

## **It's OK to Import Hay, But Not Fire Ants! Inspect Any Imported Hay!**

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A spring freeze and dry summer have left many Tennessee farmers looking for hay, but we want to be sure hay is the only thing they're importing. Two weeks ago an astute grower from Jackson County, Tennessee reported a potential imported fire ant find in hay imported from Arkansas. Upon fire ant confirmation by Dr. Pat Parkman, University of Tennessee Entomology and Plant Pathology Department, Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) personnel treated the area and the hay was returned to Arkansas.

Imported fire ants are stinging insects that live in mounds and were accidentally introduced from South America in the first half of the last century. They're a foe to be avoided if at all possible. The sting isn't as painful as a wasp sting, but it can be fiery and itchy. Most people react with a pustule at each sting site, but a small percentage of people have a more severe reaction requiring immediate medical attention.

In addition to the medical concern, fire ants change our behavior and reduce our recreational activities if populations are unmanaged. They can short electrical equipment, and damage lawns, walkways and roads. Hay yield is lost due to raised cutter bars or dulled and broken equipment caused by contact with the mounds. Germinating seedlings can be clipped and tuberous or ground crops tunneled through. Fire ants tend sucking pest insects (such as aphids) and protect them from natural enemies, deter hand labor, damage irrigation equipment and possibly kill hatching birds or newborn calves deposited onto mounds.

A recent estimate puts annual damage and repair costs attributed to imported fire ants in the U.S. at over \$6 billion even though they infest only about 320 million acres in 13 states and one territory. It is imperative that we don't introduce fire ants into new areas.

If hay is from a fire ant-quarantined area outside of Tennessee, it is highly advised to have the seller ask for an inspection and a permit from his state's Department of Agriculture and the permit should accompany the moving hay. The seller can find the number for his Department of Agriculture's state plant regulatory official at <http://www.nationalplantboard.org> – click on members. Hay must have been stored off the ground in order for the hay to qualify for shipment out of an IFA regulated area. Hay in contact with the ground is a prohibited item for movement out of an IFA regulated area (federal code of regulations - 7CFR 301.81). Hay bales one stack above the ground would qualify for movement as would hay stored on plastic. Tennessee state rule requires a compliance agreement for any hay in Tennessee moving out of a Tennessee regulated IFA area. A permit number will be assigned to the compliance holder and will appear on invoices for the moving hay. Contact the Tennessee Department of Agriculture – Regulatory Services for more information (615) 837-5130.

Regardless of whether the acquired hay is accompanied by a permit or not, the farmer should still inspect the hay for imported fire ants!

The entirety or a portion of thirteen U.S. states are quarantined for imported fire ants including fifty-two Tennessee counties. Fire ant regulated areas can be found in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and California ([http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant\\_health/plant\\_pest\\_info/fireants/index.shtml](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/plant_pest_info/fireants/index.shtml)). A list of the 52 southern Tennessee counties quarantined for fire ants can be found at <http://fireants.utk.edu>. It is especially important for those farmers outside the fire ant regulated areas to request a permit before accepting hay from regulated areas and to inspect the hay once it arrives.

Should a farmer suspect that fire ants have arrived in a shipment of hay, the local county Extension agent can help with ant identification and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture should be contacted as soon as possible. Consult the blue pages in your phone book for the closest TDA regional office or call the state plant certification office at 615-837-5130.