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National Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program (SEQ) Steering Committee

Wednesday 25 May 2022

9.00am – 3:30pm (AEDT)

MINUTES – MEETING 20

ATTENDANCE

Attendees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wendy Craik, Chair• John Robertson, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Queensland• Jo Laduzko, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Commonwealth Government• Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries (DPI), (NSW) (Teams)• Nigel Ainsworth, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, (VIC)• John van Schagen, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA) (Teams)• Anne Walters, Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (NT) (Teams)• Marcelle O'Brien, Department of Natural Resources and Environment (TAS)• Mike Richards, External Financial Consultant• Jasmyn Lynch, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (ACT) (Teams)• Nathan Rhodes, Department of Primary Industries and Regions (SA)
Apologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rae Burrows, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, Tasmania• Jacqui King, Director, Biosecurity Queensland• Sarah Mitchell, Manager, Business Support and Governance
Program presenters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graeme Dudgeon, General Manager• Brett Turville, Director Operations• Andrew Turley, Director Strategic Review• Tom Roberts, Manager, Strategic Policy• Sharon Janssen, Manager, Planning and Quality Management• Chris Hollingdrake, Manager, Communication and Engagement• Ross Wylie, Science Leader• Erin Wallace, Scientist
Observers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Elissa Van Oosterhout, DPI, NSW• Malcolm Letts, Chief Biosecurity Officer, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD• Hendri Eddy, Senior Business Support Officer, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD• James Zhou, Senior Business Support Officer, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD• Kalpana Agnihotri, Manager, Science, NRFIAEP• Maria Hauff, Principal Engagement Officer (FAST), Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD
A/Secretariat	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Camilla Wakefield



MAIN DISCUSSION, AGREED OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP ACTIONS

The meeting opened at 9.35am (AEST) following a Steering Committee closed discussion.

Agenda Item 1 - Introduction

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees, noting Marcelle O'Brien attending on behalf of Rae Burrows as the Tasmanian representative and Elissa van Oosterhout attending as an observer for NSW.

Items raised during the Steering Committee members' closed discussion included:

- a calendar listing items for the Steering Committee's decision over the coming twelve months to be created, as well as increased alignment of decision with planned meetings where possible
- the creation of a portal or SharePoint site to hold current Steering Committee documents, including out of session papers and a record of responses/approvals
- the importance of the timely communication of Weekly Reports to the Steering Committee
- the preference for the quarterly Steering Committee meetings to primarily focus on decision papers, rather than information updates for noting
- a request for a weekly or monthly update on Procurement, noting that delays to these processes can represent significant risk to the Program.

Discussion on the five-year program noted that there will likely be a requirement for jurisdictions to run the request through cabinet. To meet budgetary timeframes, a draft of the National Response Strategy 2023-27 will be due to the Steering Committee for review in August 2022, for finalisation by October 2022.

The Chair queried the progress of the legal work associated with the Intellectual Protection (IP) ownership issue for Remote Surveillance Sensing operations, and the ability of the other jurisdictions to make use of the technology. The committee was advised that the contract allows for the IP to be accessible to the cost share partners once it is owned by the Department, with more information provided as part of Item 10. Malcolm Letts also advised that an independent review had occurred into this matter, and that the outcomes would be shared with the Steering Committee once available.

Minutes for the quarterly meeting held on 17 February 2022, and the extraordinary meeting held on 4 March 2022 were taken as a correct record. All actions from these meetings were reviewed, noting that many were on the agenda for discussion.

The following comments were made regarding those actions still in progress:

- the engagement of an epidemiologist to the Steering Committee had been circulated to members for recommendations and feedback on the given options. Consensus has not yet been reached and the adjournment until after a planned governance meeting in June 2022 was agreed to allow for further clarification of the role. It was noted that an expert from one of the jurisdictions or a university contact may be suitable, with suggestions to be requested following the confirmation of requirements
- the out of session NBC paper seeking the agreement to harmonise movement controls is due to be sent shortly and will be circulated to Steering Committee members for noting at the same time



- the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) overarching plan has been conveyed to the Deputy Director General and will be circulated to Steering Committee members following review
- 2022-23 work plan will be finalised following a meeting between the Program and ACT to address concerns with a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) related to compliance. The status of the paper is approved, subject to the update of this KPI.

Malcolm Letts advised that he would be joining the Steering Committee as Queensland’s representative, with the Director of FAST reporting to the General Manager of Invasive Pests and Animals to ensure separation of governance between the two programs. It was noted that the delegation levels of the Steering Committee members within their jurisdictions may require review over the coming period, given the significant funding decisions that they will be asked to engage with as part of their representative role.

The Steering Committee:

- **APPROVED** the minutes of Meeting 19, and the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 4 March 2022
- **AGREED** that the 2022-23 Work Plan was approved, subject to an update of the compliance KPI
- **AGREED** that the appointment of an epidemiologist to the Steering Committee would be placed on hold until after a governance meeting scheduled for June 2022
- **NOTED** the update to Queensland’s representative to the Steering Committee, and the reporting relationship of the director to FAST.

