

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

Wednesday 8 March 2023

9.00am – 4:30pm (AEDT)

MINUTES – MEETING 23

Attendance

Attendees:

- Wendy Craik, Chair
- Malcolm Letts, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), Queensland (Virtual)
- Rachel Chay, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), Queensland
- Bertie Hennecke, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Commonwealth Government (Virtual)
- Rae Burrows, Biosecurity Tasmania, Department of Natural Resources and Environment (TAS)
- Marcelle O'Brien, Biosecurity Tasmania, Department of Natural Resources and Environment (Virtual)
- Scott Charlton, Department of Primary Industries (DPI), (NSW)
- Nigel Ainsworth, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, (VIC) (Virtual)
- John van Schagen, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA) (Virtual)
- Mike Richards, External Financial Consultant
- Nathan Rhodes, Department of Primary Industries and Regions (SA) (Virtual)
- Claire Morton, Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (NT)

Apologies:

- Bruce Hancocks, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (ACT)

Program presenters:

- Lance Perry, Program Executive, NRIFAEP
- Graeme Dudgeon, Head of Operations, NRIFAEP
- Tom Roberts, a/Director Strategy and Science, NRIFAEP
- Becca Hobbs, Director Business Services, NRIFAEP
- Lynda Bauer, a/Director, FAST, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QLD)

Observers:

- Enrico Perotti, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD
- Mick Jeffrey, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD
- Carmel Kerwick, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD
- Tanya Grigg, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD

Secretariat:

- Heather Jablonski

MAIN DISCUSSION, AGREED OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP ACTIONS

The meeting opened at 10.04am (AEST) following a Steering Committee closed discussion.

Agenda Item 1 – Introduction

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees and observers.

Rachel Chay was officially introduced to the Steering Committee as the incoming Deputy Director-General and Chief Biosecurity Officer for Queensland, replacing Malcolm Letts when he commences retirement in April 2023. The Chair thanked Malcolm for his contribution to the Steering Committee.

Bertie Hennecke was introduced as the new member for the Commonwealth, replacing Jo Laduzko.

The minutes from the Steering Committee Meeting 22 on 23 November 2022 were endorsed by all members.

The minutes from the Extraordinary Meeting 7 on 16 December 2022 were also endorsed by all members.

The Chair called on members to provide nominations in the innovation space for membership on the Steering Committee.

Members discussed the outstanding items on the action register and the Agenda for Meeting 23 was confirmed.

Rae Burrows advised that NBC Members would need to be excused at 2:30pm AEST to attend an NBC Meeting.

The Steering Committee:

- APPROVED the minutes of Meeting 22 from November 2022, and the minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 16 December 2022.

Agenda item 1 - Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil.			

Table 1: Agenda item 1 - Action items

Agenda Item 2 – Remote Sensing Surveillance Update

Lance Perry provided an update on the Remote Sensing Surveillance (RSS) Review. The review has progressed and is currently with the Science team for feedback.

Lance requested the Steering Committee's support for an independent review of the RSS Review due to the differing views in the feedback being received from within the Science team of the Program. Members supported the request for the independent review advising that this should be completed as soon as possible.

Members advised that the RSS Review should be included in the documents provided to the Agriculture Senior Officers Committee (AgSOC) / Agriculture Ministers (AgMIN) for their upcoming meetings.

While the independent review is undertaken the Program will continue to research other options and technology and utilise human surveillance.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the update on the RSS Review.
- ENDORSED the Program’s request for an independent review of the RSS Review.

Agenda Item 2 - Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Arrange an independent review of the Remote Sensing Surveillance Review.	Science	April 2023	Open

Table 2: Agenda item 2 - Action items

Agenda Item 3 – Legislative Responsibility (General Biosecurity Obligation)

Members discussed the General Biosecurity Obligations (GBOs), the development of specific guidelines for residents and businesses working and/or living in biosecurity zones and enforcement of compliance with those guidelines.

The Steering Committee requested that the wording on the Program’s website in relation to the discharging of GBOs be circulated to members for their review Out-of-Session (OoS) once completed.

The Program provided an update on the Plant Health Committee (PHC) meeting held on Tuesday 7 March 2023 and the discussions held around nursery compliance and ICA-39s. Graeme Dudgeon advised that the guidelines would need to align with Biosecurity Queensland’s market access controls to ensure it was clear that there isn’t a hierarchy of conditions, but that all obligations need to be met. Impacts of aligning the intrastate and interstate conditions would also need to be considered.

