The economic losses and social battering suffered by some of Australia’s major trading partners because of fire ants should serve as a warning to our governments about what we can expect if we fail to fully eradicate this highly invasive species, currently infesting parts of Queensland.

Based on overseas experience we have estimated the impacts fire ants could have in Australia if not eradicated. All estimated costs are in Australian dollars.

**General Impacts**

**Access:** Fire ants will occupy and dominate areas such as parklands, limiting access and curtailing our outdoor way of life.

**Insurance:** Fire ants are a clear risk to human health and welfare, and will represent a duty of care insurance risk for many industries, including childcare and aged care.

**Compliance:** The movement of goods, machinery and materials will be hampered and costs increased by regulations designed to control fire ant infestations.

**Local Government**

Parks, recreation areas, public offices and buildings may be affected. In the US treatment of areas managed by local government costs $218 a hectare annually.

**Tourism**

Tourism operators will be forced to shoulder similar costs to local governments if fire ants infest any land they own or are required to maintain. Fire ants swarm over parks and public spaces, and can nest along foreshores and sandy dunes, limiting beach access. In some urban areas of Texas 26.8% of householders have reduced their outdoor activities because of fire ants.

**Infrastructure**

Fire ants damage infrastructure by digging near and undermining roads and structures. Damage to roads alone could be $1921 a kilometre. If 1% of Australian roads were affected costs could reach almost $7 million a year.

Fire ants congregate around electrical switching and colonise utility housings, causing corrosion and malfunctions. Costs to electrical and telecommunications companies in Australia could be as much as $508 million a year. In the US fire ants cost airports alone an estimated $142 million every year.

**Nursery industry, landscaping, parks and gardens**

Transported in soil, turf and landscaping materials, fire ants prompted stricter regulation of nursery stock in the US. Treatment costs for the Australian nursery sector are estimated at between $4 million and $16 million annually, with overall nursery production costs in Queensland alone (including lost market costs) estimated at $18 million. Without regular chemical treatment, infested parks, gardens and homes will become uninhabitable.
Pet industry
Small animals and pets are the most common victims of fire ant attacks in the US. Young, old and caged animals are especially vulnerable. Bites cause skin inflammation, infection and sometimes blindness and death. Animals are commonly bitten by ants in pet feed bowls.

Health
Eighty-five people have been killed in the US after suffering anaphylactic shock induced by fire ant attacks. The ant’s alkaloid venom causes painful stings, pustules, and sometimes secondary infections. In fire ant infested areas of the US 30-60% of people are stung every year. In Australia fire ants could cause 140,000 medical consultations and 3000 anaphylactic reactions a year. Total medical costs borne by Australian households could be as much as $114 million a year.

Building and construction
Fire ants like open areas commonly associated with human development - roads, construction sites and earthworks. Fire ant regulations in Queensland prohibit the movement of infested soil, requiring the mitigation of risk at the expense of the businesses concerned. Operations may be delayed during treatment. Fire ants also represent an appeal risk for new developments and will eventually become an industry-wide challenge like that posed by termites.

Agriculture
One study suggests farmers can expect anywhere from 15% to as much as 95% damage to grain crops if fire ants are found on their land. In the US more than 50 commercial food crops are affected by fire ants, including citrus, tree nuts, stone fruit, grains, tree crops and vineyards – workers can be locked out of infested areas. Animals are stung around the face causing blindness and suffocation, especially in newborns. Ants dominate dams and tanks in dry times preventing access. Cost of equipment, materials, injury and death averages $11.24 per head for cattle (potentially up to $109). Cost to the cattle industry in Australia is projected at around $308 million a year.

Defence
Fifteen per cent of military personnel in the US reported fire ants as the most problematic insect. Soldiers are forced to leave weapons, change or disclose position and abandon posts during manoeuvres. Fire ants have also been reported as a hazard to military camps in Taiwan.

Environment
As swarming omnivores, fire ants will damage or kill both native animals and native plants. Population declines of 45% for birds, 38% for mammals, 69% for reptiles and 95% for amphibians are predicted, with flow-on ecosystem-wide effects likely.

Sources and information