

Deadly Force

Fire ants sting millions every year, triggering lawsuits, health issues and death in some cases

By Paul J. Bello • Contributor

The Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA) entered the United States through the port of Mobile, Ala., sometime during the late 1920s to early 1930s, carried in soil used as ballast in ships from South America.

Since then, the RIFA has spread across the southern United States to areas well beyond earlier predictions, and now is found from Carolina to California. It is estimated that the RIFA currently inhabits more than 300 million acres in the United States today, roughly a landmass nearly twice the size of Texas.

The rounded mounds of soil rising about 12 or more inches high seen on roadsides, pastures and open land are common sites nearly everywhere the RIFA is found. Despite growing RIFA infestations and related legal and health problems, pest management professionals (PMPs) and home and business owners still have quite a bit to learn and do to protect themselves and others from the potentially deadly force of the RIFA and myriad other fire ant types.

Fire ant stings are dangerous because of the venom injected into the victim that causes pain, swelling and other local effects plus the possible severity of the individual's allergic reaction. This reaction may be so severe that victims might suffer sweating, slurred speech, chest pain,

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Above: Round mounds of soil may indicate a Red Imported Fire Ant (RIFA) infestation.
Below: People should be careful where they step, even when they're near the street.



shortness of breath, swelling, nausea, vomiting and anaphylactic shock. Death can occur in sensitive individuals, including the very young or elderly. One source reports that fire ants sting as many as 14 million people each year, and anaphylaxis may occur in up to 6 percent of these individuals.

While most may agree that the number of serious fire ant cases are relatively few, the historical record indicates that the incidence of these cases may be growing and worthy of the pest management industry's full attention.

In recent years, there have been at least six documented serious fire ant-related cases associated with assisted living healthcare facilities, with four resulting in victim fatality and two resulting in serious injury. Additionally, there have been at least five fatalities that have occurred in residential settings, and untold others resulting in varying degree of injury and requiring medical attention.

RAISING AWARENESS

Ask a group of Southerners about fire ants, and one will find most have had first-hand experience dealing with this stinging insect. While many Southerners may say they know all about fire ants, the results of a survey of consumers in the South demon-



Red Imported Fire Ants first came to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

strates a clear need for updating and re-educating the public regarding these pests.

We questioned individuals who were exiting local grocery stores and other shopping venues located in the suburban North Metro Atlanta area. We asked these people several yes/no questions regarding fire ants to ascertain what they knew about fire ants.

When questioned "Are you familiar with fire ants?" all respondents answered that they are. This was not surprising given that 74 percent of the respondents have lived in the South for five years or more. Certainly, with this percentage of respondents living in the South at least five years, we might assume that they would have learned about fire ants the hard way — either by first-hand experience or knowing someone else who had been stung.

Yet, 93 percent of those surveyed said they were unaware that since fire

ants were introduced into the United States about 80 human deaths have been attributed to the stinging insects. Common to these 80 cases was that they occurred outdoors, but more recently there have been what appears to be an increased number of RIFA incidents occurring indoors.

Many within the industry may have heard about cases regarding lawsuits due to fire ant-related incidents, but we seem to only hear about those cases that are litigated or publicized through the media. There are numerous other such cases that are settled out of court, so we never hear about them.

In September 1990, a four-day-old infant was stung to death by RIFAs while sleeping in its crib in a southern state. Of special concern is that this particular case occurred in a second-floor bedroom, and it happened earlier than other previous, widely known cases. Often we hear of fire ant cases in commercial facilities such as health care, assisted living facilities or nursing homes, but such incidents can and do occur in residential settings as well.

HOT ISSUE

While the spread of fire ants is well documented, only recently has data

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Fire Ant Awareness:

Either I or someone in my family was bitten/stung by fire ants in the past three years.

Yes 85% No 15%

Before this survey, I knew for sure that fire ants could kill people.

Yes 51% No 49%

Did you know that that fire ants have been responsible for the deaths of at least 80 Americans since the 1930s?

Yes 7% No 93%

Does it concern you that fire ants can be a problem indoors?

Yes 98% No 2%

Do you think that the pest control industry should warn its customers about the hazard of fire ants?

Yes 100% No 0%

Did you know that since about 1993 there have been at least 10 cases of human attacks by fire ants that occurred indoors?

Yes 0% No 100%

Source: Survey of consumers in the southern United States, conducted by PJB Pest Management Consulting, www.pest-consultant.com.



Fire ant stings are dangerous because the venom injected into the victim causes pain, swelling and other localized effects, as well contains the potential for an allergic reaction.

been collected by the medical community regarding the incidence of fire ant-related injury on a broad basis. It has been reported that more than 40 million people live in fire ant-infested geography in the southern United States.

A recent survey found an estimated 79 percent of Texans have been stung by fire ants. In a survey of more than 1,200 healthcare professionals in South Carolina, it was estimated that 33,000 people recently sought medical attention for fire ant stings, and 660 of these people were treated for anaphylaxis — a severe reaction, although relatively rare, reported to have caused the nearly 80 documented fire ant-related deaths in the United States.

Our industry has assembled a battery of facts regarding the damage potential of termites — a virtual arsenal of information familiar to well-trained technicians and termite sales executives. Nearly every piece of termite literature is full of such

information.

For some reason, however, we have been remiss in collecting, disseminating and sharing such powerful information about potentially deadly RIFAs.

We formed a roundtable of 10 PMPs and asked them: “Knowing what you know about the hazard of fire ants and their ability to sting and potentially harm people, do you think the professional pest management industry should inform its customers about the hazard of fire ants?” (Please note this question clearly limited the call to action to just informing our customers about fire ants, not the general public.)

