

SEVEN ESSENTIALS

Governance recommendations for
the national red imported fire ant
eradication program

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About the Invasive Species Council

The Invasive Species Council was formed in 2002 to advocate for stronger laws, policies and programs to keep Australian biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, exotic pathogens and other invaders. We are a not-for-profit charitable organisation with over 2000 supporters. Our work is funded almost entirely by donations from supporters and philanthropic organisations.

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Introduction

Eradicating red imported fire ants will be not only a major technical and scientific challenge but a governance one as well. The effectiveness of governance could make the difference between success and failure.

Excellent governance will be essential for:

- ensuring that decisions optimise the prospects of eradication and are cost effective
- reassuring funders and the public that money is being spent wisely
- engendering public and political support for the program, including through probably inevitable setbacks

Our goal here is not to comprehensively design the structure and processes for governance but to identify elements of effective governance – principles and broad approaches – and recommend some ways these could be implemented. We recommend a process for developing effective governance arrangements. Here are seven elements of effective governance that we consider essential.

Elements of effective governance for eradicating red imported fire ants

1. Design an **effective governance** approach, including by consulting stakeholders and seeking the advice of experts.
2. Ensure that the structures and processes provide **robust oversight and accountability** to funders, industry and the community.
3. Make sure that **decision-making is transparent** so that stakeholders understand the rationale for decisions and can have confidence in the program.
4. Develop a **comprehensive eradication plan** that includes techniques, costings, assumptions, roles and responsibilities, milestones.
5. Create an **independent body** to ensure the program is managed effectively.
6. **Involve experts** from relevant fields for program design, advice and review.
7. Make sure the **community and industry is meaningfully engaged** in the program.



1. Designing effective governance

Goal: Design an optimal governance approach.

Governance of the RIFA eradication program will not be straightforward – there are many stakeholders, including multiple funders, and there are likely to be many technical, political, social and economic challenges. Despite eradication being technically feasible, the program could fail and hundreds of millions of dollars be wasted unless the structures and processes to manage it are optimal. There would be benefits from targeted consultation with environmental and industry groups on governance arrangements because of their stake in the program, for the different perspectives they can bring to the issue, and to engender their confidence. One of the tasks of the team should be to incorporate the governance-related recommendations of the RIFA independent review

Recommendation:

- Establish a small group representing government, industry and community stakeholders and including governance experts to advise on the design an optimal governance approach.

2. Program oversight

Goal: Establish robust national oversight structures and accountability measures for all national tramp ant programs.

The program requires strong national oversight and leadership. There have been public concerns that the existing arrangements based around the national management group and tramp ant consultative committee, with government-only membership, have not provided sufficiently rigorous or consistent oversight. A lack of transparency (see section 3) makes it hard for the community to assess the quality of governance by these groups or feel confidence in the process.

It is important to establish nimble structures (avoiding over-bureaucratisation) to enable timely decisions and provide independent, well informed guidance. We strongly recommend either creating a new oversight committee or revamping the consultative committee in particular to give it greater independence. Two vital reforms are that such a body have an independent chair and include members representing environmental NGOs and farming groups. An independent chair who is a respected community figure will inspire more trust in the program. The participation of non-government members in consultative committees has been vital to the success of eradication programs run under the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed and Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement. A diverse range of expertise (eg. biology, biosecurity, social science, communication, governance) will be needed for the oversight committee, which can be achieved by appointing government and non-government members with expertise in a relevant field, and appointing experts as members of or observers to the committee.

The current requirement for consensus decision-making, which can lead to slow, lowest common denominator decisions, should be removed.¹ Also essential is to require regular reporting against meaningful performance indicators and the recommendations of the RIFA independent review, and

to report regularly on progress to federal parliament and state and territory governments. Greater transparency will safeguard the program from suspicion and mistrust (see the next section).

Eradicating red imported fire ants from southeast Queensland will not be sufficient to protect Australia from this and other harmful invasive ants. Regular new incursions of ants, including red imported fire ants, show there needs to be much more focus on improving biosecurity, including surveillance and responses to detections. The tramp ant threat abatement plan should be fully implemented. We strongly recommend that the oversight committee for the fire ant eradication program have a broader scope that includes responsibility for other ant eradication programs (as suggested in the independent 2016 review by Magee et al.), contingency planning and the threat abatement plan. The committee will need to be well resourced.

Recommendations:

- Establish a national oversight committee for all tramp ant eradication and biosecurity programs.
- Appoint an independent chair, and include in the membership at least one ENGO representative and one industry representative.
- Aim for a diverse range of expertise on the committee – eg. by appointing stakeholder representatives with expertise in relevant fields.
- Remove the requirement for consensus decision-making, and report (publicly as much as possible) committee members' areas of agreement and disagreement and recommendations.
- Define reporting requirements for the program and develop meaningful performance indicators. Ensure the program reports against these indicators and the recommendations of the RIFA independent review and that these are reported annually to all states/territories and federal parliament.
- Commission regular (eg. every two years) independent program audits.

