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Genome research could combat ant pest

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Swiss researchers have helped decipher the genome of an aggressive fire ant, which they hope will make it possible to fight the pest effectively for the first time.

The red imported fire ant (Solenopsis invicta), a native of South America, lives in huge colonies and destroys useful native insects. Its sting is also very painful to human beings.

It is estimated to cause $5 billion (SFr4.7 billion) worth of damage every year in the United States alone, including loss of crops and livestock.

A research team headed by renowned ant specialist Laurent Keller of Lausanne University discovered that it has a huge number of olfactory receptors in comparison with most insects.

The ants recognise their queen by smell; the idea would be to reverse the receptors so that instead of being attracted to her they would be repelled. The colonies would then dissolve of their own accord.

The researchers came from Lausanne University and the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, and their results are published in the specialist journal PNAS.

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The Ant's Best Friend

For two decades, biologist Laurent Keller has been researching ant behaviour and what they can teach us.

LINKS

Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics (SIB)

University of Lausanne (French)

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA

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