

Endangered tricolor blackbird's fate entwined with dairy industry

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Tricolored blackbirds, once one of the most abundant birds in California, now depend largely on Central Valley dairy farmers for their survival.

Millions of the gregarious birds used to build their nests in wetlands. With those wetlands mostly gone, the remaining colonies congregate on fields where dairy farmers grow feed for their cows. Each Spring, dairy farmers harvest the feed, plowing under many of the nestlings in the process.

A decades-long decline in the tricolored blackbird population has reached a crisis point. Earlier this month, the state responded by listing the bird under the California Endangered Species Act on an emergency basis. The listing means it's illegal for farmers to destroy the birds' nests, said Lisa Belenky, attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the petition with the California Fish and Game Commission that led to the emergency listing.

The listing comes two years after the federal government began paying dairy farmers in the San Joaquin Valley who agree to delay their harvest to avoid killing young birds. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has spent \$370,000 on the program so far. It soon may add \$1 million to the effort, though state officials concede the program hasn't stemmed the species' decline.

Roughly 145,135 tricolored blackbirds were counted this year in the most comprehensive inventory of the species to date, 44 percent fewer than the tally in 2011. In the 1930s, an estimated 3 million tricolored blackbirds flew through California's skies.

Today, most of the remaining birds are found in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. The tricolored blackbird is distinguished by its red shoulder patch and a white bar of feathers on its wing. The bird often is confused with the more common red-winged blackbird.

Audubon California, state wildlife officials and scientists say the dairy industry is a key player in the fate of the species, given that 40 percent of the tricolor blackbird population now nests on silage fields.

"Last year, the largest colony of blackbirds was found in a dairy field in Madera County," said Kevin Hunting, chief deputy director with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Tens of thousands of the birds can jam onto fields as small as 20 acres. They eat insects and grain, and use the crops and weeds as cover from predators.

Audubon California has been working with the state and federal governments to encourage dairy farmers to delay harvesting their fields. Many dairy farmers grow triticale, a hybrid of wheat and rye popular because of its high protein content.

Payments to dairy farmers started in 2012, said Alan Forkey, state conservationist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. In total, the NRCS has entered into contracts with 14 dairy farmers in the San Joaquin Valley. Ten of the farms are in Tulare County, two in Kern County, and one each in Madera and Merced.

Farmers are paid based on the value of their crops, a figure that has been going up with the price of grain. Typically, the NRCS pays around half the market rate. In 2012, the NRCS paid \$400 per acre for a delayed harvest. In 2014, the payment was \$600 per acre, Forkey said.

Last year, the largest recipient of federal funds was a dairy farm in Madera County, where 50,000 tricolored blackbirds were thought to be nesting. The farm was compensated \$88,000 for delaying the harvest of 145 acres.

Audubon California, working with dairy farmers, recently submitted an application for a \$1.2 million grant from the federal government to continue the effort. If the application is selected, it will allocate \$900,000 to compensate farmers, and also contribute funds to create habitat for the tricolored blackbird, said Meghan Hertel, program director with Audubon California. A decision is expected in January.

So far, the payments to dairy farmers haven't boosted bird populations as much as advocates had hoped, said Robert Meese, avian ecologist at UC Davis.

"It's safe to say that the compensation program has not had the impact that was our hope – absolutely," Meese said. "We had hoped that 100 percent of the colonies would be conserved if the farmers were paid to conserve them. That turned out not to be the case, both in the San Joaquin Valley and in Southern California"

Meese said some farmers declined to accept the payments and went ahead with the harvest. In a report, he said at least two colonies were lost to harvest this year in Merced County. Last year, four colonies were destroyed, including the largest colony in Southern California in Riverside County.

Now that the species has been granted endangered status, pressure on farmers to avoid harvesting during nesting season will likely increase. The emergency listing lasts for 180 days and can be renewed for another 180 days. Within that time frame, the state's Fish and Game Commission will decide whether the species will receive a regular listing as endangered.

Dairy operator Davin Gioletti said he's concerned about the plight of tricolored blackbirds, but that he and other farmers face financial risk if the species is found on their land. Roughly 1,700 acres of his Turlock dairy farm is considered prime blackbird habitat, Gioletti said.

"Anywhere a grain crop is planted, that's all potential tricolor blackbird habitat," he said.

Harvesting late to protect nestlings can cause the grain to lose moisture, Gioletti said. Once that happens, the grain will not ferment, and that makes it indigestible for dairy cows. "At that point we have to buy cattle feed from neighbors or on the open market," Gioletti said.

Delaying harvest also means farmers plant the next crop – usually corn – too late in the season, Gioletti said. "That can affect a whole year's worth of production."

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated the time of year Central Valley dairy farmers harvest livestock feed and plow their fields. That activity is done in the spring.

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