

Formosan Termites (*Coptotermes formosansus*) In Texas
Roger E. Gold, Ph.D.
Center for Urban & Structural Entomology
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

Formosan Termites are an introduced species of wood destroying insect that are spreading rapidly throughout Texas. They were first introduced in approximately 1958 and are now found in at least 30 counties in Texas. Infestations are now established in the largest population centers in Texas including Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, Houston, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Galveston and Beaumont. It is expected that infestations will continue to spread through the use of recycled railroad ties and other infested wood products. These cities represent 4 of the 10 largest cities in the United States.

Formosan Termites have very large colonies, with over a million workers. They cause considerable damage to all wooden structures, and can invade and kill living trees. These colonies cause at least four times more damage per year than native subterranean termites.

Formosan Termites have the potential for being one of the most economically destructive insect species in Texas due to the fact that they destroy homes, commercial properties, and other wooden structures. In addition, where they have colonized, they also attack and kill living trees, which will have significant consequences to homeowners, and lumber industries.

Formosan Termites are difficult to control due to the fact that they are aggressive feeders on wood and other cellulose products, have large colonies, and they construct carton nests above ground. In some situations, the only successful controls have involved the use of liquid termiticide, termite baits, and fumigations.

In Texas, termites do an estimated \$500 million in damage per year, of which \$100 million are attributed to Formosan Termites, and the infestations are spreading rapidly. They have the potential of doing more damage than all other species of termites combined. Estimates at the national level indicate that all subterranean termites, including Formosans, cause over \$5 billion per year.

Formosan Termites have been particularly damaging in the coastal regions of Texas and surrounding states where they attack structures, particularly ports, warehouses, and wharfs receiving materials from around the world, including Homeland Security facilities. Beaumont, Texas was one of the first locations from which Formosan termites was reported (1962), and damage to the Ports of Houston and Beaumont and surrounding subdivisions is continuing at an alarming rate. This problem has been exacerbated by the hurricanes of recent years when trees infested with these termites were blown down or broken off. The resulting mulch, some of which was transported inland, has reportedly been the source of the spreading Formosan populations. Quarantines are now in effect which limit the movement of infested wood, wood products and plant materials.

Formosan Termites are a major threat to the lumber and arbor industries due to the fact that they destroy living trees. Pecans, an important agricultural product in Texas, are highly susceptible to Formosan termite feeding which weakens the trees and reduces production. These termites affect all producers and manufacturers of raw wood products, including recyclers, all of whom are negatively affected, particularly if these termites continue to spread in Texas.

The only research funds that address Formosan Termites are from USDA-ARS, and these funds are in jeopardy due to federal budget cuts. Texas provides no research money to conduct research on these invasive species at the present time.