Agenda item 1 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
1.	Calendar of decisions to be created and circulated to members.	Systems and Intelligence / Secretariat	June 2022	In progress
2.	Online portal to be investigated for creation, to hold Committee documents and registers.	Systems and Intelligence / Secretariat	August 2022	In progress
3.	Monthly Procurement updates to be generated and circulated to members.	Procurement	July 2022	Completed
4.	Draft National RIFA Response Strategy 2023-27 to be circulated to members for review.	Policy	August 2022	Completed
5.	Outcomes of independent review into RSS Intellectual Property to be shared with members.	Science	July 2022	In progress
6.	Contact University Queensland Professor Hugh Possingham, regarding possible engagement as an Epidemiologist.	Chair	July 2022	Closed
7.	Out of session NBC paper seeking agreement to harmonise movement	QDAF	June 2022	Completed



	controls to be circulated to members for noting.			
8.	Finalised 2022-23 work plan circulated to members for noting following the update to KPIs.	Policy	June 2022	Completed
9.	Update NBC Secretariat and websites to reflect the change of Steering Committee membership	Secretariat	June 2022	Completed

Agenda Item 2 - General Manager's Update and Omnibus

The General Manager provided the Steering Committee with an update on the Program, including the Program scale-up and progress against the 2021-22 work plan.

The Program has been continuing its efforts to 'scale-up' to the levels required for the proposed 2022-23 work plan, which require a 50% increase to personnel and resources over six months. The scale up is intersecting with a very tight labour market, resulting in some additional cost pressures. While rates have increased on average the Program is negotiating to keep costs down and ensure that any increases in employee expenses are primarily benefiting the staff member, rather than employment agencies. The Program is seeking to find a balance between the rate required to engage and retain the required contingent workforce, while ensuring that expense increases do not impact the feasibility of achieving treatment targets within the budget. Improvements around vehicle use, travel and route logistics, and unproductive time are all under investigation to increase cost efficiencies.

Procurement is engaging with suppliers to ensure that they can meet the Program's expanding requirements, as well as going out to market to review available alternatives. Some contracts need extending in the short-term while finalising major longer term procurement projects. Alternative accommodation arrangements which may allow for increased strategic access to departmental sites are being considered. Outsourcing certain operational aspects of the Program is also under consideration, as well as the associated intricacies around monitoring output and return on investment.

The department is providing an increased level of support to the Program with the Executive Director HR and the Strategy and Legislation team working to support the Program. The Public Service Commission has been engaged regarding restrictions around staffing caps, and the DAF leadership board has also been briefed. Additionally, an external consultant has been engaged to conduct an operational review of the Program over June and July, to ensure that the current organisational structure and processes are the best fit for ongoing requirements. The recommendations from the review will be provided to the Steering Committee once they are available.

While current efforts are focused on getting critical roles filled, longer term planning informed by the independent operational review and the use of the 'McKinsey Model' will seek to advance the organisation's resilience and culture. The immediate priority of the Program is ensuring that the workforce is available to begin treatment at the start of next season, requiring for current staff to be retained and agencies engaged to further bolster numbers. Changes to departmental strategy around the conversion of temporary employees to permanent positions is expected to assist with the attraction and retention of staff.



In addition to scale up efforts, the Program is also assisting with the development of FAST. While some aspects of the national Program are transitioning to FAST other activities would be inefficient to duplicate. Providing this additional support is currently stretching the capacity of the Program, but there is no alternative in the short term given that an ongoing relationship and understanding between the two programs is essential. Conversely, the governance and funding for FAST needs to be clearly separated from the national Program. As such, reporting on the investment of resources and independent audits will be implemented to ensure transparency of the use of Program funds.

This year's treatment activities have been severely impacted by the wet weather and the current forecast indicates that it is no longer possible to completely catch up on lost treatment time. Treatment activities will continue until the temperature drops below the acceptable threshold, however further forecast rain and wet ground will limit the amount of treatment that can be achieved. The inability to treat has resulted in an underspend in Operations of approximately \$5 million, leading to a forecast surplus that is directly due to under-delivery on the Program's treatment targets. Areas that are expected to miss treatment rounds this season are included in the 2022-23 workplan and will be prioritised in the treatment schedule. The effects of the flooding on dispersal are considered to be minimal due to all but one watercourse flowing into, rather than out of, the known infestation area.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the General Manager's update on the Program, including the Program Scale-up and treatment progress.

Agenda Item 2 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
10.	Circulate results of the independent KPMG operational review of the Program to members.	QDAF	August 2022	In progress

Agenda Item 3 – Financial Update

Graeme Dudgeon provided an update on the financial position of the Program, focusing on the underspend in Operations and Remote Sensing Surveillance (RSS) as a result of the weather-related under delivery on targets. The Committee was advised that no RSS flights had yet commenced for the season, and any expenses in this budget area are due to the cost of the contract being spread equally over the full period.

Discussion was held around the ability of the Program to provide a forecast end of year position, with the probable upper and lower ranges reflected. The finance team will be queried regarding this addition, noting that the Program's largest expenses are directly impacted by weather.

