

Targeting invasive ant species in the Pacific

April 11 2017



Atafu Village, Tokelau. Credit: Victoria University

Ants in New Zealand might be annoying, but in the Pacific, invasive ant species are tiny terrors that are destroying food crops, blinding pets and livestock, and forcing people off their land.

Pacific Biosecurity, a non-profit organisation operating out of Victoria University of Wellington's School of Biological Sciences and supported by Viclink, Victoria University's commercialisation office, is halfway

through a five-year project funded by the New Zealand Aid Programme to improve capacity to deal with [invasive ants](#).

The researchers involved say the results so far are positive.

"We've been collaborating with regional and in-country partners over the last two years to control yellow crazy ants on Atafu, Tokelau and eradicate them in Kiritimati, Kiribati," says Dr Monica Gruber, Pacific Biosecurity's programme manager.

"We are delighted to report that we have significantly reduced ant numbers so that they are no longer causing problems."

The acid-spraying yellow crazy ants are capable of mass attacking and killing animals over 500 times their size—including crabs, and nesting seabirds and their chicks—posing a significant threat to local ecosystems.

"Despite the huge impact of these pests, communities weren't able to do anything to manage the ant populations because they couldn't afford pesticides or other methods of ant control," says Dr Gruber.

The New Zealand Aid Programme funding enabled Pacific Biosecurity to help with control of the ants, and develop the Pacific Invasive Ant Toolkit (PIAT), a website and a collection of resources designed to help biosecurity staff, consultants, village councils and homeowners to prevent and control invasive ants in the Pacific.

Currently, the toolkit is being rolled out to in-country and regional agency partners through a series of workshops. The workshops cover how to prevent ant problems, including community awareness-raising and [biosecurity](#) improvements, and how to manage problems when they occur, including determining the best practice method of treatment and

the safe and effective use of pesticides.

"The results we've experienced, and the feedback we've been getting, show that our work is having a positive impact," says Dr Gruber. "Our in-country partners appreciate the resources we've created to enable them to more easily identify invasive ants, carry out risk assessments, and undertake programmes to control invasive [ants](#)."

Pacific Biosecurity will also be using some of the New Zealand Aid Programme funding to deal with the yellow crazy ant problem in Tuvalu.

Additionally, later in the year, the team will work with colleagues from the Biosecurity and Trade Support Team at the Pacific Community (SPC) to implement an integrated pest management programme for mealybugs in Fakaofu, Tokelau.

Dr Gruber says the team is grateful for support from Viclink.

"It was Viclink that advised us to set up our group as a distinct entity, and then helped us to apply for funding. There's always a risk involved in any new initiative, but they've shown complete faith in us all along, and given us the freedom to be creative about designing and implementing solutions."

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

Citation: Targeting invasive ant species in the Pacific (2017, April 11) retrieved 7 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-04-invasive-ant-species-pacific.html>

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