



Selecting a Strategy and Contracting a Commercial Pest Control Service for Community-Wide Management Programs

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The red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) is a serious pest throughout the eastern two-thirds of Texas. Worker ants from fire ant colonies threaten both humans and animals because of their aggressive behavior and sting. Foraging ants and migrating colonies cause problems by invading gardens, homes, electrical equipment and other structures. The red imported fire ant is a nuisance that interferes with our daily lives.

For many years, attempts to eliminate fire ants from our state have resulted in only limited, temporary success. Many insecticides are effective, but because of fire ants' great reproductive capability, they re-invade treatment areas and continue to be a major pest. While eradication of this species is very desirable, it is not currently realistic. Our best alternative is to develop and implement a plan to suppress fire ant populations in neighborhoods or communities to reduce their impact.

This fact sheet is designed to help you understand fire ant management options and to assist your community group in selecting a commercial pest control service to help manage the fire ant problem. Study the many different fire ant control methods available to determine which approach is best for your situation. Then, if necessary, choose a pest control service that will provide the best results at a reasonable price.

Consider a Coordinated Effort

The first question you might have is, "Should I consider a neighborhood treatment program to tackle the fire ant problem?" The answer to this question varies, depending on your circumstances. If you live in an urban area with neighbors all around, it is important

to work with neighbors to manage fire ants. If you eliminate fire ants from your property and your neighbor does not, any control you achieve will be temporary. The reason for this is that fire ant colonies can migrate, reproduce, and re-invade small, treated areas quickly.

In Texas, most imported fire ant colonies contain more than one queen, each of which produces up to 800 eggs per day, and several hundred queens may exist in a large colony. Coupled with the fact that fire ant colonies can have several mating flights a year, this means that new colonies can continually develop on your property and grow quickly.

In addition, all or some of the ants from one colony can migrate hundreds of feet to a new location and build a new mound. If your neighbors are not managing fire ants, their property will serve as a continued source for repopulating adjacent property. Coordinated treatments within a neighborhood will better manage fire ants. Homeowner's associations, or similar groups, can effectively coordinate neighborhood fire ant management.

If your neighborhood does not have such an organization, neighbors can still work together to control fire ants. Group management of fire ants can result in more effective and less costly control than trying to battle fire ants individually. If you and your neighbors manage fire ants together, major sources for re-infestation are removed, and future treatments may be less extensive or intensive. This can save money and manage fire ants more efficiently. Also, common, unoccupied areas and public access areas that serve as reservoirs of fire ants for the entire neighborhood can be treated.

Programs are more likely to be successful if there is complete cooperation in the

neighborhood and if a commercial pest control service has been contracted. If you live in a neighborhood where cooperation is not possible, you can, nonetheless, manage the fire ants on your property. Your management plan may be a continuous battle, but treatments can be made more efficient. If you live in a rural area where individual properties are much larger, it may not be cost effective to treat your entire property intensively. A more realistic goal is to manage fire ants in areas you consider most critical to keep relatively fire ant-free and to do so cost effectively.

Contracting a Commercial Pest Control Service

Your organization first needs to decide whether a professional pest control service is needed or not. Many fire ant control products are available directly to consumers, and a knowledgeable homeowner or group of cooperating homeowners can successfully implement a fire ant management plan. The advantages of a do-it-yourself management program are that you may reduce costs and can closely monitor populations and decide when treatments are needed. However, advantages of contracting a pest control service include:

- ◆ A good pest control service will be staffed with professionals who understand fire ants and the most efficient tactics to control them in different types of situations.
- ◆ Pest control professionals have access to additional products that may be more effective in some situations.
- ◆ A pest control service can coordinate selected treatments with your neighbors. This makes management much more efficient and effective than uncoordinated, individual applications.
- ◆ Having a pest control service in charge of treatments insures complete neighborhood coverage. This eliminates the possibility of individuals neglecting or forgetting to treat their property.

