



Commercial Pest Control Operator Involvement in Community-Wide Management Programs

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In the past, several attempts have been made to eradicate the red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren (Hymenoptera, Formicidae). We now realize that eradication of fire ants from Texas and other infested southeastern states is not currently possible. Instead, our best option is to manage intolerable populations of this ant on a more localized basis. In September 1997, the Texas Legislature provided funding to enact the Texas Fire Ant Research and Management Plan, with the goal of eliminating the red imported fire ant as an economic and medical threat in the state.

A part of this plan is designed to provide information to help individuals, neighborhoods, and communities to manage their fire ant problems. This fact sheet provides information on ways commercial pest control operators can work with community groups to develop and implement successful fire ant management programs. A companion fact sheet (Fire Ant Plan Fact Sheet #001) is available for homeowner groups selecting to choose a commercial pest control service to help conduct their fire ant management efforts. This information will help you make your pest control company a part of the management program in your community.

Misconceptions About the Texas Fire Ant Plan

There are several misconceptions about the Texas Fire Ant Research and Management Plan. Some of these may be dispelled with the following statements:

- ◆ **The Texas plan does not supply chemicals for fire ant control.** This plan makes information and expertise available to help communities, groups, and individuals organize their efforts to manage the fire ant, but the cost and implementation of control is the responsibility of those groups.
- ◆ **The Texas plan will not eradicate the imported fire ant.** Eradication of the imported fire ant is a desirable goal. Unfortunately, it is not currently feasible. The best option that we have now is to efficiently manage imported fire ant populations.
- ◆ **The plan is not in charge of regulating fire ant control.** This plan does not develop laws and regulations governing control methods. The implementation of the plan is expected to operate within guidelines that have been set by federal and state agencies.
- ◆ **Before starting a community-wide fire ant management program, officials of the Texas plan do not need to be consulted.** Anyone can treat fire ants by any method within the guidelines of federal and state laws. The plan is a resource to help you plan and implement fire ant management.
- ◆ **A wide variety of methods and materials are successful in controlling imported fire ants.** Many currently available products can effectively suppress fire ants in treated areas. However, the imported fire ant is very successful in re-establishing in areas where they were temporarily eliminated. This makes management an ongoing effort to control newly arriving and developing fire ant populations with periodic treatments.

Working With the Community

Fire ant management can be more efficient when treatments are coordinated within a neighborhood or community. This coordination results in all infested parts of the neighborhood or community being treated, including common and unused areas, and helps eliminate untreated areas that serve as reservoirs for re-infestation of treated ones.

Benefits to Homeowners

Homeowners should be aware of the benefits of coordinated efforts to manage the red imported fire ant. Managing the ants on a community scale should result in less-intensive control measures, once the fire ant populations are reduced. Putting a commercial pest control operator service in charge of their management needs will assure that treatments will be performed efficiently at the correct times. This is not always the case when neighbors try to take care of their own treatment needs.

Coordinated efforts allow for treatment of infested, unoccupied, or community property that may otherwise remain untreated and would serve as a reservoir for re-infestations. There also may be cost advantages to a large-scale treatment. This type of management plan can be cost effective because one large-scale treatment can take place instead of many individual treatments. These considerations make it attractive for a community of homeowners to form coalitions to accomplish their goal of fire ant management. A commercial pest control service is the likely choice to coordinate and perform these services.

Benefits to Commercial Pest Control Companies

The advantage to commercial pest control companies is the prospect of acquiring large accounts and being able to more easily manage fire ants. The company that successfully secures the contract to manage fire ants in a neighborhood or community will be visible to a larger number of customers who may also be interested in other services provided by that company. For your company to become a successful part of a community-wide fire ant management plan, potential customers will need to be contacted and convinced that it is in their best interest to hire a professional to manage their treatment plan.

How to Help Organize a Community-Wide Fire Ant Management Program

To become a part of this opportunity, your company first must formulate an action plan that

can be presented to potential customers. The action plan should detail your ant monitoring efforts, treatment strategies, and costs to assure that fire ants in the treatment area will be sufficiently managed.

The action plan should include specific treatment strategies. An example of this strategy might be to provide spring and fall applications of a bait-formulated insecticide with follow-up mound treatments for “nuisance” colonies not eliminated by the bait treatments. Another option might be to provide bait applications and allow homeowners to eliminate unwanted mounds that are found between these treatments (thus, at a lower cost to the homeowners). These are just two examples of simple management plans. The actual plan should be developed to best fit the area you are proposing to manage. It should also include treating common areas and costs involved.

Groups that are contracting a pest control service will likely be taking competitive bids from companies they have selected. These groups may already have developed their own fire ant management plan on which to bid. Conversely, your management plan will be evaluated. Including credentials of your company, such as your Structural Pest Control Operator’s license number, will be helpful.

Considerations for Bidding for Community-Wide Fire Ant Management Programs

This fact sheet will not attempt to tell you how to bid on a pest control job. This is a regular part of the pest control business, and each company has its own costs and needed profit margins. However, there are some considerations for dealing with large-scale treatment areas, such as neighborhoods or communities. First, treatment of all infested common areas should be included for a successful management program. Second, the larger number of clients may allow for a slightly lower profit margin to help make a bid more competitive. Finally, the treatment of larger areas may increase the interval between follow-up treatments. Therefore, once initial control is achieved, there will be fewer incidences of colonies moving in from untreated areas. The outer margins of the treatment area, adjacent to untreated areas, will be the exception.

