

## Damage of Formosan Subterranean Termites

Termites depend on wood and other cellulose materials to survive. Their role in the environment is to recycle wood as a part of nature. But, when they recycle materials being used by humans, they become pests.

Subterranean termite colonies live in the soil. They have different castes to perform specific duties.

Worker termites are responsible for finding food, digesting it and sharing it with others in the colony. They are busy 24 hours a day as they tunnel around in search of food. It is during this process that they enter homes and infest wooden structures in walls and roofs. They build airtight earthen (mud) tubes for traveling between the nest and a food source. Termite workers excavate the inside of lumber and rarely break through to the surface. As a result, the damage is often not detected until something gives way. If not detected early, substantial structural damage will occur. In addition to houses, subterranean termites (particularly Formosan) also infest railroad ties, wharves, telephone poles, fence posts, furniture, books and living trees.

Formosan subterranean termites (FST) are very aggressive. They have the largest colonies of any termites in North America, and they can cause extensive damage in a relatively short period. The workers forage aggressively and have been found as far as 100

yards away from the main nest. To reach a food or water source, the FST can chew through many non-cellulose materials such as thin sheets of soft metals, plastics, rubbers, stucco, styrene and seals on water lines. They can find sources of water other than the soil and build carton nests above ground.



Damaged structural timber



Damaged wooden floor



Damage to living tree

Most people are aware of the damage fire and severe weather can do to their homes, but many overlook the threat of termites. Subterranean termites are estimated to cause billions per year in damage and control measures nationwide, with \$1 billion caused by FST alone. In Louisiana, FST cause \$500 million in damage annually with \$300 million occurring in the New Orleans area. The FST is one of the most destructive insects in Louisiana despite the fact that its known distribution includes mainly parishes south of Interstates 10 and 12, and it is not widely distributed in all of these parishes.

## Detection of Formosan Subterranean Termites

Subterranean termites have soft bodies and are very sensitive to air currents and light. They attack homes from below and rarely break through the surface of wood. As a result, their activities are very secretive. They may enter walls from foundations, destroying structural wall timbers and the roof wood. Such damage may be concealed for months, or even years, before they are detected.

### Signs of subterranean termites

- large number of alates or wings either inside or outside a house

#### Inside a house

- earthen masses on door frames, edges of walls, floors, ceilings, stairs, skirting or other areas of the house
- blistering of paint on windows, door frames and skirting
- damp areas on walls
- distortion of floor, window or door frames

## Outside a house

- mud tubes over foundation walls, piers and edges of concrete slabs
- trees with earthen material near the base and on the bark
- damaged fences, utility poles and landscaping timbers

You should routinely inspect your home including attics, crawl spaces and garages for these signs whether you have a contract with a pest control company or not. Keep in mind that not all of these signs indicate a definite infestation in a house, but they do mean a termite colony or colonies are present in the area, and there is a great potential for damage.



Earthen masses inside a house



Mud tube on wall

When you see signs of termites, seek professional help because termite control requires special equipment and expertise. A good professional pest control operator will inspect all parts of the building and propose a treatment plan and give you the cost. A termite inspection should reveal the following information:

- the type of termite, if present
- areas where infestation and damage occur
- the degree of damage, if possible
- entry point(s) and potential entry points

Based on this information, control options applicable to the particular problem will be decided.

Photo credit:  
New Orleans Mosquito and Termite Control Board.

### Authors:

Alan Morgan, Associate Professor  
Dennis Ring, Professor  
Lixin Mao, Post Doc  
Dale Pollet, Professor

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, No 58-6435-2-0023.  
The authors are responsible for the content.

Visit our Web site: [www.lsuagcenter.com](http://www.lsuagcenter.com)

**Louisiana State University Agricultural Center**  
William R. Richardson, Chancellor  
**Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station**  
David J. Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director  
**Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service**  
Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Pub. 2840

(10M)

3/06

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

TERMITE INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT SERIES

# Formosan Subterranean Termite Damage & Detection