Members discussed the need to commission a third party to undertake an independent risk assessment, in consultation with the PHC, on the harmonised conditions for interstate movement of fire ants. Queensland will discuss the commissioning of the report with the PHC. The Steering Committee requested that this assessment be completed within three months and suggested the CEBRA may be able to assist in this space.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED that the Program is developing a guideline under the Biosecurity Act 2014 to provide advice on how individuals and businesses can discharge their GBO in relation to preventing fire ant infestation on property they control.
- NOTED that the Program continues to explore potential enhancements to the biosecurity regulatory framework.
- AGREED the Program would commission an independent consultant to complete a risk assessment on the interstate movement of fire ants and would notify the PHC.

Agenda item 3 - Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
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GBO legislative responsibility wording to be circulated to members OoS once completed.	Policy	May-23	Open
Commission a third party to independently complete a risk assessment on the interstate movement of fire ants.	Policy	Jun-23	Open

Table 3: Agenda item 3 - Action items

Agenda Item 4 – Governance Arrangement for the National Fire Ant Eradication Program 2023-27

The Chair sought comments from members in relation to the Governance Arrangements for the National Fire Ant Eradication Program 2023-27. Nigel Ainsworth advised that Victoria have a preference for items from the Steering Committee to go through the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC), which has not been included in the current reporting diagram. Members agreed to provide the NBC a copy of items as they are provided to AgSOC. The diagram will be updated to reflect this.

The Chair had some minor edits which were provided to the Program to update.

Malcolm Letts advised that the NBC would be meeting on Friday 17 March 2023 at the NRIFAEP office in Berrinba to further discuss the Governance Arrangements document and what changes may be implemented.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED that the Governance Plan endorsed at the December 2023 meeting has been amended in response to members requests for minor edits.
- ENDORSED the updated Governance Plan, after the Chair's edits and reporting diagram have been updated, to be forwarded as part of the package of accompanying documents to the Tactical Response Plan 2023-27.

Agenda Item 4 – Action Items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Update Governance Plan with Chair edits and inclusion of NBC in the reporting diagram.	Policy	Mar-23	Open

Table 4: Agenda item 4 - Action items

Agenda Item 5 – Proof of Freedom Strategy

Tom Roberts advised members that David Pearce from the Centre for International Economics (CIE) had been engaged to independently review the Proof of Freedom (PoF) Strategy, as requested at the November 2022 meeting. CIE's report was received back on Friday 3 March 2023.

The advice from the CIE was that the key to the Strategy would be the ability to adapt as new information was received. In summary the review found that the proposed model within the Strategy was sound, and the CIE were confident it would achieve what it set out to do.

The Chair noted the comment in the Executive Summary that the Strategy is very complicated and it would be good to have a simplified version so people can understand it. The Program have held discussions with the Science team to have this simplified. Members also commented on the confidence rate of clearance in clearance zones and the number of years surveillance would continue. Members noted the CIE report stated that “the Program should maintain 17% surveillance for five years following eradication treatment conferring a 95% chance of eradication at an individual clearance zone level and greater than 50% chance across all clearance zones.” Members noted that 95% was not total eradication.

Members were requested to provide any feedback on the PoF Strategy by the end of next week (17 March 2023).

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the PoF Strategy had been independently reviewed by the CIE and the report presented to the NRIFAEP on 3 March 2023.
- NOTED the review report of the PoF Strategy completed by the CIE.
- DISCUSSED the recommendations of the review.
- ENDORSED the PoF Strategy noting the comments made by the Steering Committee.

Agenda item 5 - Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Simplify the PoF Strategy to make is easier to understand.	Science	Mar-23	Open
Comments to be provided on the PoF Strategy and Review Report.	Members	Mar-23	In Progress

Table 5: Agenda item 5 - Action items

Agenda Item 6 – NFAEP Tactical Operational Response Plan 2023-27

Tom Roberts advised members that the feedback received from the Steering Committee has been incorporated into the NFAEP Tactical Operational Response Plan 2023-27 (Response Plan). Advice was sought from members regarding additional documents that should be provided to AgSOC along with the Response Plan for their consideration.

