



21 JAN, 2024

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Sun Herald, Sydney

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Amber Schultz

Businesses are in lockdown and an emergency biosecurity order is in place following the discovery of a fire ant nest in NSW's Northern Rivers region about 100 kilometres south of the Queensland border.

The nest was destroyed yesterday and a biosecurity control order put in place with immediate effect, restricting movement within the surrounding 5 km area of the site.

It is the furthest south the ants have ever been discovered and eradication experts are investigating where the ants were transported from and how long they had been at the site, a NSW department of primary industries spokesperson said.

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BUSINESS LOCKDOWNS

Fire ants on the march further south in NSW

Sarah McPhee, Amber Schultz

Businesses are in lockdown and an emergency biosecurity order is in place following the discovery of a fire ant nest in NSW's Northern Rivers region about 100 kilometres south of the Queensland border.

The red fire ant nest was detected by the NSW Department of Primary Industries at Wardell, south of Ballina, on Friday. A gardener was bitten and suffered blistering and pain after disturbing the nest while working. It was destroyed yesterday with the infestation chemically eradicated.

It's the furthest south the ants have ever been discovered.

The biosecurity control order was put in place with immediate effect yesterday, restricting movement within 5 kilometres of the site.

The order prevents local businesses from moving landscaping, gardening and building materials or machinery until it is inspected by officials. The ants are no longer considered a risk to the community living in the immediate area.

Agriculture Minister Tara Moriarty said Primary Industries team would continue to work alongside sniffer dogs to determine the extent of any infestation, as well as undertake genetic testing of the fire ants.

The discovery comes two months after fire ant nests were detected for the first time in the state, at South Murwillumbah, 13 kilometres south of the Queensland border

NSW Farmers President Xavier Martin called on the government to immediately ramp up control and eradication efforts.

"Red imported fire ants are a threat to agricultural production and to the landscape of NSW - they can damage agricultural equipment, sting livestock, ruin the natural environment, and pose a serious risk to the health and well-being of all people in NSW," he said.

"This latest outbreak is a stark reminder of the failure to control and eradicate these insidious pests."

Advocacy Manager for the Invasive Species Council Reece Pianta said she had long feared the outbreak earlier this year would spread.

"This is a very alarming development. The government must spare no expense in responding to this outbreak and the whole community should treat this very, very seriously," she said.

"Fire ants are one of the world's worst super pests and, if they are allowed to spread across the continent, their economic impact will be greater than cane toads, rabbits, feral cats and foxes combined. They will devastate Australia's environment and agriculture, cost our economy billions annually, and we could see over 140,000 extra medical visits every year as they sting Australians at the park or in the backyard."

Ballina Greens MP Tamara Smith said she was concerned the ants were linked to construction materials and workers who had travelled from Queensland as part of the flood rebuild efforts.

"It's going to keep heading south and what it means for our farmers, for our community and our safety is horrendous," she said.

Kylie Jacky, a representative from the Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council, said the Cabbage Tree Indigenous community, who were relocated to Wardell following floods in 2022, were likely to be affected. The community has been living in temporary demountable pods since the disaster.

Fire ants are an invasive species, known to become aggressive when disturbed and sting repeatedly. Their sting can kill people, pets and livestock and destroy native ecosystems.

They are dark reddish-brown and range in size from two to six millimetres long.



Fire ant bites can be fatal.