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

Online Teams Meeting

Wednesday 25 August 2021

9.00am – 1.30pm

DAY 1 – STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

MINUTES – MEETING 17

ATTENDANCE

Attendees	Wendy Craik, Chair John Robertson, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) (QLD) Jo Laduzko, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Commonwealth) Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries (NSW) Nigel Ainsworth, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (VIC) John van Schagen, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA) Anne Walters, Department of Primary Industry and Resources (NT) Marcelle O'Brien, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS) Mike Richards, External Financial Consultant
Program Presenters	Graeme Dudgeon, General Manager Mel Blankenberg, A/Director Strategy Brett Turville, Director Operations Andrew Turley, Strategic Review Secretariat Liz Williams, Manager, Science Heather Leeson, Manager, Policy and Compliance Sarah Mitchell, A/ Manager, Business Support and Governance Mark Winter, Manager, Business Systems and Intelligence Sharon Janssen, Manager, Planning and Quality Management Chris Hollingdrake, A/ Manager, Communication and Engagement
Observers	Malcolm Letts, Chief Biosecurity Officer/Deputy Director-General, Biosecurity Queensland (DAF) Hendri Eddy, Senior Business Support Officer (DAF)
Secretariat	Kerri Nobbs, Senior Policy Officer (NRIFAEP)
Apologies	Rae Burrows, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS)



MAIN DISCUSSION, AGREED OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP ACTIONS

The meeting opened at 9.00am.

Agenda Item 1 - Introduction

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees, including welcoming Mike Richards back to the Steering Committee as an external financial consultant and Marcelle O'Brien as the permanent meeting attendee for Tasmania, with Rae Burrows remaining as the Steering Committee member.

Meetings have been scheduled over the next week with Agriculture Senior Officials' Committee (AGSOC) members from the cost share jurisdictions to brief them on the progress and direction of the Strategic Review Report and offer them the opportunity to provide feedback.

The Chair provided an overview of the meeting agenda for Day 1 and Day 2 Review Workshop with review panel members, Helen Scott-Orr, Monica Gruber and Will Zacharin. The Steering Committee will provide a response to the review by the end of September 2021.

Minutes for the quarterly meeting held on 26 May, and the extraordinary meetings held on 16 July and 10 August, were taken as a correct record and approved with two minor amendments. All actions have been completed, in progress or on the agenda for discussion. The minutes were approved for publishing to the web. The Chair reiterated that it is important that actions are undertaken in a timely manner with action updates to be provided in the meeting papers where appropriate.

The Steering Committee:

- **APPROVED** the minutes of Meeting 16, the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 16 July 2021 and the summary of the review panel presentation meeting held on 10 August 2021
- **AGREED** the minutes for the meetings can be published to the web
- **AGREED** self-management to be a standing agenda item.

Agenda item 1 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
1.	Minor amendments to be made to the minutes and published to the web.	Secretariat	30 September 2021	In Progress
2.	Self-management to be a standing item on future agendas.	Secretariat	Ongoing	BAU

Agenda Item 2 - General Manager's Update and Omnibus

The General Manager provided the Steering Committee with an update on the Program, including how the uncertainty around funding of the Program is affecting Program staff and contractors, with tension growing about job security and some are looking for employment elsewhere.

The Agriculture Senior Officials' Committee agreed that the Program continue this financial year. The Program continuing through the financial year is dependent on the outcome of the request for cost share partners to bring forward funding or the current funding will see the allocated 2021-22 budget exhausted around



December 2021. The challenge is not being able to enter into contracts for the second half of the financial year when there are substantial lead times to secure supply, eg bait which is manufactured with corn grit that must be imported from the USA with a five month lead time.

The Program is currently delivering on the Work Plan and will be entering into treatment season in September 2021. In readiness, contractor workforce staff have been inducted into the Program. Aerial services are currently performing remote sensing and are prepared for treatment season, and the bait contract is being finalised through to the end of December 2021.

Planned surveillance has identified more detections in clearance areas. Further information on this will be provided under Agenda Item 6.

Self-management has progressed from the pilot phase into an integral part of the Program's work. Self-management on the Gold Coast will form an important part of suppression. There has been a better 'take-up' within the areas where 'community groups' are active and prepared to assist the Program. Extra support will be provided in the transition period.

