

Pest alert: the Fall Army Worm (FAW)

The Fall Army Worm (*Spodoptera frugiperda*) is a species in the order Lepidoptera. It originated in the sub-tropical and tropical areas of the Americas. Since 2016 it has spread rapidly to various parts of Africa, the middle-east and Asia (including Indonesia).



In large numbers, it has the potential to cause major damage to cultivated grass crops including maize, rice, sorghum, sugarcane and wheat, but it can also attack vegetable crops and cotton. Indeed, it has a host range comprising over 350 species. It is most likely to be found in warm, moist regions with little forest cover, and larvae are most active during the late summer and early autumn months.

FAW moths are strong fliers, and can spread remarkably fast and over long distances given the right weather conditions. They can also be spread through the movement of people. The climatic conditions and availability of host plants in Northern Australia are considered suitable for the establishment of this pest.

In late January, several moths identified as FAW were detected in traps on Torres Strait Islands – a first for Australia. Subsequent detections across the far north of Australia confirmed that a population had established on the mainland. Given its host range, ability to multiply and spread, plus the geographic distribution of detections, it was determined that eradication was no longer feasible. Focus then shifted to how the impacts of FAW could be minimised.

Surveillance activities are expanding across the north, with trapping grids covering areas of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The Commonwealth, states/territories and affected industries are working together to monitor and report the spread of this pest, and to ensure that appropriate measures are in place to deal with it as necessary.

It is very unlikely that FAW will have any impact on processing tomato crops this season, but it could well make an appearance in future years. Current control measures for similar pests are likely to provide crop protection in the short-medium term but it should be noted that FAW has shown the ability to develop resistance to pesticides. The fact that army worms

(including FAW) are listed as only occasional pests of processing tomato crops in California further suggests that any impact on Australian crops should be minor.

In the event that we do need to deal with Fall Armyworm, early crop monitoring is critical for effective control.

What to look for

- The eggs are pale yellow in colour and clustered together in a mass, which often contain 100 – 200 eggs per mass. Egg masses are usually attached to foliage with a layer of mould/silk-like furry substance.
- The larvae are light coloured with a larger darker head. As they develop, they become browner with white lengthwise stripes. They also develop dark spots with spines.
- The adult moths are 32 to 40mm in length wing tip to wing tip, with a brown or grey forewing and a white hind wing. Male fall armyworms have more patterns and a distinct white spot on each of their forewings.

Biosecurity and reporting

- Appropriate registered pesticides may be suitable to treat fall armyworm infestations, if used in accordance with label instruction and relevant state or territory government control of use legislation. Please refer to your local chemical supplier or the state department of primary industry for advice.
- Industry and agronomists are encouraged to report any unexpected symptoms in the field by phoning the **Exotic Plant Pest Hotline** on **1800 084 881**. This will put you in touch with your department of primary industries or agriculture.

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