

Fire ants' real sting has not yet been felt

About four years ago, I wrote an article that identified the mole cricket as the most serious pest of golf courses in Florida and much of the Southeast. But the imported red fire ant might soon change that assessment.

Both insects come from South America and are successful in the southern U.S. because of favorable climate and lack of natural predators and parasites. Both cause hundreds of millions of dollars worth of economic damage each year and both cause golf courses to spend money for their control,

although the total directed at mole crickets is substantially higher than that for fire ants. But pesticides applied for mole cricket control and other pests on golf courses can also suppress fire ant populations.

For practical considerations, the major difference between the two is that fire ants can sting you and possibly kill you. As many as 85,000 sting victims seek medical treatment for allergic reactions each year and 30 people died from stings last year. The fact that one of these fatalities allegedly occurred on a golf course in my area compounds the problem and magnifies the danger for the golf industry.

As expected in today's litigious society, the victim's family is seeking compensation from the golf course. Their lawyer has contacted superintendents in the area concerning their fire ant control programs so as to determine (I assume) whether or not the golf course in question was taking adequate control measures. If the plaintiffs are successful in this litigation and the golf course is found negligent and responsible for damages, think of the potential ramifications.

Who will determine what constitutes adequate control measures? What kind of liability will a club be forced to carry? Will the superintendent be personally liable for neglecting mandated procedures? How much more will a round of golf cost to satisfy one more regulation fueled by our society's quest for a no-fault, risk-free environment?

The fact is, one fire ant sting can kill you if you are one of the few highly allergic people. No control measure, no matter how thorough or expensive, will totally eradicate the target pest. Some will always survive, and re-infestation from nearby areas can occur very quickly. Clubs surrounded by open pastures infested with fire ants would be fighting losing battles. A fire ant queen is capable of flying as far as 15 miles to start a new colony. The risk of getting stung by a fire ant can be reduced, but not eliminated.

Attempts at eradication might have been the catalyst for the fire ant's remarkable evolutionary adaptation, which makes present control measures so difficult. Fire ants have only been in this country for about 40 years and already infest more than 400 million acres. There are places in Texas where nothing but fire ants can be found for miles in any direction. Widespread efforts to eradicate them with pesticides such as dieldrin, heptachlor, and mirex might have triggered an evolutionary response that causes them to produce multiple-queen colonies rather than the typical single-queen colony.

Just 10 years ago, a typically invested pasture averaged about 50 single-queen mounds per acre. Now the typical pasture has as many as 500 mounds per acre and 200-500 queens per mound. Individual mounds are no longer independent of or antagonistic towards each other, but are part of integrated "super colonies."

According to some experts, it is better to leave a few well-established colonies alone. By trying to wipe them out, you invite a massive re-infestation later.

The good news is that the U.S. Department of Agriculture spends \$5

Mark My Words



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million annually on fire ant research and Texas about \$1.1 million. More than 8,000 chemicals have been screened for fire ant control. They have obviously had limited success and current research focuses more on promising biological, hormonal and genetic manipulation techniques.

With a nearly 40-year history of intense research dedicated to fire ant control, and its dismal record of success, the last thing the golf industry needs is a judicial decision mandating responsibility and protection of golfers from the sting of a fire ant.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mark Jarrell wrote this column for the Jan. 19, 1991, issue of *Golfweek*, which has given us permission to reprint it.

Common sense prevailed in the recent ruling in West Palm Beach

when a jury declared that the PGA National Golf Club was not responsible for the death of a golfer bitten in 1988. The jury correctly noted that the club had attempted to get rid of the fire ants, but recognized that there is no sure-fire way to eliminate them completely.

This case underscores the need for all golf courses to keep accurate records of their pest control management programs, and it also points out the need for the continued education of the general public about the actual risks and benefits of chemical applications on golf courses.

The hazards caused by fire ants are not limited to golf courses. Home lawns, schoolyards, parks and other recreational facilities are also at risk for fire and infestation.

-JJ

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