Nine of the 10 PMPs stated a resounding, “Yes.” While 90 percent of our roundtable of experts think the pest management industry should inform its customers about the hazard of fire ants, 100 percent of home owners questioned in our survey think the pest control industry

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While many initially think of commercial accounts when discussing fire ant activity, the fact is that the stinging insects are equal opportunity offenders.

should inform them regarding the hazard of fire ants, what they can do and ways to prevent and control infestations.

HEALTHCARE SETTINGS

“Recommendations For Prevention and Management of Fire Ant Infestation of Health Care Facilities,” published in the *Southern Medical Journal*, outlines tips for controlling fire ants in healthcare facilities, including:

- Negotiate a contract with a pest management company providing monthly inspections of the grounds and the interior of all facilities, with treatment as required, and emergency service within 24 hours when requested.

- Have staff conduct weekly inspections of the grounds and facilities.

- If fire ants are found within 25 feet of a building, notify the pest management company and require a perimeter treatment within 24 hours,

with an on-site follow-up appointment by the provider one week later.

- If fire ants are found indoors, notify the pest management company and require a response within 24 hours. Document the extermination of fire ants in rooms and a post-treatment inspection of all facilities for active ant nests. Require daily inspections by the pest management company for one week.

The publication also includes a suggested treatment protocol for healthcare professionals if fire ants are found on a patient, recommendations for establishing and implementing facility fire-ant policy and developing and executing fire-ant prevention program protocols for both outdoor and indoor healthcare facilities. Interested readers can get a copy of this publication by visiting www.medscape.com/viewarticle/438229.

While many initially think of commercial accounts when discussing fire ant activity, the fact is that the

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stinging insects are equal opportunity offenders. Historical record indicates that fire ants have caused serious injury in both commercial and residential accounts as well.

In either case, commercial or residential, there seems to be sufficient cause for the pest management industry to pay more-serious attention to our nation's growing fire ant control problems. Our survey clearly indicates that most people *do not* know that fire ants can kill people or that the stinging insects have been responsible for at least 10 cases of attacks on humans indoors.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Just as PMPs protect their customers from pests, where fire ants are concerned, PMPs need to be better prepared to best protect their businesses as well. The industry has seen

numerous claims and litigation related to termites, but recently we have suffered an increasing number of fire-ant-related cases, and some of these cases have resulted in

By having a specially prepared service contract covering fire ants, PMPs can include special stipulations about responsibilities.

multi-million dollar awards and settlements.

PMPs who provide fire ant control services can protect their business interests by: eliminating fire ants from their general pest service contracts; using a separate contract for fire ant services; and upgrading

their fire ant service protocols.

The elimination of fire ants from a general pest service contract is necessary for a number of reasons. One of the most important reasons is that by having a separate fire ant service contract, PMPs can include special language that supports the fire ant service protocols and requires certain key cooperation points from customers. While fire ants may be eliminated from the general pest service contract, PMPs also need to include disclaimers that clearly communicate that these contracts *do not* include fire ant service.

By having a specially prepared service contract covering fire ants, PMPs can include special stipulations that share the responsibility of fire ant management with customers (i.e. healthcare and assisted living facilities) and better protect both customers and pest management service providers.

The fire ant contract should detail a list of client responsibilities, including various items that will serve to enhance the overall success of the fire ant management program. Examples of such items may include:

- The establishment of critical zones around structures' exterior. If fire ant mounds or ants are found within critical zones, the client must call the pest management company immediately;
- Regular inspection of critical zones by the client facility staff;
- Cultural controls and practices such as keeping any food in patients' rooms in sealed containers; conducting regular inspections of patients' rooms; and assuring intravenous lines do not leak and a higher level of vigilance; and
- Ongoing fire ant training for facility staff.

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NO SMALL THREAT

“While there is no legal duty to do so, the adoption of a fire ant awareness program may be one of the more wise things a pest management company can do,” says Cliff Slaten of the law firm Slaten & O’Connor in Montgomery, Ala. “Having made an effort to inform

customers about the hazards of fire ants will help strengthen pest professionals’ position in the event of a claim, plus it will help the customers to have a better understanding of fire ant-related hazards so they can make better-informed purchase decisions.”

While bed bugs justifiably seem to

be getting most of the pest press these days, it remains that there are no documented deaths attributed to bed bugs — but fire ant-related deaths are closing in on triple digits in the United States.

The successful management of fire ants may be achieved with a sound management program. In the majority of cases, fire ants may be controlled from the outside and exterior perimeter treatments will serve as excellent first line of defense against fire ants. There are many products that pest professionals can use in their fire ant program including baits, liquids and granular products.

Once the initial perimeter treatment has been completed, PMPs should conduct regular, periodic visual inspections to assure fire ants have not returned. Any subsequent mound or activity discovered should be immediately treated. Areas beyond critical zones may also be treated in a similar fashion or PMPs may decide to use fire ant bait products in such areas.

PMPs should also be conducting regular inspections of the exterior grounds to treat as necessary when mounds are discovered. Additionally, the program should include a sound inspection and treatment protocols for structures’ interior as well.

“Pest professionals would be best served to communicate the facts about fire ants”, says entomologist Hal Coleman, president of North Fulton Exterminating in Alpharetta, Ga. “Informing customers about the harm fire ants can cause, what to look out for and what can be done to avoid being stung, is the responsibility of every PMP,” Coleman says. **PC**

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