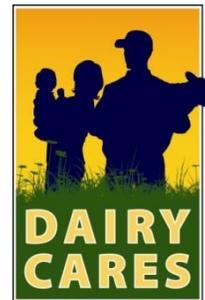


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Dairy Cares Newsletter

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Dairy families step up preservation efforts as tricolored blackbird nesting season nears



For more than a decade, California dairy organizations have worked shoulder to shoulder with conservationists to preserve and increase the state's threatened tricolored blackbird population. Partners in this effort include Audubon California, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation, and Western United Dairymen (WUD). In the past three years, efforts have accelerated thanks to a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Found almost exclusively in California, the tricolored blackbird generally begins nesting in

February. Loss of habitat over many decades has led these birds to sometimes seek nesting sites in fields where farmers grow cereals over the winter. Unfortunately, these fields are often scheduled for harvest before the birds are finished nesting, which can create a conflict. However, conservation actions by dairy farmers and other private landowners in California have helped prevent losses of the birds and economic losses for farmers. In fact, last July Audubon California reported that more than 57,000 of the birds nesting in Central Valley farmlands were saved during the harvest season, making it the first season every colony found in an agricultural field was preserved and marking unprecedented success for these collaborative efforts.

The Partnership Program provides farmers the opportunity to receive over \$600 per acre to cover the costs of delaying a harvest until after the nesting season. Jesse Bahm, who runs the NRCS program in Fresno, noted that "dairymen continue to step up and answer the call for helping the declining tricolored blackbird. Participation in the tricolored blackbird initiatives with NRCS and Audubon has been increasing each year and we anticipate working with 100 percent of producers with the birds in their fields in 2017."

This effort is a critical part of a larger endeavor to identify sustainable habitats to help the tricolored blackbirds thrive. Samantha Arthur with Audubon California estimates that nearly 40 percent of the birds nest in dairy forage fields. Protecting 100 percent of the known farmland colonies in 2016, she said, “is a milestone highlighting the collaborative efforts of Central Valley dairies and the success of the partnership across different sectors.”

Once numbering in the millions, the tricolored blackbird population has declined in recent decades to as low as 150,000 birds, according to 2014 survey data. That prompted the California Fish and Wildlife Commission to vote early last year to consider listing the bird as an endangered species under the California Endangered Species Act. The next comprehensive statewide survey of the tricoloreds will be conducted this spring. In November of last year, a stakeholder coalition led by the California Farm Bureau Federation requested that any decision on the listing of the tricolored blackbird as an endangered species be informed by the data from this survey. Accordingly, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife agreed to extend the time frame for the listing assessment to include consideration of this important data.

The efforts of California dairy farmers to help tricolored blackbirds received a good deal of media coverage in 2016, including features in The Fresno Bee, The Modesto Bee, Capital Public Radio (KXJZ Sacramento), and Valley Public Radio (KVPR Fresno). The latter segment ran nationwide on National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition and featured a visit to Steve Shehadey’s dairy farm near Fresno. As Shehadey told KVPR reporter Ezra David Romero, “Farmers are environmentalists. We live and take care of our environment every day.” In this instance, that includes helping to sustain a species.

Featuring dairy farmer Frank Mendonsa of Tipton, the 2015 Dairy Cares/Audubon California video on the efforts of Central Valley dairy farmers to protect nesting tricolored blackbirds can be viewed [here](#).

For more information on tricolored blackbird working group contact Paul Sousa at pauls@westernuniteddairymen.com; and/or Noelle Cremers at ncremers@cfbf.com .

Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care. Our members include Bar 20 Dairy Farms, California Cattlemen’s Association, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-Western Area Council, Dairy Institute of California, GHD Services, Inc., Harris Construction, Hilmar Cheese Co., HP Hood, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O’Lakes, Merck Animal Health, Milk Producers Council, Ruan Transport Corp., Western United Dairymen, Yosemite Farm Credit and others. For information, visit our web site or call 916-441-3318.