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News Release

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Farmers & Conservation Experts Celebrate Five Years of Helping Tricolored Blackbirds

DAVIS, Calif., August 10, 2017 – In 2017 farmers with rare Tricolored Blackbirds nesting in their fields have again aided the birds' survival. By delaying silage harvest, the farmers allowed the birds sufficient time to fledge their young. Working with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Audubon California, Western United Dairymen, Dairy Cares, California Farm Bureau, and Sustainable Conservation, farmers have helped save over 200,000 birds in the past four years.

During the 2017 nesting season, the partnership protected five colonies on dairy farms, totaling nearly 75,000 birds, in Kern, Merced and Tulare counties. Two additional colonies were protected in Madera and Riverside County through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

"This unique partnership of dairy farmers and conservation experts continues to help protect both an imperiled bird and the long-term sustainability of California's dairy industry," says Carlos Suarez, NRCS state conservationist for California.

Each spring, Tricolored Blackbirds build large colonies of nests in Central Valley areas that were once marshy ecosystems and are now cropland. About 40 percent of the birds now use silage crops such as triticale and wheat to build their nests. Since Tricolored Blackbirds are colonial nesters, thousands of birds may occupy a single farm. Farmers in Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Riverside, Stanislaus, and Tulare counties, with Tricolored Blackbirds in their fields are offered payments to help offset the expense, and possible crop damage caused by delaying harvest until fledging has finished.

In the 19th century, Tricolored Blackbirds in California numbered in the millions. But due to habitat loss and other factors, the population has declined to fewer than 150,000 according to the last published survey in 2014. *In 80 years the population decreased more than 80 percent.* The species is now protected under the California Endangered Species Act as the State of California considers a listing petition, and is also protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

"If not for this program, the future for the Tricolored Blackbird would be in serious doubt," said Samantha Arthur, conservation project director for Audubon California. "It's inspiring to see everyone come together to protect this unique California bird and support the farmers with nesting colonies."

The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment.

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

Audubon California is the lead partner in NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Project (RCPP) set up to oversee the Tricolored Blackbird protection efforts in recent years. RCPP is funded through the 2014 Farm Bill.

In addition to the seasonal protection of fledgling birds, the partnership is also pursuing easement opportunities to allow Tricolored Blackbirds to live and rear young without impacting farms. One successful example is on Atwell Island near Tulare, Calif. This site has hosted nesting tricolors for the last four years with colonies ranging between 10,000 and 20,000 birds each year. Atwell Island is an NRCS Wetland Reserve Program easement, owned and managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The property was formerly marginal farmland that was restored to wetlands.

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