3. Transparency

Goal: Maximise transparency to motivate decision-making in the public interest and engender public confidence.

Transparency is an essential part of accountability, and vital for sustaining support for the program. The public are likely to maintain confidence in the program only if they understand the rationale for decisions and are kept well informed. Otherwise, there is a high risk that one or more governments will withdraw funding if setbacks are encountered. A lack of transparency will encourage suspicion in the community about cover-ups and stuff-ups, potentially leading to public and media campaigns against the program.

The benefits of transparency mean that the default position should be to make all information public unless there is an overriding need for confidentiality. This should include, for example, the general locations of fire ant detections and treatments.

Recommendations:

- Develop an information policy that gives high priority to transparency and defines the limited situations in which information is to be kept confidential.
- Unless there is an over-riding need for confidentiality, publish online all documents, including agendas, minutes, reviews, reports and audits and fire ant detection and treatment locations (generalised).

4. A clear detailed plan

Goal: Develop a detailed plan for achieving the goal of eradication within 10 years.

Fundamental to effective governance and engendering confidence in the program is agreement about how the goal of eradication can be achieved. We need a detailed plan that identifies strategies, techniques, costings, assumptions, roles and responsibilities and milestones. Relevant parts of this plan should be subject to peer review by relevant experts. This plan or aspects of it should be regularly reviewed and improved to reflect new circumstances or knowledge. It is important that the relevant recommendations of the RIFA independent review are incorporated into the plan.

Recommendations:

- Develop a plan specifying techniques, costings, assumptions, roles and responsibilities, milestones, performance indicators etc. Develop subsidiary plans where more detail is needed or for associated activities such as compliance and community and industry engagement.
- Incorporate the relevant recommendations of the RIFA independent review into the plan.
- Subject the plan to peer review and publish it.
- Review and adapt the plan every two years or as circumstances change.

5. Independent program management

Goal: The program is managed effectively to meet its goals.

The program itself needs a structure and management that engenders responsive, purposeful, evidence-based decision-making and strong staff commitment and competence and.

We strongly recommend that the program is delivered by an independent or semi-independent body, for this can bring greater efficiency and focus than embedding it within a large government department. The levels of approval required within a government department tend to slow decision-making, stymie public communication and lead to interference. A department-wide staff freeze or

other state government edict could hamper program implementation despite the availability of funds and long-term program approval.

Highly competent people to manage the program should be appointed through an open recruitment process. They should have clear performance goals and their performance should be reviewed annually.

Recommendations:

- Create an independent or semi-independent body to run the eradication program.
- Identify management roles and responsibilities, and run a recruitment process to select highly qualified and competent people for these roles. Include members of the oversight committee in the recruitment process.
- Identify performance goals for management positions and review positions annually.

6. Involving experts

Goal: The program benefits from the advice and involvement of the best experts.

Eradicating red imported fire ants is going to be a challenge requiring the involvement of a wide variety of expertise. The program should foster an openness to expert critique and new ideas. There should be a willingness to try new approaches and risk some failures along the way. The academic community can add much value to the program and the program can yield insights into biosecurity more generally if strong research partnerships are established.

Recommendations:

- Establish expert advisory committees on important aspects of the program, including eradication methods and community and industry engagement.
- Invite expert review of strategies and plans.
- Conduct forums that facilitate expert input and the development of new ideas.
- Foster a willingness to try out new ideas.
- Develop partnerships with universities to foster research.

7. Engaging the community and industry

Goal: Engender strong community and industry support for and participation in the program.

The Australian community is funding the program and stands to lose a great deal should it fail. Effective community and industry engagement should be a high priority for the program, including for the benefits it can bring for involving the public in detecting new outbreaks, reporting illegal behaviours and minimising the risks of human spread of fire ants.

This program can be used to develop and trial new methods of public engagement through a wide range of media.

Recommendations:

- Recognise community and industry engagement as a central element of the program and develop an engagement plan that aims to reduce the risk of spread of fire ants, facilitate detection of new outbreaks, and report non-compliant behaviour.
- Develop a program that uses tried and tested methods and also innovative and experimental ways of public engagement.
- Assess the effectiveness of engagement methods and report on them, so that the program contributes to more effective engagement in other biosecurity programs.

ⁱ A review of Australia's preparedness for responding to foot and mouth disease (FMD) by Matthews (2011) found that consensus decision-making has 'tended to obscure authority, responsibility and accountability for progress in national FMD planning and preparations, and increased the potential for delays, confusion and compromise'





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