The Chair sought comments on the proposed Response Plan. Clarification was sought regarding the difference between a tactical response plan and a normal response plan. Malcolm commented on the previous discussions held around the CPI index and inflation of costs, noting that these figures were a conservative estimate. Given the uncertainty of funding, it was suggested that the Response Plan be updated to include the bi-annual revision of estimated figures within the Response Plan to provide feedback to jurisdictions.

Members requested that the original four triggers be reinserted into the Response Plan in addition to the triggers already listed. The inclusion of expected timeframes and a caveat of the Steering Committee’s confidence in the plan in terms of effectiveness without the remote sensing surveillance, drone information and bait costs were also requested.

The Steering Committee questioned the community suppression surveillance. Lynda Bauer provided advice on the FAST surveillance plan and the project underway to create a mobile surveillance tool using artificial intelligence to identify nests. This data would then be captured to collect samples in the hope that the general public can have access to self-treat.

Nigel Ainsworth made a general comment regarding the reliance on the ability to increase recruitment for ground surveillance, allowing time for staff to be trained and the assumption that those challenges can be overcome.

Members agreed to provide AgSOC with the Response Plan, the Eradication Strategy, the Governance Plan, the Proof of Freedom Strategy, the review of the Remote Sensing Surveillance and the current risk matrix. The Program was requested to provide a covering position statement to accompany the documents, detailing a confidence statement advising of the surveillance effectiveness, reliance and dependency on market resource risks and bait costs and efficiencies. The letter will need to include advice that a transition to management plan will also be prepared within the next three months.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the draft Response Plan has been updated to incorporate feedback from Steering Committee members following the December extraordinary meeting.
- ENDORSED the Program’s draft Response, noting the qualifying comments of the Steering Committee, to be forwarded to the AgSOC related to their endorsement to AgMIN.
- AGREED that the Eradication Strategy, Governance Plan, Proof of Freedom Strategy, review of the Remote Sensing Surveillance and current risk matrix would accompany the Response Plan when forwarded to AgSOC.

Agenda item 6 - Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Response Plan to be amended to include bi-annual review of CPI figures	Policy	Mar-23	Open
Covering statement to be prepared detailing Steering Committee current position to accompany documents being provided to AgSOC.	Policy	Mar-23	Open

Table 6: Agenda item 6 - Action items

Agenda item 7 – FAST Plan

Lynda Bauer advised the Steering Committee that Eddie Jebreen has left FAST and introduced Mick Jeffrey as the new Director for FAST. Malcolm provided a history of Mick’s background.

Lynda advised that FAST is currently mobilising all levels of government as well as businesses and communities to assist in the suppression of fire ants. FAST will be focussing on heavily infested areas within South East Queensland and will be working closely with the Program. Project plans for each of the FAST projects will be presented to the Program at the Senior Leadership Board and Extended Leadership Team meetings to seek the Program’s assistance.

FAST will focus on four key areas:

- Community Suppression Programs
- Collaborative self-management agreements with large landholders including all levels of government and private entities
- High risk industries that pose a risk for human-assisted movement of fire ants
- Development of novel treatment and surveillance strategies for fire ants in urban areas.

Members were advised that to ensure FAST’s operational and strategic objectives can be achieved, FAST will prioritise projects according to risk including suburbs with known high fire ant densities. FAST will use the community suppression projects to empower the community to share responsibility for fire ant management by treating their own properties. Large scale community projects will occur annually and will involve two rounds of treatment.

Large landholder suppression projects will be developed individually to cater for business operations and will come in the form of a collaborative agreement or a Memorandum-of-Understanding. Businesses will be able to choose a treatment option that best suits their business and preventing injury to staff and clients while demonstrating they have met their GBO.

Lynda provided advice on how FAST and the Program will provide technical support for treatment and logistics of bait, logistics for sample kits and detailed guidelines for public treatment and collection of samples. The Program will remain responsible for responding to reports of fire ants and the treatment of high-risk areas.

The Chair called for comments on the FAST Plan to be provided within one week (15 March 2023). It was agreed that the FAST Plan should also be included in the suite of documents being provided to AgSOC.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the draft Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce Plan 2022-23 to 2025-26.
- ENDORSED the draft FAST Plan, noting the Steering Committee’s comments to be sent via email by 15 March 2023.
- AGREED to include the FAST Plan in the suite of documents being provided to AgSOC.

