

Enhancing biosecurity against pest threats across the Pacific

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Dr Monica Gruber has been researching invasive ants in the Pacific region since 2008 and is now heading the collaborative endeavour.

"The work had its genesis about 10 years ago when Professor Phil Lester [from Victoria University's School of Biological Sciences] was asked by villagers to help with infestations of yellow crazy <u>ants</u> on two of



Tokelau's three atolls. Then, in 2011, we were told the ants had spread to the third atoll and were causing damage and disruption to the lives of local people. While doing some separate work in Kiribati, we discovered the yellow crazy ant there too."

Dr Gruber says these <u>invasive ants</u> can become massively abundant and widespread. "People tell us they are unable to sleep due to ants crawling over them, crop production is reduced, and pets and livestock are affected by ants spraying acid in their eyes or stinging."

She says despite the huge impact of these pests, many communities are unable to do anything to manage the ant populations because they cannot afford pesticides or other methods of ant control.

Dr Gruber is now leading the project on behalf of, and in partnership with, the Tokelau and Kiribati governments and regional and in-country agencies, including the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the Secretariat of the Pacific Region Environment Programme and the Pacific Invasives Initiative.

With the assistance of Victoria University's commercialisation office, Viclink, Dr Gruber and Professor Lester formed a non-profit entity called Pacific Biosecurity based in Victoria's School of Biological Sciences to facilitate the partnership. The New Zealand Aid Programme (which is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade) has awarded Viclink a \$1.5 million contract to enable Pacific Biosecurity and its partners to improve resources for ant management and biosecurity across the Pacific.

Across the region, Pacific Biosecurity's goal is to help prevent the spread of species like the little fire ant. "These tiny ants have an extremely painful sting, and the effects of the ants can be serious when they are in high abundance," says Monica. "In some places, the ants have forced people off their land as they can't tend crops. Because they're found on



both sides of the Pacific, we need to prevent their spread into the rest of the region, and improve the ability to manage them.

"Prevention requires less effort and resources than eradication—which becomes impossible when these ants cover a large area. That's why we need to focus on biosecurity across the whole Pacific region to prevent the ants—and other invasive species—from spreading. We encourage additional partners to join the initiative as these ants are a region-wide problem, and improved resources will be a benefit for all."

More information: For more information about the initiative, go to the Pacific Biosecurity website: <u>www.pacificbiosecurity.org/</u>

Provided by Victoria University

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