

## **Fire Ants at Talladega Bringing NASCAR Fans Back Down to Earth**

**Henry D. Dorough  
Regional Extension Agent  
Animal Science & Forages  
Alabama Cooperative Extension System  
Talladega, Alabama**

Since their introduction into the United States in the early 1900's, fire ants have been the primary target of many Extension projects. One recent project involved treating for fire ants at the Talladega Superspeedway, NASCAR's fastest track and home of two major NASCAR Nextel Cup races in Talladega, Alabama. Twice each year about 150,000 race fans converge on campgrounds owned by the Talladega Superspeedway. An additional 100,000 fans will arrive on race day and picnic in the day parking areas. Track officials and race fans routinely called the local Extension office to get recommendations for controlling fire ants in the campgrounds at the track. Twice a year, race fans poured into local stores to buy anything that purported to kill fire ants, even resorting at times to illegal methods such as the use of gasoline, diesel fuel and lighter fluid within infested areas.

A visit with track officials revealed that fire ants were the number one complaint from race fans camping on speedway property. Track officials had been giving small bags of Amdro to campers that complained of fire ant problems; a practice that has obvious flaws. Amdro requires two to four weeks to control fire ant populations whereas race fans are only at the track for a maximum of one week for each race. Also, without specific label instructions, intoxicated race fans are hardly likely to apply the bait according to label directions.

After visiting with track officials, a team of Extension personnel along with the Alabama Fire Ant Management Program worked together to develop the largest site-specific demonstration ever conducted in the State of Alabama.

The primary project goals for the team were:

- To educate Talladega Superspeedway employees on proper bait calibration and application techniques.
- To educate race fans on effective fire ant control methods.
- To minimize the environmental impact of race fans killing fire ants on speedway property.

The goals for Talladega Superspeedway officials were:

- To eliminate fire ant complaints from campers in the more expensive campgrounds.
- To eliminate fire ants during race week.

Pre-treatment surveys of speedway property revealed an average fire ant population of 186 mounds per acre. The infield at the track had a population of 243 mounds per acre. From August 1 through 3, 2005, the team equipped 16 John Deere Gators with Herd GT-77 seeders, trained the speedway staff in calibration and spreading techniques and then monitored the spreading of over 2,500 pounds of Extinguish Plus on approximately 1,500 acres of campgrounds owned by the Talladega Superspeedway.

On August 31, 2005, 30 days after the initial treatment, the population was reduced to just 49 mounds per acre. Speedway officials, although impressed with the results, insisted on a zero tolerance for fire ants during race week in October. Therefore, the decision was made to make an additional application of Extinguish Plus to the most expensive campgrounds inside and outside of the track where the greatest fire ant populations existed and where the most camper complaints originate. On September 23, 2005, nine days before the Nextel Cup championship

points race, the population was reduced to only nine (9) mounds per acre, an overall 95 percent reduction. The most expensive campgrounds in the infield were practically devoid of fire ants.

During race week, the team surveyed approximately 10 percent of the campers about their experiences with fire ants at Talladega. Fans were asked to rate past and present experiences on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 was no problem and 10 was an extreme problem. First-time campers rated their present experience at 1.3. Fans camping at Talladega two to four years rated their past experience at 4.1 and their present experience at 1.2. Fans camping five or more years rated their past experience at 6.9 and their present experience at 1.4. The numbers clearly indicate that race fans considered fire ants a serious issue at their campsites in past years and that the treatment with Extinguish Plus greatly improved their overall camping experience.

Fans were asked if they had brought chemicals to control fire ants in their campsite and if so, if they were used since arriving on speedway property. Thirty-nine percent indicated they brought chemicals with them and only 47 percent of those individuals said they actually used the product. In all, 80 percent of the campers used no chemicals to control fire ants in their campsite. Of those who used the chemicals they brought, most said based on past experiences they were in the habit of treating their campsite prior to parking their RV and did so before learning of our project. The list of products brought with the campers included a variety of contact insecticides, baits, aerosols as well as gasoline, diesel fuel and lighter fluid.

Fans were also asked if they had fire ants where they lived and if so, how they controlled fire ants within and outside their homes. Sixty-seven percent said they lived in a fire ant infested area. The rest resided outside areas of the U.S. where fire ants have invaded. For those with fire ants at home, most said the same methods used at the Talladega Superspeedway were used at home while some indicated they used pest control operators to treat their personal property. When asked to rate the effectiveness of the treatments they used, the results were the same for treatments on speedway property and at home. Using the same scale of 1 – 10, fans rated their control methods an average of 5.7. Contact insecticides rated 5.2 and baits rated 6.2.

On an interesting note, the fans surveyed represented 24 states including: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

In addition to the surveys, race fans were educated about the method of fire ant control used at Talladega. Literature was handed out giving details of the Talladega project, results and information on controlling fire ants at home with a bait product using the two-step method. Several local newspapers assisted with the educational effort by publishing articles on the project's results. Signs also were posted throughout the speedway property to inform fans about the project.

Seven months after the initial treatment, control of fire ants at the speedway remained at 95 percent. During the spring race in April 2006 there were no complaints registered with track officials by campers on speedway property. A one year survey of fire ant populations at the Talladega Superspeedway is planned and the results will be added to this report at that time.

In summary, the project was a tremendous success. All of the project goals were met. Talladega Superspeedway employees learned the proper methods for controlling fire ants using a bait product, race fans were educated about fire ants and their control and Talladega Superspeedway property was protected from the tremendous volume of chemicals normally used to control fire ants during race week twice each year. The project was highly successful not only for its effect in controlling fire ants but through its use of environmentally sound and sustainable methods. It is a success not only reflected by the survey but by the positive comments of race fans who, by becoming better informed about effective fire ant control methods, were less inclined to resort to harsh and, in many cases, largely ineffective control measures.