a better indication of costings.

The Steering Committee discussed the merits of both options presented. This included discussion around the number of treatment rounds and the importance of these rounds in supporting past seasons treatment. A discussion was had on the current operational boundary and reasons for detections of interest located outside of the boundary. The Steering Committee examined the approach taken to treatment gaps and advice was provided that these predominately related to cropping and the presence of livestock. The importance of remote sensing to Program success and a continued focus on a compliance program to reduce the threat posed by human assisted movement of fire ant product were noted. The Program highlighted that the learning from the first four years of treatment was that treatment gaps left untreated would pose a risk to being able to delimit an area.

The Steering Committee was advised that AGSOC at its last meeting had supported the continued operation of the Program under the Ten-Year Eradication Plan. This included the current treatment effort and budget spend. It was noted that the endorsed treatment option would mean that the Program would have budget and funding available to December 2021. The budget required for the 12-month treatment and surveillance program of work would require funding to be brought forward. There is no intent for the Queensland Government to cover the cost of the short fall from January 2022. The Program is requesting that cost share partners bring forward funding committed from the out-years' budget.

It was recommended if seeking extra funding that the work program is articulated in practical terms, including the effectiveness of delimitation and the treatment of gaps.

The Chair emphasised that the Steering Committee has the responsibility to assess the current situation and make the best recommendation under the circumstances.

The Steering Committee noted that the members of the Strategic Review Panel will review the operation of the Program from its commencement and provide comment on the impact that significant funding constraints have had on its operational success.

The considerations and recommendations of the Review are critical for the Program and the cost share partners. The draft report is expected in late July, with the full report due at the end of August 2021. The Steering Committee could consider the draft report in July 2021 which will be indicative of the final



report to enable the revised Work Plan to be provided to the NBC for endorsement prior to being presented to AGSOC and Agriculture Ministers.

Malcolm Letts indicated that should the funds in the Program budget be exhausted by December 2021 as per the newly endorsed Work Plan, and there was no bring forward of funding from cost share partners, then Queensland as the combat state would have to stop the Program at this time. This will be reiterated in the governance briefing papers.

The Chair sought agreement to the recommendations, noting that the governance papers will be circulated to all members for approval prior to being presented to NBC, AGSOC and the Agriculture Ministers; noting what the paper will imply, ie the Program is holding the line, maintaining what has been achieved to date, stating that without the extra funding the Program will need to stop at the end of the year with potential consequences that the fire ants will spread rapidly. The paper should also include the Review timeline and a draft forward plan. It was specifically requested by the Commonwealth representative that the minutes reflect the fact that the 'additional investment' being made in the increased expenditure was to keep live the options that the panel may recommend from the review (i.e. so that we did not go backwards).

The Queensland Minister will formalise the request to all jurisdictional Ministers for the bring forward of funding of \$33.3M. Members discussed that the contributions would be in their ordinary splits but asked that a breakdown of the respective state jurisdictions be distributed with the meeting minutes.

These amounts will be provided in the letters from the Queensland Minister. It is noted that Queensland's 'bring forward' has been exhausted with Queensland fully expending all of its outyear liabilities.

The Chair thanked members for considering the request at very short notice and acknowledged the difficult positions the jurisdictions are in.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the information provided in the brief and the treatment options and costings attachment.
- **AGREED** with the recommendations, noting that all governance papers will be circulated to all members for approval prior to being presented to NBC, AGSOC and the Agriculture Ministers.
- **APPROVED** that Option 1 be implemented immediately (noting amendments), acknowledging the 'bring forward' amount for the second six months of 2021-22 will be approximately \$33.3M, \$6.7M higher than the original estimate of \$26.6M in the brief to the NBC and AGSOC.
- **AGREED** a bring forward of funding request be sent from the Queensland Minister to Ministers of all cost share partners for funding required to complete the Work Plan strategy with a clear breakdown for each jurisdiction.



Agenda Item 1 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
1.	Circulate Work Plan presentation to the Steering Committee.	Secretariat	July 2021	Completed – sent 16/7
2.	Bring forward funding request be sent from the Queensland Minister to Ministers of all cost share partners with a clear breakdown for each jurisdiction.	Program	July 2021	Completed
3.	Governance papers be circulated to Steering Committee members for approval prior to being presented to NBC, AGSOC and Agriculture Ministers.	Secretariat	August 2021	Completed

STRATEGIC REVIEW PROGRESS

The Chair welcomed Dr Helen Scott-Orr (Review Panel Chair) and panel members, Monica Gruber and Will Zacharin to the meeting. Dr Scott-Orr briefed the Steering Committee members on the progress of the review and the complex considerations to form the recommendations of the report. Members were invited to provide comments to the panel. The Steering Committee look forward to receiving the draft report by the end of July 2021.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the progress of the review and thanked the panel for an excellent summary.

Agenda Item 2 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			