

## **Pine Straw Retailers Protect Your Employees and Customers**

Your employees may lose valuable work time and customers may be at risk from stings by imported fire ants when handling the popular landscaping material, pine straw mulch. Pine straw is the term used for fallen pine needles that are gathered beneath the trees in a pine forest or plantation. Pine straw can be raked, baled, and sold as mulch or ground cover for use in gardens and landscaping.

The majority of pine straw mulch is baled in areas in the southern United States where fire ants have become established. Fire ants may be gathered accidentally with the pine straw during the baling process.

Fire ants are 1/8 to 1/4-inch long and reddish brown to black in color. They look much like ordinary ants so they are best distinguished by their aggressive behavior. Fire ants respond rapidly to any disturbance.

A single fire ant can sting their target repeatedly, and several or even dozens of ants may be on a person before the ants begin to sting. Fire ants inject a dose of venom that causes a burning sensation and skin blistering at the sting site. If not kept clean, these blisters can become sites of secondary infection. Some people stung by fire ants may be allergic to the venom. Allergic reactions can vary, but may include chest pains, nausea, dizziness, shock, or in rare cases, coma. Every year deaths have been documented as having been caused by fire ant stings but these cases are extremely rare.

To prevent the spread of fire ants to uninfested areas, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) requires that most nursery stock and other items likely to carry the pests be inspected and/or treated before traveling from fire ant-infested areas to fire ant-free areas. Regulated articles include soil, potted plants (except house plants maintained indoors and not for sale), grass sod, baled hay, straw that has been stored in contact with the soil, and used soil-moving equipment.

Currently, pine straw mulch is not specifically included as a regulated article and no treatment to remove all fire ants in this type of mulch currently

exists. However, the risk of imported fire ants in pine straw is real. Several States have reported to APHIS the presence of fire ants in pine straw mulch. These States also have reported that employees and customers of retailers have been stung by fire ants while handling this mulch.

APHIS takes these reports very seriously, and is in the planning stages to revise the fire ant quarantine regulations to address pine straw mulch. However, before the new regulations can be written, APHIS needs a better understanding of the pine straw industry and the types of treatments that the industry can be reasonably expected to implement. APHIS intends to gather much of this information through discussions with pine straw producers, retailers, and transporters. APHIS also intends to issue an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking soliciting input and guidance on these issues.

The rulemaking process can be lengthy. Therefore, APHIS encourages pine straw retailers to be aware of the potential hazards of pine straw and to look forward to being part of the rulemaking process. Throughout the rulemaking process, there will be several opportunities for public comment.

Should you find fire ants in a pine straw shipment please contact your State agricultural regulatory official or the USDA-APHIS State Plant Health Director. Contact information for these individuals can be found at

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ismf/fireants/contacts.pdf>.

For more information regarding the imported fire ant Federal quarantine, please visit the Plant Protection and Quarantine Web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ispf/fireants/index.html>.

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