The Program met with the Executive Director of the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) around how critical the Program is to the nation. They were very supportive and regular meetings are now occurring, and the Program is optimistic that there might be some movement on the permit that currently prevents the Program from treating crops.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the General Manager's update on the Program, including the information provided within the Omnibus.

Agenda Item 2 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda Item 3 – Financial Update

Sarah Mitchell provided an update on the financial position of the Program, including:

- the financial result as at 30 June 2021 was an overspend of \$821,000 which was underwritten by the Queensland Government to be repaid to DAF from the 2021-22 funding allocation in accordance with approval sought out of session by the Steering Committee in June 2021
- the dashboard and a full Program Financial Report will be circulated to the Steering Committee out of session following sign off on or around 31 August 2021, following the annual financial statement process
- the Program requested the approval of the Steering Committee for an increase to capital funding approval from \$25,000 to \$47,880 ex GST for the purchase of four 'utility terrain vehicle' bait trailers, previously approved by the Steering Committee out of session in April 2021
- full Steering Committee approval has been received for the 2020-21 2nd and 3rd Quarter Reports and will be forwarded to the Commonwealth for acceptance and milestone payment as per Reference Schedule D2



- the proposed 2021-22 Program state and territory payment schedule being the total financial expenditure forecast in advance, consistent with what the Agriculture Ministers approved in the Ten-Year Plan, not including requests for bring forward
- a breakdown of the Program’s budget by area aligned to a total of \$66.7M requirement for the 2021-22 Work Plan
- the impact of the funding shortfall for the Program when comparing the full budget requirement of \$66.7M in 2021-22 with the Program’s fiscal limit of \$33.4M.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the financial update and all attachments, including:
 - the 2021-22 Cost Sharing Contributions
 - 2021-22 full program budget \$66.7M
 - Fiscal limit to budget comparison
 - the Capital Program update
- **APPROVED** the Program’s request to increase capital funding approval from \$25,000 to \$47,880 ex GST for the purchase of four bait trailers
- **APPROVED** the proposed 2021-22 Program payment schedule with cost sharing partners, with the exception of the Commonwealth.

Agenda item 3 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda Item 4 – 2021-2022 Work Plan

Mel Blankenberg provided an update on the 2021-22 Work Plan following endorsement of the ‘\$66.7M option’ presented to the Steering Committee at its 16 July 2021 extraordinary meeting and a presentation covering:

- planned treatment areas
- 2021-22 strategy highlights including the ‘no more gaps’ approach, evaluating efficiency and effectiveness of surveillance and treatment activities, and using technology better with centralised job dispatch, real time monitoring and leveraging of the technology, including Forage, which enables a more efficient use of resources
- the surveillance plan, including planned surveillance progress, responsive and treatment monitoring, with more detail to be provided under Agenda Item 6
- other program activities for 2021-22:
 - mitigating human-assisted spread
 - leveraging multi-agency capacity
 - regulation enhancement
 - reviewing biosecurity zones
 - innovation



- o business information systems enhancement
- o business services.

The updated Clearance Strategy is to be forwarded to the Steering Committee for endorsement out of session by the end of September 2021. It was suggested that 'real time' interim figures from remote sensing could be included in the weekly report. Validation commenced later than planned due to COVID lockdown and resourcing. The Program will prioritise having information on the effectiveness of remote sensing, the improvements on last year's data and how the algorithm continues to learn to the Steering Committee as soon as possible.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update on the 2021-22 Work Plan
- **APPROVED** the 2021-22 Work Plan in principle, noting a formal request for bring-forward funding is currently underway.
- **SUGGESTED** that 'real time' interim figures from remote sensing could be included in the weekly report.

Agenda item 4 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
3.	Program to progress the Clearance Strategy to the Steering Committee for endorsement out of session.	Science	30 September 2021	In Progress
4.	Provide analysis on remote sensing surveillance to the Steering Committee.	Science	20 Sept 2021	In Progress
5.	'Real time' interim figures from remote sensing to be included in the weekly report.	Science	Ongoing	BAU

Agenda Item 5 – Bring Forward of Funding Status

The Steering Committee was provided with an update on the status of the bring forward of funding.

Malcolm Letts confirmed that Mr Bob Gee, DAF Director-General has written to the cost share partner Directors-General/Secretaries and the Queensland Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities has written to Agriculture Ministers from the cost share partners explaining the background behind the request for bring forward of funds. Wendy Craik, Helen Scott-Orr (Review Panel Chair), Bob Gee and Malcolm Letts have also held meetings or meetings are scheduled with cost share partner Directors-General or colleagues to provide an update on the review.