Agenda item 7 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Comments on the draft FAST Plan to be provided	Members	15-Mar-23	Open

Table 7: Agenda item 7 - Action items

[Agenda item 8 – AgSOC / AgMIN Update](#)

Rachel Chay advised that the funding for the Program is listed on the AgSOC agenda for 30 March 2023 and that if an AMM meeting is not scheduled closely after this date, the paper would be circulated OoS to keep the process moving.

Members were advised of the NBC meeting to be held in Brisbane on Friday 17 March 2023 where further discussions regarding the Program will be held.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the proposed process for obtaining Agriculture Minister’s approval for the Response Plan 2024-27 and associated budget.

Agenda item 8 – Action items		Responsibility	Target	Status
	Nil.			

Table 8: Agenda item 8 - Action items

Agenda item 9 – Financial Update

Becca Hobbs provided members with a financial update including the current underspend of the Program and where these figures were attributed and the carryover of funds that may be required.

Marcelle O’Brien queried the bringing forward of jurisdictional funds and sought advice as to whether these funds were in addition to the scheduled amount allocated in the ten-year plan. Becca agreed to provide advice OoS.

Becca provided advice on the data provided in the financial attachments, detailing the breakdowns. Members were asked if they had questions in relation to the financial update.

Members questioned how future years funding would be invoiced and were advised that no assumptions have been made to date. This is hoped to be resolved once the Response Plan has been considered by the Agricultural Ministers.

The Steering Committee requested that all outstanding invoices be provided to the jurisdictions.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the January 2023 Financial Performance Report.
- NOTED the remaining funding under the 10 Year Eradication Plan.
- NOTED the reconciliation of prior year cost sharing apportionment payments.

Agenda item 9 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Provide clarity regarding financial data required from the jurisdictions regarding bring-forward and the ten-year plan.	Business Services	Open	Apr-23
Provide jurisdictions with copies of outstanding invoices to date.	Business Services	Open	Apr-23

Table 9: Agenda item 9 - Action items

Agenda item 10 – Program Executive Update

Lance Perry provided an update on the Program advising members that the People and Culture Working Group has been established and the Workplace Health and Safety Committee meetings have recommenced. Culturally the Program is tracking well. Employees have been reminded of the Employee Assistance Program available to all staff.

Dr Tracey Churchill recently commenced as the new Science Manager.

There is an increased risk as 30 June 2023 approaches with the uncertainty and stability of contractor positions and the FTE cap. The Program will be working through positions that hold a delegation and will need to be filled with an FTE. The management team has advanced in leadership and proactiveness to create a cultural change by providing honesty and transparency across the Program.

The Program has been challenged by prioritisation and resourcing. There were delays in the commencement of aerial operations due to a delay in the procurement process. Corporate Procurement have provided feedback to ensure that there is appropriate time to review large scale processes.

Lance advised that the Program has a clear expectation that workloads are managed, and staff are not working excessive hours. A Portfolio Performance Manager (PPM) and Risk Analyst Manager are currently being recruited to provide assistance in the directorate space.

As part of the Program’s innovation process, the drone project has reached the end of the discovery phase with drone demonstrations taking place. Members questioned the ratio of staff to bait application for drone use and the land size drones could cover at one time. It is expected that the drone project will be submitted to SLB and ELT for consideration to progress to the Pilot phase.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the update provided by the Program Executive.

Agenda item 10 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Drone demonstration videos to be provided to Members.	Secretariat	Mar-23	Completed

Table 10: Agenda item 10 - Action items

Agenda item 11 – Head of Operations

Graeme Dudgeon provided an update on Operations advising that the current work plan has been adjusted due to budget requirements and the remaining time left to complete activities.

The aerial teams are currently catching up and the ground teams are working well. There is currently difficulty with the turnover of staff. Moving forward if the Program scales up staffing capacity will need to be managed differently. The Chair questioned if work could be contracted to pest management technicians.

Recent significant detections have impacted the capacity of planned activities and cropping is still a concern for the Operations team with restrictions on bait being applied to certain crops.

Members questioned the restraints the Program faced and were advised that these can include baits not being able to be applied in wet weather and protocols for rounds of treatments within set timeframes and the impact weather can have. More trials will need to be undertaken to determine if baits can be applied in the winter seasons to ensure there is no reduction in the efficacy of the treatment.

