

And the bad news about fire ants is...

New mounds producing 200 queens

GAINESVILLE — Fire ants have always been bad news, but the news just got worse.

A new form of fire ant colony, with thousands of queens, is spreading through the Southeast.

"It means four times as many ants and almost one solid ant nest," said Phil Koehler, an entomologist with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

An IFAS-USDA study near Paddock Mall in Ocala found 30 to 40 fire-ant mounds per acre back in the days of single queens. Now, there are 5,000 mounds per acre — about every 5 feet — with 200 queens per mound.

"When a queen dies in a single-queen nest, the whole nest dies," said Mike Glancy

of the USDA's Agricultural Research Service in Gainesville.

"With multiple queen mounds, they just scatter. The workers do not have loyalty to a single queen, and will accept any queen. The more the merrier."

Multiple-queen fire ants live in greater concentrations and are more aggressive in hunting for food than single-queen fire ants. They have been known to attack sick people in hospital beds and the nipples of nursing goats.

Queens from multiple queen nests fly 8 to 10 miles on their mating flights, compared to half a mile for queens from single-queen nests.

"This is a more aggressive insect, which means more human contact, which means more health problems," Glancy said.

Bill Becker, IFAS safety expert, says that about one person a year dies of allergic reaction to fire ant stings in Florida.

Fire ants also cause trouble by eating foam expansion joints in highways and shorting out air conditioners.

Multiple queen fire ants were discovered in 1973 in Mississippi and then were discovered in Ocala and Texas in 1983. Since then, multiple queen colonies have spread throughout Florida and are found all over the Southeastern United States.

Fire ants were accidentally imported from Brazil and Argentina in the 1920s and 1940s in the ballast of ships.

Koehler said multiple-queen colonies are reported in Brazil, too, and as man kills off single-queen nests, it clears the way for multiple-queen nests.

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