



## ARTICLE SUBMITTED to LICH

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### **Pest Alert: Little Fire Ants on the Move**

It took just a couple of stings from Little Fire Ants (LFAs) to convince a Maui farmer that these ants were different. State agriculture officials took the report and quickly confirmed the first known infestation of Little Fire Ant on Maui. As their common name implies, LFA are small—about as long as a penny is thick—and their stings burn for hours before turning into pustules that can itch for weeks.

LFA are serious pests that infest yards and agricultural fields, from ground level to the tops of trees, and they move into houses when their numbers are large. LFA are primarily transported to new sites in potted plants, plant materials, soil, green waste and rubbish, although they may also move in cars or heavy equipment stored in infested areas.

LFA are native to Central and South America, but they have managed to hitchhike on nursery materials and invade remote and fragile ecosystems including the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, and Vanuatu. In 1999 the first LFA were reported in Puna on the Big Island, and on a single property in Kalihiwai, Kaua'i shortly after. Today, there are 50 known infestations in East Hawai'i, one infestation on Kaua'i, and this newly reported ½ acre property in Waihe'e, Maui, but experts agree that there are probably more infestations that just haven't been reported yet.

Hawai'i now has two types of stinging fire ants. Most people are familiar with tropical fire ants, the uninvited picnic guests that infest many of our parks. To tell the difference, tropical fire ants are fairly big (1/8-1/4 inch long), brownish in color, and some of the workers have heads that look bigger than their bodies. LFA are very small (1/16 inch) and rather difficult to see, orange-red in color, slow moving, and their heads and bodies are evenly proportioned.

You can test for LFA by placing a peanut butter-coated chopstick around properties or in plant materials for an hour to attract ants. Pick up the chopsticks (carefully, LFA are easily dislodged) and put them in a sealable plastic bag. Examine the ants on the peanut butter.

- Are they red-orange?
- Are they no longer than 1/16 inch (the thickness of a penny)?
- Are they slow-moving and do they fall off the chopstick easily when you tap it?

If you can answer YES to these questions, then you may have the little fire ant. Seal the plastic bag, write your name and phone number on the bag, and place it in the freezer overnight to kill the ants. Contact the State Pest Hotline at 643-PEST (643-7378), your local Hawai'i Department of Agriculture office or Invasive Species Committee.

Do not begin control of the ants until State Agriculture officials have been consulted. Products such as Siege® Pro and Amdro® Pro (both hydramethylnon), Extinguish® Plus (hydramethylnon and methoprene), Esteem® Ant Bait (pyriproxyfen), and Conserve™ Professional Fire Ant Bait (spinosad) have been successfully used to control LFA infestations, but eradication is extremely difficult and requires repeated applications over years.

Like the farmer on Maui, you can help in the early detection of pests by reporting unusual or unknown species to the State Pest Hotline at 643-PEST (643-7378).

More information on LFA can be found at <http://hawaii.gov/hdoa/pi/ppc/npa-1/npa99-02-lfireant.pdf>

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