Helen Scott-Orr provided a detailed summary of the panel's findings and provided them the opportunity to ask questions. There have been clear and consistent messaging from jurisdictions around the remote sensing project, delivery of recommendations from the Bernie Wonder review, and that jurisdictions are generally supportive of the Program's achievements but need the confidence that eradication can be delivered.

It was acknowledged that this is a very complex situation and feedback from the meetings held with AGSOC members and the formal responses to the ministerial letters will determine what is put together for the cabinet



processes moving forward. Also noted, was the importance of giving jurisdictions confidence that the bring forward of funding that the Program will be successful, including Queensland’s approach in urban areas to ensure success.

Helen Scott-Orr and Wendy Craik have also briefed the Honourable David Littleproud, Federal Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management who was very supportive of the bring forward of funding but did raise that it has to be clear what the Program and Queensland will do, the milestones to be spelt out clearly and how getting more money will help to achieve what hasn’t been achieved to date. Minister Littleproud intends to write to the Agriculture Ministers seeking support for the bring forward of funding.

It is hoped that there will be clarity on the decisions on the bring forward of funding by October 2021, to enable states to prepare budget submissions.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update and discussion on the bring forward status.

Agenda item 5 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda Item 6 – Surveillance Findings Update

Sharon Janssen provided an update on the surveillance season which commenced in mid-June 2021 and presented the Steering Committee with the progress of the Program’s treatment and surveillance, including:

- the total of planned treatment as at 30 June 2021 was 323,103 ha, with 305,746 ha completed, being 94.63 per cent
- the 2021-22 surveillance season will continue through to September 2021 dependent on the weather conditions and ground temperatures
- clearance, sentinel and responsive surveillance around new detections will continue year-round and the Program will implement an “agile” management approach by regularly monitoring surveillance progress and adapting the timing of surveillance as necessary to account for changing priorities
- clearance surveillance is focusing on the high-risk areas of Area 2 to protect eradication areas from reinfestation and to gather data to help to confirm the areas are free from fire ants. Approximately 4,500 ha of ground surveillance by field teams will be undertaken in Area 2. Clearance surveillance will also be undertaken in Area 1 and the Western Boundary using remote sensing surveillance and ground teams to verify areas identified as high-risk
- remote sensing surveillance is operational and up to 40,000 hectares of imagery is expected this season to assist with the confirmation of ‘clearance’ in Area 1 and the Western Boundary area but also to capture data around significant detections outside the operational boundary. The Program commenced ground verification surveillance based on high-risk predictions from an artificial intelligence algorithm
- sentinel surveillance will commence in September 2021 for early detection of fire ant spread beyond the current operational boundary/biosecurity zones and will include approximately 1,300 ha of ground



surveillance. Sentinel sites are used to monitor the presence or absence of fire ants in areas which are highly suitable habitat for fire ants

- targeted surveillance is undertaken around new significant detections to delimit the infestation, and also revisiting some of the previous boundary or significant detections to ensure no residual infestation remains
- responsive surveillance was higher than expected, with field teams used to delineate the extent of new infestation focusing mostly on detections of importance
- the odour detection dog teams are deployed in previously treated infestations within Area 1, the Western Boundary and Area 2 to provide confidence of the absence of fire ants

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the update on the Program’s surveillance progress, including the Remote Sensing Surveillance Project.

Agenda item 6 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda item 7– Detections of Importance

Liz Williams provided an overview of the Program’s detections of importance, including:

- there were 11 significant detections during 2020-21 financial year and one this financial year, with individual risk assessments undertaken for each detection and an appropriate response plan devised for the level of risk
- seven of the detections were reproductive which poses a significant risk of spread of natural flight.
- most detections were likely due to human assisted movement, many which may have been legal as they were outside of the Biosecurity Zones and the infestation age suggests movement happened some time ago. The Biosecurity Zones have recently been reviewed and amended and will be reviewed at least every six months or more often if there are detections outside the biosecurity zones
- hay has also been a risk and has been a focus for compliance recently in the boundary areas
- there are now two biosecurity zones with most conditions on movement controls being the same, with a permit required for movement of soil between or outside of zones
- as a number of significant detections were found to have reproductive content within the nests, there is a high risk of natural spread from these detections which triggers a further surveillance and treatment regime, including delimiting with remote sensing where suitable
- sentinel sites are selected just inside or outside of the operational boundary with selection based on a criterion on what habitat is high risk for fire ant infestation
- 132 boundary detections were found last financial year. The boundary detections in the north were treated as per detections of importance protocol. There is concern in the southern area where it appears previous suppression effort was not as effective. Treatment options for a new approach in the southern area were provided to the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG). The option endorsed by the