An update on funding was held by members, with South Australia's funding contribution noted to have been delayed by state elections and in progress for payment. Jo Laduzko provided an update on scheduled Commonwealth milestone payments, advising that the required reports for the first 2021-22 payment were significantly delayed with payment expected to be remitted in June.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the financial update and all attachments, including:
 - the Program's March 2022 YTD Financial Performance Report



- o the Capital Program update
- o the Financial Dashboard 2021-22
- o the status of the Program payment milestone with the Commonwealth under Schedule D3
- o the current fiscal limit for the 10 Year Plan

Agenda item 3 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
11.	Investigate whether financial reporting can be modified to include probable upper and lower ranges of the end of year forecast.	BQ Finance	August 2022	In progress
12.	BQ Finance to contact ACT delegates regarding the 2021-22 outstanding invoice.	BQ Finance	May 2022	Completed

Agenda Item 4 – AGSOC / Bring Forward of Funding Update

Malcolm Letts advised that \$31.5 million of the requested \$33.3 million to be brought forward to the 2021-22 financial year had been confirmed, with all jurisdictions save South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory having approved the bring-forward of funds from future years at the time of meeting.

The Agriculture Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC) response to the requested contributions for the 2022-23 financial year has been positive, with \$84 million of the requested \$95 million confirmed. It was noted that South Australia and ACT have confirmed marginal commitments equal to the previously approved commitment for 2022-23. A response from Tasmania is currently in progress and Western Australia has provided an interim response, awaiting further information and assurances regarding FAST. In-principle support has been received from the Commonwealth, which will require further confirmation after re-engagement with the new federal government.

The Program is working on the basis that planning and operations will continue for the 2022-23 year, given that a commitment of some level has been received from all jurisdictions. The requested bring-forward for the 2022-23 year exhausts the remaining commitment under the Ten-Year Plan, less a small residual. The forecasted surplus for the 2021-22 financial year will be carried forward to be used in 2022-23, and this will not result in revisions of the amounts invoiced to the jurisdictions.

The FAST work plan is expected to be circulated to members out of session and may require an extraordinary meeting for further discussion.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update on the AGSOC response to the request for bring forward of 2022-23 funding, and the status of responses from outstanding jurisdictions
- **NOTED** the Commonwealth’s in-principle support of the bring forward, pending re-engagement with the new government, with final funding conditional on progress of Queensland-led and national program activities
- **NOTED** the request for the draft 2023-27 workplan to be provided to the Steering Committee in August for finalisation in October.



		Responsibility	Target	Status
13.	FAST overarching work plan to be circulated to Steering Committee members.	FAST	June 2022	Completed

Agenda Item 5 – Governance Changes

Andrew Turley advised that changes to the governance of the Program were identified last year, primarily around the requirement for new triggers, the Program’s reporting responsibilities to the Steering Committee, and the intersection between the national Program and FAST. These changes were originally included in the draft work plan but have since been removed and will need to be formalised in an updated copy of the Governance Plan. Work on these draft changes has been commenced by the Program’s Policy team but have been delayed by capability and capacity gaps resulting from employee departures.

A further Governance Plan for the period 2023-27 also needs to be developed in parallel to the Response Strategy 2023-23, as the existing document will not be sufficient to reflect the significant changes such as FAST integration.

The Chair advised that a Governance meeting had been scheduled for mid-June 2022, to include Graeme Dudgeon, Malcolm Letts, and Jo Laduzko as the Commonwealth representative. Discussion would be focused on the governance of the Program over the next twelve months and onwards. Existing triggers for the National Program will continue to apply for the next twelve months, but consideration is needed regarding how these will evolve past 2023 and what triggers are required in relation to the activities of the FAST program.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** progress on the Governance Plan for NRIFAEP
- **AGREED** that further progress on the Governance Plans should cease until after the Governance meeting scheduled for June 2022
- **NOTED** that further discussion of a FAST trigger is expected to be required at an extraordinary meeting following circulation and review of the FAST’s overarching plan.

Agenda item 5 - Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda Item 6 – 2022-23 Work Plan Update / NRIFAEP 2023-27 Response Plan

Andrew Turley advised that the 2022-23 work plan has in-principle approval, pending work with ACT around the update of compliance-related KPIs. The expected deadline for this document to be finalised is 30 June 2022.

The 2023-27 Response Plan is under further development following an initial draft provided to members during an extraordinary meeting in October 2021. The KPMG operational review engaged by the department and an additional review commissioned by the Program into the current IT systems are both expected to yield results between September – October 2022. As the outcomes of these reviews will feed into the final Response Plan, it was noted that the August draft of the 2023-27 Response Plan is expected to have gaps or caveats pending the finalisation of these reviews.



The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update provided on the progress of the 2022-23 Work Plan and the 2023-27 Response Plan

Agenda item 6 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda item 7– FAST Update

Malcolm Letts provided an update on the progress of the FAST program, on behalf of program director Jacqui King. Malcolm acknowledged the hard work of the director and the communications and engagement team over the past six weeks.

Engagement has begun with local governments to bring them on board with the aims of the program, and to initiate projects in self-management and bait utilisation. A series of governance committees have also been established, including one comprised of relevant local government. Extremely positive responses have been received from Somerset Regional Council and Morton Bay Regional Council, who are both willing to work actively to keep their council areas free of fire ants. There is the potential for FAST to engage with Morton Bay Regional Council to conduct delineation around the northern edge of the infestation.