Tracing has occurred in relation to the Stieglitz outbreak. Depending on the outcome of those tracing activities, surveillance will be undertaken according to a risk assessment. Rae Burrows raised questions about detections located in the eradication and containment areas. Graeme advised that

some of these detections were related to gaps in the treatment. The National Invasive Exotic Ant Scientific Advisory Group have been asked to consider the definition of gap and provide further advice on whether a gap in treatment relates to a period of time.

The Chair sought advice on whether the Steering Committee had been provided updates on detections of importance and was advised that these had all been provided.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the treatment and surveillance progress against the 2022-23 Work Plan.
- NOTED the proposed adjustments to the 2022-23 Work Plan.
- NOTED the detections of importance.

Agenda item 11 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil.			

Table 11: Agenda item 11 - Action items

Agenda item 12 – FAST Update

Lynda Bauer provided members an update on FAST detailing the reporting structure within the Taskforce.

During the pilot year of FAST, the taskforce has:

- Worked with large landholder private entities (CANEGROWERS), of the 40 CANEGROWERS, 39 members have signed up to self-treat. This will cover approximately 6 000 ha. The Program has completed responsive treatment and once harvesting is complete aerial treatment will commence. The CANEGROWERS will do all further treatment themselves and bait will be provided for growers to complete self-responsive treatment for the next four years.
- Commenced community suppression projects within the Ipswich local government area. Lynda provided members advice on the success and learnings of the project.
- Signed a collaborative agreement with the City of Gold Coast Council to target high-risk sites within the biosecurity zone. The City of Gold Coast have almost completed treatment of the 800 ha agreed to in the agreement
- Signed a Memorandum-of-Understanding with the Queensland Department of Education to treat 47 schools across the Ipswich, Logan and Coomera areas with an overarching target to treat 200 schools. The Department of Education will use pest management technicians with bait supplied by FAST for the first year.

A new community suppression project will commence in Logan in April 2023. This will cover all properties in the local government area and includes semi-rural properties. FAST have held meetings with the Logan City Council to determine the best communication methods to reach as many community members as possible.

FAST is in the initial stages of planning with Queensland Rail, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and a combined local government suppression project incorporating Ipswich, Logan and the Gold Coast. FAST have received a large number of enquiries wanting to sign up and are prioritising projects to ensure realistic timeframes can be provided.

The Chair questioned whether FAST have commence discussions with the federal government regarding the treatment of their land and were advised that FAST is hoping to begin talks within the next year.

The Steering Committee:

- NOTED the progress on key issues and projects for FAST.
- NOTED the future priorities for FAST.

Agenda item 12 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status
Nil.			

Table 12: Agenda item 12 - Action items

Agenda item 13 – Transition to Management Plan

The Chair advised the meeting that the transition to management plan had been discussed in the closed session of the meeting and a decision had been made to request a contingency plan within the next three months. There will be two components, one being the plan and the other a policy paper detailing the options of what the plan might look like and the funding arrangements. Details in the plan should include:

- funding models
- involvement of private enterprise
- how to progress if the new response plan is endorsed
- the new Australian Biosecurity arrangements
- recruitment of new staff

Nigel Ainsworth advised that a transition to management is nationally cost shared and ongoing management, whether it be containment or suppression, has not historically been cost shared. This is something that will need to be considered in the transition to management plan.

Members discussed the transition to the proposed Response Plan and the adjustments that may need to be made within the first six months of implementation.

The Steering Committee:

- DISCUSSED available options to progress once a decision has been made by the agriculture ministers regarding the Tactical Operational Response Plan 2023-2027.
- NOTED further information and work required for the Program.

Agenda item 13 – Action items	Responsibility	Target	Status	
13-13	Contingency Plan for the transition to management.	Policy	Open	May-23
13-14	Policy paper with transition to management options for the Steering Committee’s consideration.	Policy	Open	May-23

Table 13: Agenda item 13 - Action items

The Chair recapped the meeting and thanked members for participating. The Chair thanked Malcolm Letts for his dedication and support over the last six years.

Malcolm thanked the Chair for her commitment over the past four years.

The meeting closed at 2:30pm.

The next quarterly meeting will be held on 23-24 May 2023.