

South Valley dairy farmer halts harvest to save imperiled tricolored blackbird

By Lewis Griswold lgriswold@fresnobee.com

A Tipton farmer is being praised as a role model for saving the lives of thousands of imperiled tricolored blackbirds by holding off on harvesting his fields until the baby birds can fly.

Frank Mendonsa, owner of a dairy south of Tulare, was recognized at his dairy farm Wednesday by [Audubon California](#) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Two large colonies of tricolored blackbirds totaling 15,000 birds are temporarily nesting in fields of triticale silage that Mendonsa is growing to feed about 1,100 cows.

The birds built nests inside 80 acres of the silage crop and their young would be wiped out if he were to run harvesting equipment that chops the crop into bite-size chunks for cows.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is paying Mendonsa \$600 per acre to voluntarily delay harvesting under its Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The effort is funded by the farm bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program to enhance wildlife habitat.

By delaying harvest, Mendonsa is literally helping to save the species from extinction, said Audubon California representative Samantha Arthur.

"Through the all-hands-on-deck participation you are seeing here, I think we can do something" to protect the species for another year, she said before handing Mendonsa a canvas print of tricolored blackbirds and thank-you notes from Audubon California members.

In the past six years, the population of tricolored blackbirds — they're native to California and mostly live within the state — has declined 64%, she said.

Only about 150,000 of the species remain.

Although not listed as an endangered or threatened species under federal law, it has been given emergency listing as an endangered species under California regulations.

In spring, the birds nest in large colonies in the San Joaquin Valley but change locations yearly, so neither farmers nor biologists know which fields of rye, oats or wheat-like triticale they will choose.

Mendonsa, president of [Western United Dairy](#), said he did not know much about the birds when they started arriving in April but soon learned their precarious status.

"Most dairy farmers, if given the right information, they want to do the right thing to protect these birds," Mendonsa said. "That's the right thing to do."

The baby birds will fledge between now and the beginning of June, after which he can harvest his crop.

The peak harvest time will have passed, but some will still be usable, he said. Still, he will have to buy feed to make up for the shortfall.

Mendonsa is setting an example by delaying harvest and talking about his experience, said Alex Fortney, NRCS

assistant state conservationist for programs.

“When you have a farming organization working hand in hand with conservation groups, that gives it a certain amount of credibility,” he said.

About five farmers in the Valley have tricolored blackbird colonies on their properties and have agreed to delay harvest, he said.

Others supporting Mendonsa include the California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Cares, Western United Dairymen and Sustainable Conservation.

Advocates of tricolored blackbirds said additional wetland habitat will allow the birds a place to nest other than a farmer’s field, and gave Atwell Island as an example.

Not far from the Mendonsa dairy farm, tricolored blackbirds are raising their young in the Atwell Island wetland between Alpaugh and Allensworth owned by the Bureau of Land Management.

Lewis Griswold: (559) 441-6104, [@fb_LewGriswold](#)