Brisbane City Council has been engaged primarily through the Oxley Creek Commons project. Contact has also occurred between the department and the City Standards Committee, prompted by the Japanese Encephalitis outbreak, and FAST is working to leverage this relationship by seeking support to engage with the Committee more broadly.

Several meetings have been held by the FAST program, chaired by Director General Bob Gee, and an initial meeting with State government and Queensland treasury has also taken place. A significant amount of land within the suppression area is owned by the Commonwealth or State government, such as road verges, airports and state forests. FAST is working to communicate the responsibility and biosecurity obligation for these areas to the relevant government agencies, to which the response has been generally positive.

A meeting was held with the Archerfield Aerodrome in April 2022 and work is continuing on the provision of bait and resources. The self-treatment project with the cane growers at Rocky Point is also continuing and good progress is being seen in this area following the offer to provide bait to stakeholders.

There is currently low confidence that all of the stored bait will be distributed to stakeholders this year. Work is ongoing into whether waste facilities will be able to take and store the excess bait, which will allow ongoing self-treatment on these sites that are known to potentially harbour fire ants.

The Chair raised concerns over the draft KPI list for FAST, noting that they were activity based, rather than evaluating the performance of the program on the suppression of fire ants. Also raised was the importance of demonstrating Queensland’s contribution to the taskforce, both in planning and budgetary terms. Malcolm Letts advised that work would continue into the reporting of in-kind work, noting that this would be complex, and that the financial contribution by Queensland was primarily the through the funding of staff positions and the provision of bait. A suggestion was made for records be held of industry contributions, to allow for the tracking and reporting on the share of in-kind support provided by different stakeholders.



Following a query into the contractual agreements to be held with local government bodies the Committee was advised that Crown Law had been engaged to provide legal advice regarding attaining assurances that any bait supplied would be used appropriately. Initial responses indicate that this is an unusual situation for government to be in, but that acquittal or invoicing type arrangements might be a potential way forward. Further work will need to take place around possible auditing arrangements.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the Queensland Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce update.

Agenda item 7 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
14.	FAST KPIs updated to include performance-related metrics.	FAST	July 2022	Completed
15.	Member of Steering Committee to be invited as an observer to the FAST.	FAST	June 2022	Completed
16.	Formalise a reporting arrangement between FAST and the Steering Committee.	FAST	July 2022	Completed
17.	Develop system to track and report industry/community input, in-kind and cost.	FAST / NRIFAEP	July 2022	On-going

Agenda item 8 – Surveillance and Treatment Update

Brett Turville provided an update on the progress of treatment and surveillance against the 2021-22 work plan, listing some key statistics for the season, including:

- public reports of suspected fire ants between 1 July 2022 and 24 May 2022 were 17 055, with wet conditions resulting in up to 200 reports per day in recent weeks and a backlog of around 1 000 reports which has required the reallocation of resources to provide a field response
- progress in planned treatment areas stands at approximately 283 000 ha of the planned 348 280 ha.

A reasonable estimate for fire ant reports in the suppression area over a twelve-month period would be between 18 000 – 19 000, which has implications for FAST operations.

A visual presentation of the progress against the 2021-22 work plan was provided, showing the layered treatment operations over multiple rounds. Key points included:

- a delay to the season due to wet weather resulted in treatment starting from 12 September 2021
- higher risk areas outside the operational boundary and in clearance zones were prioritised in the treatment schedule with most having now received the full number of planned rounds
- impacts of wet weather were felt starting from the Christmas period, with continued delays contributing to a decision to halt further treatment in selected Western Overlap and Eastern Overlap worklots
- following extended rain and flooding between March and April, a further decision was made to discontinue outstanding Round Two ground and aerial buffering treatment and delay the start of treatment in the northern section of the Southern Suppression area
- further rain in May hampered the Program's abilities to catch up on lost time and has made it likely that some worklots will miss their third round of planned treatment



- the fourth round of treatment scheduled for May in selected worklots has not commenced and is expected to be incomplete by the end of the season.

Discussion of treatment gaps, which has been an area of focus over the recent years revealed that prior to the impacts of rain the Round One treatment was considered highly successful, with a treatment rate of 98 percent or above achieved in all planned areas. A team within the Program intended to reduce treatment gaps has been working over the last two years in combination with the Compliance and Communication and Engagement areas to engage farm and livestock owners, as well as clients who refuse treatment. This ‘gaps’ team has been working with local police departments in a more structured way, engaging officers on special duty to assist with forced power of entry for the purposes of treatment.

In addition to the dedicated gaps team the Program is also leveraging advancements made possible by the implementation of tablets and electronic job tasking, which has allowed for the agile issuing of jobs and the rapid identification of outstanding work. A dispatch team has been in operation to centrally assign, monitor and follow up on scheduled work for completion by the field teams. A further two staff have been engaged to enhance ongoing learning and development, working with teams to reinforce or deliver new information after the initial induction process.

Organic farms remain a challenge to planned treatment, made complex by the existence of several private bodies issuing domestic organic certification with differing standards and requirements. Recent consultation has occurred regarding domestic oversight of organic products with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, with the Program providing requested data and research papers. Discussion was held around the ability of the Program to reimburse farmers following treatment, with initial investigation indicating that this would be an extremely costly exercise. Alternatives such as surveillance with odour detection dogs are being considered.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update provided in relation to progress against the treatment plan
- **ENDORSED** the changes to the work plan outlined in the briefing paper.