- ◆ Contracting a pest control service is a convenient way to assure that a management plan is being followed in a timely manner.

If you or your homeowner's group decides to use a pest control service, it is important to select a company that can best do the job. Deal with a reputable company you know will do a good job. If you are unfamiliar with pest control services in your area, check the telephone directory, consult your Better Business Bureau for service performance records, consult your county agricultural Extension agent, or contact the Texas Pest Control Association or the Structural Pest Control Board.

The key to successful fire ant management is to work together with homeowners nearby. Develop a plan and select the products most suitable for your situation, either through a homeowner's association or an informal organization of neighbors. For example, a coordinated program may require two bait treatments each year. Between these bait treatments, individual mound treatments will be needed to control colonies not eliminated by the baits. This approach is known as the "two-step method."

Ask several pest control services to submit bids for applying treatments. Give them a set of uniform specifications so that bids can be compared and evaluated. Things to consider when developing a bid sheet are:

- ◆ Cost per given area for treatments
- ◆ Product(s) to be used
- ◆ Frequency of service visits
- ◆ Assessment procedure (ant population monitoring activities)
- ◆ Cost of follow-up treatments
- ◆ Cost to treat common areas such as parks and roadsides
- ◆ Alternatives for neighbors uneasy about the use of pesticides
- ◆ Reporting or information system between service provider and the customer
- ◆ Contact personnel (one person for company and one person for the customer group)
- ◆ Guarantee of re-treatments, if needed

It is important for the customer group to provide the commercial pest control service companies a list of current pesticide use patterns in the area where fire ants are to be managed.

To plan for successful fire ant management, consider the following:

- ◆ **Determine which areas need treatment before designing a management plan.** Some areas may have few fire ants but may harbor numerous native ants, which are beneficial to the environment and best left untreated. In these areas, these native ants may help control the fire ants.
- ◆ **Work with your neighbors to manage fire ants.** Cooperation is the most efficient and cost-effective way to manage fire ants. However, if one or more neighbors do not want to be involved, respect their wishes and devise the best management plan for your situation.
- ◆ **Set realistic goals.** Achieving fire ant suppression initially may take several months, and properties at the borders of your management area will require more attention and time. Fire ants probably will not be totally eradicated, even from your neighborhood, no matter how good your management plan.
- ◆ **Pesticide laws and regulations must be followed.** These rules are to protect you and your environment. If your organization applies its own treatments, all individuals are responsible for treating their own yard. One person in the group cannot be hired to treat everyone's lawn, unless he or she has a license to perform these services from the Structural Pest Control Board (in urban areas) or Texas Department of Agriculture (for agricultural areas). This is another reason a professional service is helpful. These professionals ensure that all areas are treated correctly and thoroughly.
- ◆ **Before choosing a pest control service, consider your options carefully.** Choose a

reputable company with a reasonable bid and make sure it is knowledgeable in fire ant management and fully licensed by the Texas Structural Pest Control Board or the Texas Department of Agriculture. The Better Business Bureau can provide information about whether complaints have been filed against a company. However, remember that even if a company has a complaint on file, not all complaints are legitimate, and each should be evaluated individually.

- ◆ **Understand treatment methods and remain informed about your management program.** Research under way in Texas and elsewhere may produce data that can further improve methods available today by making them even more cost effective and environmentally sound. These new methods can be incorporated into your ongoing community-wide fire ant management program.

Contact a certified pest control operator in your area by visiting:

<http://fireant.tamu.edu/CertifiedOperators.htm>

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For more information regarding fire ant management, see Extension publications [B-6043](#), *Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas*; [B-6076](#), *Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Agriculture*; [B-6099](#), *Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control*; or [L-5070](#) *The Texas Two-Step Method Do-It-Yourself Fire Ant Control for Homes and Neighborhoods*. Also visit our web site at <http://fireant.tamu.edu>.

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