

Fire ant mound located against the exterior brick wall adjacent to a door at an elementary school.

MOUNDS OF TROUBLE

The red imported fire ant (RIFA) entered the U.S. through the port of Mobile, AL, sometime during the late 1920s to early 1930s. Since then, RIFA has spread across

the South and is now found from the Carolinas to California. It is estimated RIFA currently inhabit more than 300 million acres in the U.S. today — a landmass nearly twice the size of Texas.

What may be a more alarming statistic, though, is that since RIFA's introduction into the U.S., about 80 human deaths have been attributed to the pest. These cases all occurred outdoors, but more recently there have been reports of increased indoor RIFA-related incidents.

Of concern to lawn and turf professionals is the possibility of being held liable in these cases, because they may provide some level of fire ant control services.

Mounded nests are commonly built in lawns and garden areas surrounding structures — both residential and commercial. As such, it is likely that some may look to the lawn and turf professional for fire ant management services.

Red imported fire ants are an increasingly serious problem — and potential business liability — in several states. BY PAUL J. BELLO

More ants = more bites

The medical community has recently begun collecting data on fire ant-related injuries to humans. It has been reported in the Southeast that fire ants sting an estimated 14 million people each year.

A survey in Texas reported that about 79% of Texans have been stung by fire ants.

In South Carolina, a survey of more than 1,200 healthcare professionals estimated that more than 33,000 people seek medical attention for fire ant stings, and 660 of these people are treated for anaphylaxis. This severe reaction, although relatively rare, is usually the cause of death in fatal RIFA incidents.

Fire ants present a serious hazard

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. Susceptible victims may suffer anaphylactic shock. Death can occur in sensitive individuals, including the very young or elderly.

LM's sister magazine, *Pest Management Professional*, reported that in 1998 approximately 660,000 people were stung in South Carolina. About 33,000 of these individuals required medical attention, with 27 patients hospitalized.

Sources report that from about 5 million to 14 million Americans are stung each year, and that anaphylaxis may occur in from 0.6% to 6.0% of individuals who are stung.

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

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TECHNOLOGY INSECT CONTROL

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Protect your customers, protect your business

Because of the nature of their work and expertise, lawn and turf management professionals may be the first to detect RIFA activity at an account. The pest management industry has recently seen an increase in the number of RIFA-related cases, and some of these cases have resulted in multimillion-dollar awards and

settlements. Of concern is that these cases may spread to include lawn and turf management professionals as well.

Lawn and turf professionals may be able to protect their business interests by:

- ▶ Eliminating fire ants from their general service contracts;
- ▶ Using a separate contract for fire ant service; and
- ▶ Upgrading their fire ant service protocol.

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Identifying RIFA

Although the red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*), or RIFA, is common in 12 Southern states, it is new to California and has recently been found infesting numerous residential and commercial areas in Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and to a lesser extent, San Diego counties. The spread of these ants has largely been a result of the movement of infested soil to uninfested areas.



Editor's Note: Below are excerpts from a description from the University of California's Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program.

RIFA workers vary in size (1/16- to 1/5-in. long) and are dark reddish brown. Unlike the southern fire ant (*S. xyloni*) and harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmex californicus*), RIFA can quickly produce many nests and colonize a yard.

While there are several characteristics that distinguish RIFA from other ant species, one way to recognize this pest is to observe its aggressive behavior when its nest or food source is disturbed, or from its painful bite and sting.

In areas that are not disturbed, RIFA typically make dome-shaped mounds that are about 18 in. across and about 8- to 12-in. tall. They resemble large gopher mounds or look like crumbly earth with small holes; these mounds readily distinguish RIFA colonies from other ant colonies. Nests of the native southern fire ant, for instance, are usually irregular and consist of scattered soil with multiple obscure entrances.

Unlike the other ant species mentioned, RIFA tend to build nests in open, sunlit, grassy areas that are typically irrigated. They will readily run up any object that touches their mound, whereas the other species are much less aggressive. Because RIFA often build their nests in turfgrass areas, frequently the mounds have been mowed and are nearly flat, appearing as soft, loose dirt that obscures the grass and looks like a bald spot in the turf.

In some instances, RIFA do not build mounds, but nest in places such as rotten logs, walls of buildings, or under sidewalks.

Source: www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/IPMG/PESTNOTES/pn7487.html

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One of the most important reasons for having a separate fire ant service contract is so the contractor can include special language to support the fire ant service protocol and require certain key

cooperation points from the customer. While fire ants may be eliminated from the general pest service contract, contractors also need to include a disclaimer that clearly communicates the contract does not include fire ant service.

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Casting of the underground nest tunnels of a fire ant mound casted by Dr. David Williams of USDA, Gainesville, FL.

Recommendations **today**

"Recommendations for Prevention and Management of Fire Ant Infestation of Health Care Facilities" (J. Goddard et. al) was published in the *Southern Medical Journal* in 2002. The report provides information and recommendations for physicians, healthcare facility managers and pest management professionals. Because RIFA mounds may be found in the landscape, several of these recommendations are applicable to lawn and turf professionals as well. In fact, it is possible that these published recommendations will be cited by a claimant in the event of future litigation.

Some of the published recommendations for healthcare facilities include:

- ▶ Negotiate a contract with pest control service, providing monthly inspections of grounds and interior of facility, treatment

These recommended procedures serve to bolster the overall RIFA management program and, by having them included in the contract, help to ensure the necessary cooperation from the customer.

In addition, it may pay in the long run to be proactive when it comes to RIFA.

"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 company can do," says Cliff Slaten, founding partner of Montgomery, AL-based firm Slaten & O'Connor, which specializes in representing the pest management industry. "Having made an effort to inform the customer about the hazard of fire ants will help strengthen the professional's position in the event of a claim. Plus, it will help customers have a better understanding of the fire ant hazard so they can make a better informed purchase decision."

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as required, and emergency service within 24 hours when requested.

- ▶ Weekly inspection of grounds and facility by facility personnel.
- ▶ If ants are found within 25 ft. of the building, notify pest control service and require perimeter treatment within 24 hours, with one-week follow-up.
- ▶ If ants are found indoors, notify pest control service and require response within 24 hours, documentation of extermination of ants in rooms and inspection of facility for active ant nests. Also require daily inspection by the pest control service for one week.

Interested readers can get a copy of this publication by visiting www.medscape.com/viewarticle/438229.

— PB

In addition to offering an awareness program, lawn and turf professionals should be on the lookout for the presence of fire ant mounds when conducting their services of the exterior grounds. If any are discovered, they may inform

the account or conduct a suitable treatment as appropriate for that account. **LM**

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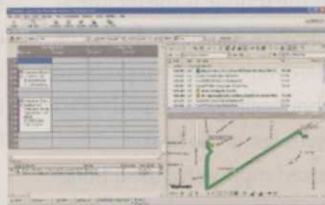


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