Agenda item 8 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
18.	Map of planned treatment areas with incomplete treatment at the end of the 2021-22 season to be circulated to members.	Planning	June 2022	Completed

Agenda item 9 – Detections of Importance Update

Sharon Janssen led a discussion on the recent Detections of Importance, which includes all confirmed nests outside of the Operational Boundary (Significant Detections), within the Clearance Areas (Clearance Detections), and within 5km inside of the Operational Boundary (Boundary Detections). For each of these nests there is an escalated response process that includes a risk analysis to determine the correct course of action. Detections are usually found during the surveillance season but also occur during ground treatment or as a result of public reporting. Generally, Program operations in an area increase the occurrence of public reports as the community become more aware of the Program and fire ants through the associated communication and engagement activities.



Review of the planned treatment areas for 2020-21 and 2021-22, overlaid with the Detections of Importance found during these periods, confirmed that the Program was generally proficient at predicting and placing treatment areas in locations expected to have remnant infestation. A contingency allowed in the work plan for the detection of additional nests in previously unknown locations was used during the 2021-22 season to create further treatment areas as required.

The planned treatment areas for 2022-23 are expansive, as per the recommendations of the 2021 Strategic Review. The Program will return to areas that have previously received broadscale treatment where there is not a high confidence of clearance. A significant area to the south of the current operational boundary will be treated, with further delineation occurring during the surveillance season to ensure that the southern bounds of the infestation are contained within treatment worklots. A further 55 000 ha has been allowed for as a contingency where future detections occur outside of the planned treatment areas.

The Program has been investigating why detections were still occurring in treatment areas, especially those receiving multiple rounds. Currently, this work is suggesting that there are four key factors:

- getting the timing of treatments right
- addressing gaps quickly
- stopping human assisted movement of fire ants
- looking in the 'right areas' and out to the required distance.

Outbreaks are primarily related to the timing of treatments and their relationship to fire ant biology. It is understood that fire ant alates in monogyne colonies are produced between mid-Feb to June and nuptial flights occur between late-April through to July. Consequently, the most important treatment rounds to prevent spread through flight are the first and last, with the final round of each season historically the most likely to be affected by weather conditions.

This season the contingency of 33 wet days built into the treatment schedule for 2021-22 was insufficient, with aerial operations losing 60 percent of possible work days to rain or other weather conditions. The related loss of field workers due to the regular stand-downs resulting from wet weather also led to a reduced workforce.

Solutions to combat these occurrences in future seasons include:

- an increased focus on live monitoring of progress against the treatment schedule, particularly for ground treatment
- continued improvements to job assignment responsiveness to allow for the re-deployment of teams to areas that are dry enough for treatment
- implementing regular and ongoing onboarding of field workers will allow for a more stable workforce, avoiding the peaks and troughs that occur following staff departures and reactive hiring.

Human Assisted Movement continues to be a significant cause of new Detections of Importance, with 8 out of the 11 Significant Detections in 2021 suspected to have resulted from the movement of fire ant carriers. The movement of hay is of particular concern given that it is known to be a fire ant carrier and its transport is unregulated. A series of forums on the movement of hay have been held in the community and engagement with non-compliant clients by the Program has proved to be of assistance. Further support in the form of mass media campaigns is planned for next season.

Ensuring that surveillance is conducted in the correct areas allows for the efficient use of resources and has been historically planned using modelling. The operational use of Remote Sensing Surveillance (RSS) now allows for improved risk-based strategies to inform planning, accounting for previous detections and surveying the surrounding area much more broadly than would have been possible with ground surveillance.



Consideration of the size of the nest is required for remote detection, with RSS being most effective two to three years after eradication treatment is completed in an area.

Discussion regarding the reporting requirements of Detections of Importance, led to the Committee agreeing that detailed reports are only required for Significant Detections, which will be defined in the coming season as falling outside of the 2022-23 operational boundary. Clearance and Boundary detections will continue to be communicated through weekly, monthly and quarterly reports. It was also requested that the distance of Detections from the NSW border be more clearly communicated in reporting.

The Steering Committee was advised that sentinel sites previously placed around the outside of the Operational Boundary are no longer in use, as the implementation of RSS has allowed for much broader surveillance over these areas. Delineation up to 500 metres around Detections of Importance using ground surveillance will continue.

The Bioclay project being led by the University of Queensland has achieved a proof of concept with the funding provided, with additional research awaiting the outcome of grant applications. Further funding from the Program as an industry partner is expected if these grant applications are successful. The project investigating the waterproofing of bait has developed a product that could be used in wet conditions, however the coating used impacts the attractiveness of the bait to ants. Attractants are currently being tested to see whether this will increase bait uptake. A grant application for \$300 000 to \$400 000 has been submitted to the Australian Research Council with a response expected in June, however this is an extremely competitive process.

