

Modesto-area dairy group touts a way to save blackbirds

HIGHLIGHTS

Species nests in dairy feed crops

Federal program pays farmers to delay harvest

Conservation group sought endangered status



A pair of tricolored blackbirds forage for food in Tipton dairy farmer Frank Mendonsa's wheat field in May. The birds are part of a double colony of 15,000 nesting in his field, which he has postponed harvesting. |

John Walker - The Fresno Bee

BY JOHN HOLLAND
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The tricolored blackbird, known to nest in dairy feed crops in the San Joaquin Valley, is not headed to the state's endangered species list anytime soon.

The California Fish and Game Commission declined last week to continue considering the bird as a candidate for listing, a decision that won praise from Western United Dairymen. The Modesto-based group and its allies argued that listing could have meant penalties for killing blackbirds during harvest or other operations.

They support a voluntary program where farmers are paid to delay harvesting feed crops where blackbird nests are found. The species tends to nest in high concentrations, so protecting a few fields could save tens of thousands of nestlings.

"It would have been challenging going forward with this bird listed as an endangered species, with its habit of nesting in dairy forage fields," said Paul Sousa, the group's director of environmental services.

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The commission in December granted a six-month emergency listing to allow further review of the blackbird's status. It was sought by the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, Ariz.

"This species has been in a dangerous decline for years, so this is a very important step to protect tricolored blackbirds and their nesting colonies," spokesman Jeff Miller said in December. "Tricolors are particularly vulnerable to human impacts because a small number of breeding colonies can contain most of the entire population."

Tricolored blackbirds, not to be confused with the still-abundant red-winged blackbird, once numbered in the millions in California. A UC Davis survey estimated 145,000 last year.

The birds have lost most of their natural habitat to farming and urban development, but there's a twist: They have taken to nesting in dairy feed crops that are planted in fall and harvested in spring, especially a wheat-rye hybrid called triticale.

The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service has been paying selected farmers to keep their harvesting rigs out of the fields until the nestlings have taken flight. The effort is mainly between Merced and Kern counties, Sousa said, but some of the birds make their way into the Sacramento Valley.

The dairy group's president, Tulare County farmer Frank Mendonsa, received \$600 per acre this spring to postpone harvesting where about 15,000 birds were found. The money makes up for reduced feed quality.

"Most dairy farmers, if given the right information, they want to do the right thing to protect these birds," Mendonsa told The Fresno Bee last month. "That's the right thing to do."

The service has \$1.1 million to continue the program over five years, plus nearly that much from its partners. The effort includes Western United Dairymen, Audubon California, the California Farm Bureau Federation, Sustainable Conservation and an industry group called Dairy Cares.

The project also involves planting native vegetation in wetlands to reduce reliance on dairy feed crops over the long term.

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