

Florida's Coneheadache

by Sue Alspach, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS)

If the title is any indication, Florida is dealing with yet another invasive species. This time, the culprit is a termite with a cone-shaped head, a huge royal family, and a voracious appetite for anything made of wood or cellulose. The invasive conehead termite (*Nasutitermes corniger*) has moved into Broward County, leading the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and its partners on a mission to put a lid on the problem before it spreads to forests and woody crops.

The conehead termite has settled comfortably in Florida where the climate is much like its native range – the Caribbean basin, Central America, and northern South America. It is assumed that coneheads entered the state in wooden packing material from a boat that traveled through its native range and docked at a marina in Dania Beach. This termite lives aboveground, building conspicuous nests and transportation tunnels on trees, shrubs, stumps, roots, and buildings (sometimes inside). Due to the presence of multiple queens and kings in each nest, the population in a colony grows rapidly. To feed its ever-expanding hungry horde, the colony's foraging area spreads widely and quickly.

Conehead termites were first discovered in Florida in 2001 when a Broward County homeowner noticed a strange phenomenon inside their house. Long, branching, dark brown tunnels covered the walls. A pest control company confirmed that conehead termites were building the tunnels. By that time, the adjacent marina was already heavily infested. Coneheads were eating the trees, bushes, boats, and spreading to vegetation on nearby properties. Typically in Florida, coneheads first infest vegetation on a property, then as their population grows, they scout nearby homes and businesses for new food sources.

The largest infestations found to date in Broward County have been in heavily overgrown wooded areas, indicating that natural spaces such as state parks, Big Cypress National Preserve, and Everglades National Park, are prime for conehead colonization. Invasion in natural areas could spark a chain of negative impacts to the native ecosystem and ultimately impact the structural integrity of tree stands, making them more susceptible to blow overs.



Conehead termite soldiers from Pompano Beach (Photo © B.L. Thorne).

Although the only known populations of this termite in the United States currently reside in Broward County, they may be elsewhere. The department is working diligently to eradicate two populations of conehead termites in Dania Beach and Pompano Beach. Floridians can do their part and notify the department of any suspicious tunnels or nests by calling the hotline at **888-397-1517**. For more information on the invasive conehead termite's biology and pictures of the termite, their tunnels and nests, visit FreshFromFlorida.com and search "conehead." With our homes and natural areas at risk, your reports can help us stop this 'conehead'ache.



Conehead termite nest on sabal palmetto (Photo by: Sue Alspach, FDACS).



Conehead termite tunnels on a tree (Photo by: Sue Alspach, FDACS).