SAG as the most suitable approach considering financial and time constraints, is to treat one round in the upper suppression area to reduce propagule pressure and two rounds in a lower containment area to minimise further spread south

- Area 2 was broken up into three areas each of which received a different eradication treatment. Learnings from this was that toxicant seems to expedite eradication quicker although data are still being gathered and results analysed
- 73 clearance detections were discovered in Area 1 and the Western Boundary last financial year. The Program conducted an individual risk assessment for each infestation (grouped detections) to determine the potential reason for residual infestation, and devised a response plan based on risk of spread
- Results suggest that it can take up to two years since broadscale eradication to detect remnant infestation with current surveillance methods and areas able to be surveyed. Many of the clearance detections have been by public reports which is likely due to the increased community and engagement campaign in the west
- a 'no more gaps strategy' has been developed. Coverage with treatment has substantially improved with less gaps in Area 2 due to the four treatments per year strategy
- the No More Gaps Working Group is helping to address treatment gaps, with key treatment gaps identified and reviewed prior to treatment season
 - progress has been made with APVMA in regard to cropping permits, with regular meetings being held
 - meetings have been held with poultry industry stakeholders to discuss industry practice. Options are being developed, including temporary fencing, surveillance and enforcing powers
 - the Program will engage more with the horse and livestock landholders particularly in the southern suppression area to assist the owners during treatment of their properties. There will be an additional four resources for on-ground support to manage the horses and put them into different paddocks or move them around as necessary
 - team leaders/coordinators are receiving coaching for effective execution of authorised powers and communication of legislative obligations when entry is refused
 - access issues are being documented and escalation processes are implemented.

It was suggested that the standard operational procedures should be published.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the information provided on the Program's Detections of Importance and noted the improvements the Program is making.

Agenda item 7 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
6.	The standard operational procedures are to be endorsed by the Steering Committee and published to the web.	Program	December 2021	In Progress



Agenda item 8– Cost Benefit Analysis Work

Mel Blankenberg advised that discussions have been held around the scope and method for the cost benefit analysis (CBA) and after consultation with the chair of the Strategic Review Panel, the Program will use a ‘wave’ model approach with adaptations for radial spread at 0km; 5km and 48km.

There will be more emphasis on urban and environmental shortcomings from previous CBAs, trying to get behind the scenes in terms of what benefits are and a transition strategy on what it would look like and the likely costs.

A procurement process is currently underway to have Central Queensland University (CQU) deliver the CBA and the Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis (CEBRA) do a peer review of methodology and final output.

Timing is constrained, with draft contracts due end of September 2021.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED:**
 - the risk of delay in meeting NBC dates
 - the caveats around the level of costing detail available to CQU and CEBRA in conducting the CBA work and relevant limitations in doing a CBA around transition to management
 - the Program intends to seek further information around cost for an Australian Priority Pest and Disease modelling framework (APPDIS) adaption for future consideration
- **APPROVED** the recommended approach for the CBA.

Agenda item 8 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil			

Agenda item 9 – Communication and Engagement Update

Chris Hollingdrake provided an update and a presentation on the Program’s communication and engagement, including:

- Program branding and website:
 - new endorsed national program logo, with the removal of “red imported” to make it a simpler branding logo
 - style guide for visual identity for the Program and a branding protocol for national branding, incorporating jurisdictional branding and governance reference to the Program
 - the Program website was recently rolled out on 30 June with a single landing page and the second version was launch in August 2021
 - all Program governance content has been moved from the DAF website to the Federal Government’s Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment website which includes media releases, meeting minutes and information relating to Program reviews