The consultation on wettable bait with supplier Sumitomo has been delayed due to travel restrictions associated with COVID-19. An alternative wettable bait is currently on the market in Taiwan and work has started on importing the product into Australia, pending Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) approval. Previous efforts to import this product were blocked by the supplier's unwillingness to provide the bait's chemical composition, however progress has been made on this front. Of potential concern is whether the APVMA will accept the results of efficacy testing, which was primarily conducted in the United States.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the Program's update on the Detections of Importance
- **AGREED** that detailed detection reports are only required for Significant Detections outside of the Operational Boundary, with numbers of other Detections of Importance to be reported in the weekly, monthly and quarterly reports.

Agenda item 9 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
19.	Update Significant Detection Report template to make the distance of detections from the NSW border more visible.	Planning	June 2022	Completed

Agenda item 10 – Remote Sensing Surveillance

Erin Wallace provided the committee an overview of the planned Remote Sensing Surveillance to be done for the season. A minimum of 52 000 ha is scheduled for the surveillance season, weather permitting, which is a significant increase on last season's RSS operations. A delay to the start of the surveillance season has occurred due to the wet weather, with the scheduled start of 1 May unable to be achieved. The Program is using risk-



based planning and hopes to redirect flights to areas with suitable conditions, given the sizable region in which flights will take place.

Planned flight areas are primarily located along the boundary of planned treatment areas and in the southern portion of the containment zone, and also include areas that were unable to be validated in the previous season due to rain. As per last season, remote surveillance will be validated on the ground by field teams who will be targeted to those detections identified by the AI model (version 1.5.1 - an algorithm used to predict points that are likely to be fire ant nests) as high risk.¹ This will allow the Program to survey a large region and confirm the presence of fire ants without having to conduct broadscale ground surveillance.

Additionally, RSS will be deployed as a risk mitigation tool in areas of complexity. An example of this is a crayfish farm which was unable to be treated due to the risk to aquaculture operations. RSS will be used to survey the area between the detection at the crayfish farm and genetically related nests located approximately a kilometre away in the suburb of Tarome. It is anticipated that this surveillance will detect any previously unknown nests in this area and indicate whether the Program has conducted enough treatment to mitigate further spread.

During the coming season RSS will also be deployed over the regions within FAST's operational area. This deployment is expected to assist with the training of the surveillance program while also offering intelligence on suppression efforts and providing an indication of how well the surveillance tool will work in higher density residential areas.

An ongoing concern with RSS are issues around the transition of ownership to the Program, which arose from a lack of explicitness in the original contract and the absence of an Intellectual Property (IP) register from the outset of the project. The Program is working to appoint an IP law expert to review progress to date, suggest an appropriate course of action, and support consultation with the vendor. The contract for the external expert has an end date of September, with the current contract with Outline Global finishing in December. It was noted that a further extension to the Outline Global contract for camera hire or services would not be possible without a resolution being reached, and that a handover of software, hardware and Standard Operations Procedures would be expected at the end of the current contract period.

In addition to this work with the current supplier, the Program's procurement team is working to develop a plan, with the understanding that there may be opportunities to split the contract between multiple suppliers and to return to market for certain activities. The Program's priority will be on finalising any changes in time for a resumption of RSS operations by the start of planned surveillance in May 2023.

Malcolm Letts advised that the IP-related concerns had been included on the Department's risk register, with the Chief Information Officer commissioned to review and report on the situation. The outcome of this review was that the perpetual right to the IP for the project is already included in the current agreement, and that the outstanding actions are to identify and exclude the pre-existing IP that was brought in by the supplier.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the overall strategic plan for the 2022 Remote Sensing Surveillance (RSS)

¹ Outline Global, *AI Report* (Apr 2022). High resolution imagery is captured aerially. This post-processed imagery is analysed by an algorithm developed specifically for detecting fire ant nests. The algorithm is a complex deep learning algorithm with roots in "Object Detection Deep Learning". This form of deep learning is a machine learning process whereby the artificial intelligence model is provided with data specifically for 'training' purposes. The model uses this data to learn and improve itself reducing reliance on human programmers. The model developed for the program is unique. It has been designed and optimised to identify tiny points (i.e., fire ant nests) within large images of the landscape and analyse imagery in up to 6 distinct spectral bands. This allows it to predict points that are likely to be fire ant nests. Field teams are sent to validate the points of highest "risk" or likelihood of being fire ants according to the model.



- **ENDORSED** the deployment of RSS over key areas, including areas which fall under Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce (FAST) jurisdiction and targeted properties inside current treatment areas that have not yet received treatment
- **NOTED** the update on IP and associated issues.

Agenda item 10 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda item 11 – Movement Controls Update

Tom Roberts gave a verbal update on progress of the work that is occurring to harmonise movement controls across different states and territories. Currently, issues such as inconsistencies around definitions of fire ant carriers and the contrasting use of fire ant biosecurity zones versus the Interstate Plant Quarantine (IPQ) Boundary have led to difficulties in aligning interstate processes. A paper has been drafted for submission to the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC) requesting their agreement that movements require harmonisation, with the aim of prompting action at the national level that has not been achievable through Program engagement with the Subcommittee on Domestic Quarantine and Market Access (SDQMA). Previously identified changes to the legislation, such as those proposed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) report, have been placed on hold in anticipation of the much larger adjustments likely to be proposed during consideration of this paper.