Coordinate With Other Pest Control Companies Working in the Community

Coordinating treatments with other types of commercial and non-commercial pest control must be considered for a successful program. Undoubtedly, many homeowners will have pest control needs for other pests, and all programs need to be coordinated so that they will work together and not interfere with each other. An example is a yard that is being treated for chinch bugs or fleas. If treatments for these pests are made prior to a scheduled broadcast application of a fire ant bait product, any contact insecticide applied to the surface of the turf will prevent worker ants from foraging and successfully collecting the bait. This would cause a failure of the fire ant management effort, requiring re-treatment to control fire ant populations. For this reason, your company should be aware of any other treatment programs that will take place in the area.

Set Realistic Expectations

Your action plan should match your clients' expectations. In your offer, spell out any guarantees and limitations of treatment options to support your fire ant management plan. This step includes educating your clients that the plan's goal is to manage (suppress, control) fire ants and, that because of the biology and habits of the imported fire ant, eradication is not realistic. Re-invasion of treated areas will occur, particularly if treatment schedules aren't maintained.

Promote Your Plan

With an action plan developed, the next step is to sell your program. One way is to contact homeowner's associations and give presentations about your plan and the benefits of managing fire ants on a community-wide basis. If no homeowners group is organized, an option is to present your management plan to current customers and encourage them to tell their neighbors about the benefits of forming a neighborhood group. Another way is to advertise your neighborhood fire ant management plan in media outlets.

Schools: A Special Consideration

Texas schools must comply to specific pest management regulations enforced by the Structural Pest Control Board. When a school is

within the area of a planned fire ant management program, there will be special considerations. Not every pest control operator is qualified to apply treatments to school grounds. If the school administrators agree to include their grounds in the fire ant management program, the regulations for treating in these areas must be followed. Some insecticides can be used near schools more easily than others. These agents are on a "green list" and include products such as those containing insect growth regulators and biological agents. Other products, those on the "yellow list" and "red list," have use restrictions that must be considered (See [FAPFS020](#)).

Use an Environmentally Friendly Program

A management program that is environmentally friendly has several benefits. Some homeowners will object to having chemicals used on their property. If this consideration keeps some homeowners from being part of a management program, managing fire ants in adjacent areas will be more difficult. The strength of a community-wide program is to have everyone involved. Deal with this concern by relying on methods that are environmentally friendly and present your company's concerns and options to homeowners (see [FAPFS012](#)). An environmentally friendly program can rely heavily on baits, which mainly target selected ants. Some bait products also use insect growth regulators that are relatively less toxic to mammalian life when properly used. These options are attractive to homeowners who may object to the use of more toxic chemicals.

Another consideration is to design a program that is friendly to native ants (see [FAPFS007](#)). Many native ants are beneficial insects and are the best competitors of imported fire ants. If these ants are not highly impacted by a treatment program, the native ants can provide biological resistance against high fire ant population levels. Strategies such as treating individual mounds where there are few fire ant mounds (less than 5 per 1/4 acre yard) and where native ants are present, instead of broadcast baiting, have much less impact on native ants.

Checklist for a Successful Imported Fire Ant Management Program

The following is a checklist of ways to ensure success of an imported fire ant management program:

- ✓ **Survey treatment areas.** Know the level of infestations in areas that are to be managed. Some areas may not have enough red imported fire ants to justify any treatment except a few single colony treatments, while some areas may be heavily infested. Native ants should be maintained and encouraged wherever possible.
- ✓ **Respect the sensitivity of homeowners.** All potential customers don't have the same view about fire ants or their control. Some may be OK with living with a limited number of fire ants in order to reduce the amount of chemicals used on their properties, while others may not want to see any ants in their yards at all.
- ✓ **Educate customers and make them aware of the limitations to management.** The strengths and limitations of your management plan should be outlined to customers before treatments begin. This information can take care of unforeseen problems that may stem from misconceptions. The time period that different treatments take to give results should be stressed. Some people do not realize that baits take time to bring about control, but this time is essential for their success. Customers should also be aware that there are no treatments that will provide permanent control. Fire ants will not be permanently eradicated, and, therefore, must be continually managed. Even when ants are eliminated from an area, there will be re-infestations from other areas from mating flights and movement of colonies may occur whenever favorable environmental conditions exist.
- ✓ **Costs and future treatment needs should be clear.** Management of the

imported fire ant must be a long-term, sustained effort for best results. This concept, along with its costs, should be explained to homeowners or homeowner groups, so that once a program is started, it can continue without interruption. A continual effort usually means less-intensive treatments following the initial treatments, if there are no gaps in the program that allow fire ants to fully re-establish.

- ✓ **Be prepared to show that you are qualified.** To legally receive compensation to treat pest insects in the state of Texas, you must be licensed to do so. Be sure that your clients know you are licensed by the Structural Pest Control Board or the Texas Department of Agriculture.

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

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

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Bill Clark, Larry Novy and Beth Brooks of the Texas Pest Control Association, the Structural Pest Control Board, and Dr. Harlan Thorvilson for their review of this fact sheet.

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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