

DAIRY HERD MANAGEMENT (/)

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California dairy efforts help keep Tricolored Blackbirds from CESA listing

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Pictured from left to right: John Labandeira, WUD field rep, Frank Mendonsa, Samantha Arthur, biologist for Audubon, James Garner, communications director for Dairy Cares, and Jessie Bahm, biologist for NRCS.

The California Fish and Game Commission voted not to add the Tricolored Blackbird as a candidate for listing under the California Endanger Species Act (CESA), thanks in part to efforts by dairy farmers to preserve the birds' nesting habitat.

As a candidate, the species would have received full protection under CESA while the Department of Fish and Wildlife studied the species before taking a vote for listing by the commission at a later date.

Paul Sousa, Western United Dairymen (WUD) Director of Environmental Services, testified at the hearing in opposition to the listing, along with Dairy Cares and California Farm Bureau representatives. Sousa noted the efforts by dairy farmers and others growing winter forage this year saved the nests of 67,000 Tricolored Blackbirds.

“Incentive-based, voluntary efforts are the way to save this species,” explained Sousa. “This collective effort by dairy producers played a major role in the positive decision made this week. WUD members have committed to doing the right thing and I look forward to focusing WUD's resources on the needs of the species rather than a protracted regulatory process.”

Acting on a petition by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), the Commission voted to grant the Tricolored Blackbird emergency protection under the CESA in December of 2014. That emergency listing expires at the end of this month. The CBD petition also asked the commission to permanently list the species and yesterday's decision ended that process.

Following the announcement in December, WUD, along with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), California Farm Bureau, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation and Audubon California announced a proactive and innovative conservation project to reimburse farmers for lost yield in fields where the blackbirds nest, boost habitat, and do outreach work for the Tricolored Blackbird. The partnership was one of only six distinct conservation projects selected in California through the new NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Representing the collective efforts of industry partners, WUD President Frank Mendonsa was recently recognized by NRCS for his work to protect two colonies of nearly 15,000 Tricolored Blackbirds temporarily nested in his silage fields. Conservation partners working with Mendonsa to find win-win solutions for farmers and the birds included Audubon California, NRCS, and Western United Dairymen.