It was clarified that the NBC was not currently being asked to approve a finalised movement control standard. The paper instead requests a commitment to achieving a harmonised arrangement and the referral of the matter to the Plant Health Committee for the development of a report for future implementation.

Further work is occurring to investigate the utility of other tools, such as guidelines or accreditation systems. The Program has been working closely with national industry body Greenlife Australia identifying issues to harmonisation between the industry systems, such as BioSecure HACCP Certification, and the current fire ant movement regulations. The Program's Policy team has also reviewed the Biosecurity Zones, with significant changes proposed for the suburbs to the north of the current zones that are expected to come into effect on 1 July 2022. Communication and engagement projects are scheduled to communicate these changes to the effected stakeholders and will include the new suburbs in their activities going forward.

An item was raised around risk mitigation in areas which are currently outside of the fire ant biosecurity zones but are considered at risk of having fire ants. The application of movement controls to these areas is contentious given the additional cost imposed to businesses and the inability to prove the presence of fire ants in the area. The use of RSS in these areas will assist in informing whether the biosecurity zones need to be immediately expanded to cover these areas, after which the existing movement controls will apply.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the verbal update on the program of movement control harmonisation.

Agenda item 11 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda item 12 – Self-Management Update



Chris Hollingdrake provided the Committee with an update on recent Self-Management, focusing on recent projects.

The Gold Coast community treatment project which tested a shared self-treatment model in six high density residential suburbs has now completed. Initial work in the region in 2020-21 required online registration, which resulted in participation rates of approximately 15 percent. Further work in 2021-22 utilised the placement of stickers on mailboxes to give notice of resident consent, leading to participation rates increasing to 40 percent with almost every second house taking part in the first round of the year. A second round saw participation drop to approximately 28 percent, with the reasons for this still being investigated. The aim of the pilot was focused on how to best engage residents to self-treat, rather than achieving a level treatment that would actively suppress fire ants. The learnings from this pilot will be used to inform a similarly structured community treatment project in Ipswich, which has a higher density infestation and will cover almost five times as many households. Unlike the Gold Coast project, Ipswich residents will be asked to treat from their back fence to the edge of the road, with no treatment completed by the Program. A combination of online registrations and the mailbox sticker will be used, with the Program investigating outsourced options for delivering bait to participants.

A community responsive treatment project held in Calamvale ward provided residents with a follow-up treatment kit, to allow for two subsequent rounds of self-treatment, with the aim of reducing repeated visits by the Program. Approximately 200 treatment kits were provided to residents whose fire ants were confirmed by the visiting team, with positive feedback received from both the community and field staff. The Program plans to implement the procedure over the Logan City Council government area, the suburbs of which account for 68 percent of the responsive treatment completed by the Program within the suppression area. The Program will continue to complete the initial treatment in most cases; however, further trials will test the possibility of issuing bait directly to residents for self-treatment. The use of commercially available bait will also be tested to prompt a mental association with those products available in store for self-purchase.

The Committee was advised that a research program conducted prior to the start of the self-management projects indicated that only between three to five percent of the community actively self-treated fire ants, mostly due to knowledge gaps and the strong historical messaging to leave nests undisturbed and contact the Program for treatment.

The Oxley Creek Transformation Project is an area under development by the Brisbane Sustainability Agency (BSA), with the Brisbane City Council investing \$100 million to transform the region into a world-class recreation area. The presence of fire ants was highlighted during the project's risk assessment, following which the BSA reached out to the Program for assistance to create a fire ant management plan. Following visits by science and operational teams it was judged that of the 150 ha under development only 50 percent was suitable for broadscale treatment. Proactive community surveillance was suggested for the remaining area of suitable fire ant habitat, with spot treatment performed as required. Engagement has begun with the Archerfield Airport, which is located adjacent to the area with approximately 250 ha of prime fire ant habitat, on which leaseholders are reporting heavy infestation.

The Program's Large Landholder self-management project is engaging with major stakeholders in the suppression area, focusing on strategic areas for risk-management such as new developments and waste facilities. The project targets areas and stakeholders it expects to be able to engage and mobilise quickly, to create an environment within which the Program can effectively provide support in the form of bait provision agreements, treatment advice and equipment, training, bait storage and treatment reporting.



The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the Self-Management update provided by the Program.

Agenda item 12 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda item 13 – Communication and Engagement Update

Chris Hollingdrake updated the Steering Committee on progress of the Communication and Engagement team’s actions since the previous meeting. The major media campaign currently on the market across southeast Queensland focuses on the phrase “Don’t spread fire ants”, targeting industries associated with fire ant carriers and particularly engaging those moving soil and hay. Following conversations with AgForce it was suggested that the Program engage primary producers in more direct way, including producing a physical document for them to refer to. In response to this, booklets have now been delivered to 60 000 households in rural areas both inside and outside of the biosecurity zones.

Roadside signage has continued with both large format billboards and variable message signs (VMS) in use along highways heading north, west, and south. Signage has also been used at petrol browsers scattered throughout the biosecurity zone which aim to target the building and construction industry, alongside messaging in industry relevant publications.

