

Nurseries and Plant Growers: Help Control the Spread of the Imported Fire Ant

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and State agricultural officers enforce regulations impacting businesses that grow and transport items capable of spreading the imported fire ant (IFA) to areas outside current quarantine zones. This foreign pest (*Solenopsis invicta* Buren, *S. richteri* Forel, and their hybrid) typically travels contained in potted-plant soil and can be accidentally collected and baled in pine straw sold as mulch. Fire ants cling to soil, sod and grass, as well as nursery stock or equipment covered with or caked in soil. These items could contain IFAs able to reproduce and start new colonies.

The IFA was unintentionally introduced into this country from South America about 1918. The species has become established in 14 States and territories since then. Currently, all or portions of, the following States have active IFA quarantine zones: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. A map of the quarantined areas can be found at www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ispm/fireants/index.html.

IFAs are 1/8 to 1/4 inch long and reddish-brown to black. They respond rapidly and aggressively to disturbances. A single fire ant can sting its target repeatedly. Young and newborn animals are especially susceptible. These ants will also girdle young trees and feed on the buds and fruits of numerous crop plants, especially corn, soybeans, okra, and citrus. Large nests located in fields interfere with and damage equipment during cultivation and harvesting, while ant attacks inhibit field-worker activities.

The objective of Federal IFA quarantines is to keep the ants from spreading. APHIS verifies, via a certificate or permit, that businesses involved in growing, transporting, and selling plants with roots and soil attached, nursery stock, soil, or used vehicles designed to move or transport gravel, sand, nursery stock, grass, sod, soil, hay, or wood are fire-

ant free before moving to States or counties outside of fire ant quarantine zones. Officials issue certificates authorizing movement of regulated articles when approved treatment and procedures in Title 7, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 301.81 have been completed to ensure that regulated articles are free from the IFA. Nurseries themselves can also be certified as being free of this pest through the process in 7 CFR 301.81.

The Plant Protection Act of June 2000 enables APHIS to promulgate IFA quarantines.

The penalty for shipping untreated or improperly treated products from fire-ant quarantine zones into areas where fire ants are not regulated ranges up to \$10,000 per violation.

An APHIS brochure outlines the steps required for nursery stock and other regulated articles grown and/or packaged for sale within IFA quarantine areas. USDA-APHIS Program Aid No. 1822 entitled "Imported Fire Ant 2005: Quarantine Treatments for Nursery Stock and Other Regulated Articles" guides business and industry in IFA program compliance. The brochure includes a list of regulated articles, insecticides authorized for use to combat IFA, and treatment procedures for regulated articles, and it outlines how nurseries can become part of the Fire Ant Free Nursery Program. The brochure is available at

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ispm/fireants/index.html>.

For more information on the Imported Fire Ant, Federal IFA regulations, quarantine zones, or enforcement programs, please log onto <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ispm/fireants/index.html> or call your APHIS-Plant Protection and Quarantine State Plant Health Director or your State department of agriculture.

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