- Fire ant management campaign:
 - a creative agency was procured to present a range of different options to approach advertising across different campaigns. Mock-up artwork was presented to focus groups and it was agreed 'the ants eye view' was the best option.
- Engagement with rural communities
 - the Program is currently revising strategies to improve communication and engagement with rural areas and key industries, including hay farmers
 - engaging and building relationships with peak bodies such as AgForce, Queensland Farmers Federation and the Fodder Association
 - reaching out across Queensland Government Departments with community networks in place to assist with getting direct access
 - community events held at Tarome and Coulson with very good attendance and positive interaction
 - direct engagement via mailouts, SMS and courtesy calls
 - mass engagement with unaddressed mailouts, roadside signage and media engagement
- Community treatment projects:
 - Community Suppression project on the Gold Coast – a Hybrid model where the Program team will treat all road verges and front yards of residential properties, local councils will treat all land that they manage with bait provided by the Program and residents will be requested to treat backyards. Queensland Health have advised that the residents need to give their consent and then bait can be left at the front door. Residents will be requested to display a sticker visible from the road, indicating they would like to take part in the project and bait will be left.
 - Community Responsive Treatment project in Calamvale ward, which is a highly infested area. Responsive treatment teams will undertake the treatment in the area where there are fire ants. Once treatment is completed, they will leave two bait containers with the resident. The residents will then do two follow up treatments, two and six weeks following the first responsive treatment. This will help to reduce repeat visits. The local councillor is very supportive and is proactively assisting the Program.
- Scaling up – need for Policy and Engagement Frameworks, currently preparing for post review release work with:
 - looking to liaise with councils, public utilities and government agencies at a higher level to undertake a whole SEQ regional approach
 - detailed mapping of public sector capacity leveraging
 - advocacy for a whole of SEQ taskforce approach – expenditure involved, workstreams, governance, models, capacity and community mobilisation.

Messaging will identify that fire ants are a significant health risk, talking about the stings and how unpleasant and catastrophic it can be. The Gold Coast suppression project will also have a focus on the stings.

The Steering Committee:



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

Agenda item 9 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil			

Agenda item 10 – Sub-Committee Updates

Updates were provided on the:

- Risk Management Sub-Committee
- Scientific Advisory Group
- Efficiency and Effectiveness Review Sub-Committee – a progress statement on the status of recommendations following the 2019 Bernie Wonder Review will be published to the website.

The Steering Committee:

- **NOTED** the updates from the:
 - Risk Management Sub-Committee
 - Scientific Advisory Group
 - Efficiency and Effectiveness Review Sub-Committee.
- **AGREED** the progress E&E report be published to the website.

Agenda item 10 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
7.	Report to be published to website.	Program	30 September 2021	In Progress

Agenda item 11 – Other Business

The Steering Committee was advised that the changes to the Pest Management Act and the Health Regulations should come into effect on 27 September 2021, which should allow businesses to treat fire ants.

The Chair commented on the improvements and progress the Program is making from learnings, which is very positive and encouraging for the future.

Following the Strategic Review Panel discussions being held on Thursday 26 August 2021, extraordinary Steering Committee meetings will be scheduled in September 2021, for an update on the progress and drafting of the Steering Committee response to the review.

Agenda item 11 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
8.	Schedule Steering Committee meetings in September 2021.	Secretariat	1 September 2021	Completed – two meetings scheduled.

The meeting closed at 1.25 pm.



The next quarterly meeting will be held in November 2021.



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

Online Teams Meeting

Thursday 26 August 2021

10.00am – 12.00pm

DAY 2 – MEETING WITH STRATEGIC REVIEW PANEL

ATTENDANCE

Attendees	Wendy Craik, Chair John Robertson, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) (QLD) Jo Laduzko, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Commonwealth) Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries (NSW) Nigel Ainsworth, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (VIC) John van Schagen, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA) Anne Walters, Department of Primary Industry and Resources (NT) Marcelle O'Brien, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS) Mike Richards, External Financial Consultant
Strategic Review Panel Members	Helen Scott-Orr Monica Gruber Will Zacharin
Observers	Malcolm Letts, Chief Biosecurity Officer/Deputy Director-General, Biosecurity Queensland (DAF) Graeme Dudgeon, General Manager Andrew Turley, Review Secretariat Brett Turville, Director Operations Mal Blankenberg, A/Director Strategy
Secretariat	Kerri Nobbs, Senior Policy Officer (NRIFAEP)
Apologies	Rae Burrows, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (TAS)

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees, including the Strategic Review Panel members, Dr Helen Scott-Orr (Review Panel Chair) and panel members, Dr Monica Gruber and Will Zacharin to the meeting.

The Review panel presented their options for the Program and discussed them with the Steering Committee.

The Chair thanked the review panel for their excellent review and report.