Short radio segments are run regularly on stations Triple M and River 94.9, which broadcast across the full operational area. Engagement has also expanded outwards past the current operational boundaries into the Sunshine Coast and Northern NSW, with digital ads running across a range of news sites and social media. A further social media campaign is currently in place as a pre-engagement phase prior to the upcoming changes in the biosecurity zones. The number of households and industries that will be included in the new expanded zones is significant and represents a completely new audience for engagement.

A new campaign will be run over the next 12 months with the theme of an ‘ants eye view’, which will aim to increase support for field teams accessing back yards. This campaign is based on research suggesting that people are most concerned about the effect of fire ants on their immediate lifestyles, with campaign images featuring children and pets.

Plans for the next financial year include a large increase in advertising spending, with increases in broadscale awareness planned to complement the other work that is occurring in eradication and suppression areas. Multiple messages will be communicated to the public over the next 12 months, including encouraging reporting, embracing self-management, and preventing the spread of fire ants. These campaigns will be staggered, however, to prevent the audience being exposed to multiple simultaneous messages.

Work around content migration from Queensland government websites to a dedicated fire ant website is ongoing, with an expected completion date of the end of June. So far, the website has received excellent traffic with 215 000 page views recorded this financial year. Analysing data from the website shows significant increases in traffic following media campaigns, which lends confidence to the effectiveness of Program advertising. The fire ant website is now also offering self-paced online modules, with training aimed at residents and workplaces now live and pest management technician training scheduled for June 2022 deployment. In the first two thirds of May 2022 500 people completed online training, equivalent to approximately six months’ worth of training in the previous year.

The Steering Committee:



- NOTED the information provided in the Communication and Engagement update.

Agenda item 13 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda item 14 – Risk Management Sub-Committee Update

The Steering Committee were provided with a briefing update and the draft minutes for the March 2022 Risk Management Sub-Committee meeting.

No concerns were raised by the Steering Committee, with the Chair reiterating the value of an independent group to raise issues around risks that may not have been previously considered.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the update for the Risk Management Sub-Committee.

Agenda item 14 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda item 15 – Scientific Advisory Group Update

Ross Wylie, a member of the National Exotic Invasive Ant Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) provided a verbal update on the April 2022 meeting, complementing the briefing update circulated to Steering Committee members. It was noted that the meetings suffered from being held over Microsoft Teams and that the next meeting scheduled for October was proposed as a face-to-face meeting that would encourage more in-depth discussions than the 3-hour online meeting agendas allow.

The meeting covered three main topics:

- ‘How much suppression is enough?’, discussed in relation to the activities to occur within the FAST suppression area. The SAG:
 - Considered any level of suppression treatment that reduced fire ant density to be beneficial in reducing risk, but insufficient to fully halt spread
 - Suggested that a greater emphasis on targeting high risk carriers would be an efficient use of resources to restrict further infestation.
- The Program’s suggested research priorities, with the SAG:
 - Noting the proposed areas of focus, including the use of drone technology and improvements to RSS
 - Suggesting investigation into the use of eDNA technology to detect ants, following advances for its use on Yellow Crazy Ants.
- The ‘Treatment and Surveillance Principles’ document drafted by the Program, which the SAG will review and provide further feedback on out of session.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the update for the Scientific Advisory Group.

Agenda item 15 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status



Nil			
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Agenda item 16 – Other Business

The Steering Committee noted the ‘Schedule of Audits’ paper circulated out of session, with no amendments required.

NSW proposed the appointment of a Liaison Role to be funded out of the State’s normal contribution to the National Program. The aim of the role would be to liaise between the Program and NSW stakeholders to align processes and ensure that treatment activities could quickly become operational in NSW following a detection within the state. The Committee had several concerns about the proposal, including:

- the inconsistency between the current funding arrangement for an eradication program, and the suggestion to redirect funding to prepare for a significant expansion of the infestation
- the need to consider larger questions around whether genetically linked infestations in other states would be responded to, and funded by, the national Program, or whether other arrangements would be instigated
- the responsibility of each state to have a preparedness program for invasive species, including fire ants, that is funded in addition to their commitment to the Program.

The Steering Committee declined to endorse the out of session paper. Scott Charlton thanked members for taking the time for discussion and requested support for a similar, state-funded position to access Program materials and expertise where appropriate. Both the General Manager and the members were supportive of this request, noting that previous partnerships between the Program and individual states had been extremely beneficial.

The Committee discussed the online publication of committee meetings minutes, which is currently on hold given that the AGSOC funding decision is incomplete and that the 2021 Strategic Review remains unpublished. The Committee agreed that full minutes would continue to be held in confidence, with an alternative such as meeting summaries to be provided. It was noted that some information has been made available by the Program for the purposes of making procurement and scale up arrangements or could be reasonably deduced from the continuation of Program activities.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the out of session ‘Schedule of Audits’ paper
- **DID NOT APPROVE** the out of session “NSW Liaison Role” paper
- **AGREED** that committee minutes would not be published in full until further notice.

Agenda item 16 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
20.	An alternative to the outstanding committee meeting minutes to be generated and published to the web.	Chair / Secretariat	July 2022	In progress

The meeting closed at 3:22 pm.

The next quarterly meeting will be held in August 2022.