
Fire Ant Quarantine Notice

June 18, 2009 - The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) intends to establish a temporary quarantine of the movement of regulated articles in the lower Peninsula and greater Tidewater areas of Southeastern Virginia to areas outside the quarantined localities for the purpose of preventing the artificial spread of the Imported Fire Ant to uninfested areas of the state.

The Imported Fire Ant is an introduced species that is notorious for its aggressive behavior and the damage it causes to several agricultural commodities, livestock, companion animals and wildlife. Further, the Imported Fire Ant can cause serious health problems for the human population due to its aggressive nature and sting. Problems with fire ants are particularly serious in most Southern and Gulf Coast states, where quarantines have been in place for several years. In North Carolina, portions or entire areas in more than 70 of that states 100 counties are considered infested with fire ants, including the counties of Camden, Currituck, Gates, Hertford, and Northampton, which border the Tidewater area. In Virginia, the first discovery of Imported Fire Ants occurred in Hampton in 1989. Since then, the number of colonies has continued to increase despite VDACS' and private sector eradication efforts due to the movement into Virginia of infested materials from other states, as well as the natural spread of the ants.

Recent state and federal data confirms that Imported Fire Ants are now permanently established and spreading naturally in the Tidewater area, making outright eradication no longer achievable. From 1989 to 2007, VDACS staff treated an average of 33 Imported Fire Ant sites per year. In the last six months of 2008, staff treated 642 sites in the Tidewater area alone. This dramatic increase in reports and treatments, and the high potential for harm to humans and agriculture, necessitates the agency's intention to establish the quarantine.

Therefore, pursuant to the provisions of Section 3.2-703 of the Virginia Pest Law, it is my intention to declare a temporary quarantine on the movement of articles capable of transporting Imported Fire Ants in the counties of James City and York, and the cities of Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, and Williamsburg.

Once the temporary quarantine is enacted, which I anticipate will be on or about June 24, 2009 the movement of articles capable of transporting Imported Fire Ants out of the quarantine area will be restricted unless the regulated articles have been inspected or if a compliance agreement is in place. Likewise, VDACS staff will cease eradication treatments of Imported Fire Ant colonies in the quarantine area, concentrating instead on treatments outside the quarantine area to attempt to prevent further spread. A proposal for a permanent quarantine will be presented for review by the Board of Agriculture and Consumer Services when the Board meets again on August 4, 2009, in Caret, Virginia.

The agency recognizes that this decision will generate questions by affected stakeholders, including nurseries, tree removal services, timber operations, farmers, builders, construction companies, and developers, all of whom would be required to inspect and certify regulated articles before they can be moved from regulated to non-regulated areas. It is important to note, though, that regulated articles can be moved within the regulated area without any restrictions. Regulated articles include, but are not limited to, nursery stock, soil, grass sod, hay, straw, used farm and soil moving equipment, logs, and bee hives. In many cases, certifying regulated articles as being free from Imported Fire Ants can be accomplished through basic compliance agreements that would allow for self-inspection of regulated articles and which should result in minimal disruption in stakeholders' operations.

Neither VDACS staff nor I expect the Quarantine to have a negative economic impact on the area. Regulated articles can move without restriction within the quarantined area and, with inspection or a compliance agreement regulated articles will be able to move out of the quarantined area as well. Indeed, we will work with the affected communities and businesses to make sure that the quarantine will not deter economic activity mostly in the lower Peninsula and Tidewater areas of Virginia while helping to keep an injurious pest which can be harmful to humans, pets, and agricultural animals, from moving to other areas of the state.

In order to address any questions related to the quarantine and help facilitate compliance, staff in the agency's Office of Plant and Pest Services will host two educational outreach events in July, one in Southside Hampton Roads and the other in the Peninsula, as indicated below.

July 1, 2009, 1-3 p.m. - Hampton Roads Agricultural Research & Extension Center, 1444 Diamond Springs Road, Room: 125 A & B, Virginia Beach, VA 23455

July 10, 2009, 10 a.m. - noon - Tabb Library, adjacent to lobby, 100 Long Green Blvd., Yorktown, VA 23693

In the meantime, I urge you to contact Mr. Larry Nichols, Program Manager, Office of Plant and Pest Services, if you have any questions. Mr. Nichols can be reached at (804) 786-3515 or Larry.Nichols@vdacs.virginia.gov . Thank you in advance for your support of this action. With your help and the help of your constituents, we can collectively reduce the impact that Imported Fire Ants will have on the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

Todd P. Haymore, VDACS Commissioner of Agriculture