

**Title of Project:**

Informing the Public and Decision-Makers About the Progress and Impact of the Fire Ant Project

**Principal Investigator:**

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**Issue:**

While researchers are finding long-term, biological controls for managing fire ants, educating the public about current, effective approaches and informing them about the research progress being made is crucial to the fire ant project's success and continued public support. To accomplish this goal, a communications team, consisting of representatives from all of the organizations involved in the project, was formed to ensure that science-based information to the mass media was coordinated and disseminated across the state for the utmost impact in reaching the public and to assist the county extension fire ant agents in obtaining awareness for their educational programs.

**Major Accomplishments to Date** (Sept. 1, 1997 - August 31, 1999):

- C Assisted the fire ant project coordinator in getting the governor in 1998 to proclaim the second week in September as Fire Ant Awareness Week and in working with the 1999 state legislature to make the week a permanent state observance.
- C Conducted successful statewide awareness campaigns in 1998 and 1999 during Fire Ant Awareness Week to educate Texans to team up with their neighbors to tackle fire ants in the fall. The campaigns combined the traditional education methods of the Extension Service (agents conducting demonstrations and seminars and distributing informational brochures) with highly visible communications such as print and broadcast news releases; TV, radio, cable, and print public service announcements; inserts for utility bills/paychecks; and flyers for retailers to distribute. In 1999, we translated some of these materials into Spanish, distributed them to Spanish language media, and posted the information on the Web site.
- C Conducted a pilot communications program in Dallas during the 1999 awareness week that could be implemented in Texas' other metro areas in 2000. We established a toll-free metro number, which greets callers with a brief pre-recorded message about ways to manage fire ants and lets them request that more information be sent to them. Posters using the same theme as the other awareness week materials were placed on information

kiosks at area malls, and Dallas commuters can stare at signs on the back of buses for fire ant information. The effectiveness of this one-month effort will be measured by the number of phone calls received. If successful, the mall and bus/rapid transit communications program will be implemented in Austin, San Antonio and Houston and expand to a couple of months in both the spring and fall.

- C Promoted progress of fire ant research and education through print and broadcast media. Collectively, we've disseminated around 30 print releases statewide, 13 radio stories to 147 outlets, reaching 200+ stations; 6 video news releases to 51 TV outlets, reaching 200+ stations; and several articles for magazines, including The Cattleman and Texas Association of Nurserymen's newsletter. Responded to dozens of media inquiries from as far away as Japan and Brazil. Held a news conference to kick off the 1998 awareness week.
- C Created and distributed a postcard promoting the fire ant Web site to the 700+ public and research libraries in Texas and to regional and national magazines and news organizations.
- C Provided general communications support for the fire ant project coordinator, including the creation of stationery, demonstration signs, project directory, fact sheets, publications, Web site, and a summary highlighting research progress, among other things.

#### **Measurements of Success:**

- C During the 1998 campaign, access to the Web site increased from 2,000 a month to 100,000 a month and stores sold out of bait. Forty extension agents who responded to our survey reported that the PSAs ran from 2 to 54 times on their county's radio stations and that they worked with organizations to place the educational inserts into paychecks, electric bills, and bank statements with feed stores, floral shops and lawn and garden centers to distribute the educational flyers. We are still gathering data on the 1999 campaign.
- C As a result of the mall posters and bus signs, the Dallas extension office received an average of 50 calls per day during Fire Ant Awareness Week.
- C Every major Texas newspaper in fire ant quarantined areas has published one or more articles based on our news releases; overall around \_\_\_\_ stories have been published (see attached list - to be updated by Anna Kjolen).
- C Educational information through the mass media has complemented the county fire ant agents' educational programs, many of which have resulted in neighborhoods seeing fewer fire ants than in previous years.
- C Overall communications effort helped to show legislators and the public how to manage fire ants as well as see the rapid progress we're making in collaborative fire ant research, helping the project receive \$5 million in state funding for the next biennium.

- C The communications team has received numerous local, regional and national awards for its communication efforts, including first place awards from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, Region IV; Public Relations Society of America - Houston Chapter; and International Association of Business Communicators - Bryan/College Station. We received a second place award from Agricultural Communicators in Education, an international organization.

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FY 1998-1999**

**Communication Products**

- C Fire ant Web site and promotional postcard
- C Six-page summary of research progress
- C Tackle Fire Ants in the Fall materials
  - TV, radio, print and cable PSAs
  - Four educational inserts for utility bills or paychecks (English and Spanish)
  - Four educational flyers for retailers to distribute (English and Spanish)
  - Pocket folders
  - Posters for information kiosks in malls
  - Signs for buses
  - Various promotional items
  - Summary of fire ant insecticides
  - Billboards (1998 only)

We also assisted the fire ant project coordinator in developing stationery and demonstration signs and creating computer templates for fact sheets and internal communication products.

**News Releases**

- C Biological Control Offers Hope For Fighting Fire Ants (September 1999)
- C Fire Ants Cost Millions, Survey Says (September 1999)
- C Ranchers Should Practice Preventive Measures Against Fire Ants In Arid South Texas (July 1999)
- C Prevent Fire Ant Damage and Reduce Chemical Use Costs (July 1999)
- C Know Your Fire Ant Baits From Your Granules and Drenches (July 1999)
- C Taking The Bite Out Of Fire Ant Stings (July 1999)
- C Protect Pets From Fire Ants (July 1999)
- C Fire Ants: Getting "Two Steps" Ahead (July 1999)
- C What Kind Of Ant Is This? (July 1999)
- C Go To The Web For Fire Ant Information (July 1999)
- C Start Winning The War on Fire Ants (July 1999)
- C Summer Rains Keep Fire Ants Active (July 1999)
- C Ant-Attacking Flies Adapting to Texas Climate (June 1999)
- C Tiny Phorid Flies Attack Imported Fire Ants in Biological Control Experiments at UT Austin (November 1998)
- C Governor Declares Sept. 14-20 As Fire Ant Awareness Week (September 1998)
- C Fire Ants More Than A Nuisance On Farms And Ranches (September 1998)
- C Managing Fire Ants Around Homes And Buildings (September 1998)
- C Taking The Bite Out Of Fire Ant Stings (September 1998)
- C Managing Fire Ants In Vegetable Gardens (September 1998)

- C Practice Farm And Ranch Safety (September 1998)
- C Act Now For A Fire Ant-Free Spring (September 1998)
- C Fire Ant Control? Keep On Dancing The Two-Step (September 1998)
- C Control Fire Ant Populations With Two-Step Method, Community Programs (March 1998)
- C Fire Ant Surveys To Be Conducted (March 1998)

**Magazine/Newsletter Articles**

- C South Texas Ranchers Should Work to Prevent Fire Ants (October 1999; The Cattleman)