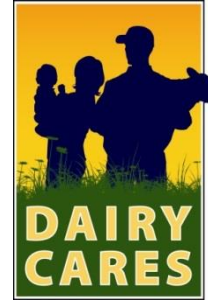


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## Dairy Cares Newsletter

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# Dairy families, Audubon California partner to protect threatened Tricolored Blackbird

California's declining Tricolored Blackbird population can expect some much-needed support in the near future thanks to recent collaborative efforts between dairy, conservation and farming groups.

Last year, Audubon California, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation and Western United Dairymen jointly submitted a \$2.1 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant titled "Protection, Restoration and Enhancement of Tricolored Blackbird Habitat on Agricultural Lands" to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The application sought funding to identify and implement sustainable solutions for increasing the struggling Tricolored Blackbird population in California, which has declined by as much as 64 percent since 2008 according to a June 2014 article in [Scientific American](#).



Good news came earlier this month when NRCS announced that one of the more than 100 approved RCPP grants totaling \$372 million nationwide – and one of only four in California – was awarded to the tricolored blackbird project.

"We are excited and energized by the new opportunities made possible with a strong mix of partners involved in the RCPP projects that will take place here in California," said NRCS State Conservationist Carlos Suarez. "It is very powerful to be able to engage in partnerships that embrace both agricultural and environmental interests and perspectives – and find collaborative ways of making progress on critical issues such as avian habitat, climate change, groundwater protection and more."

### Declining numbers

Once numbering in the millions, the tricolored blackbird population declined to just over 145,000 in 2014, according to a comprehensive statewide survey, down from about 394,000 in 2008. While the bird's population

has fluctuated over the years (1999 population estimates totaled about 94,000), experts attribute loss of the bird's natural habitat, such as wetlands and native grasslands, food sources and the state's crippling drought as principal drivers for the species' decline. These developments have resulted in the bird nesting in winter forage fields on dairies, attracted by an inviting combination of cover and food that unfortunately coincides with springtime crop harvest. Exacerbating the situation, tricolored blackbirds tend to cluster in small areas in very great numbers. Tens of thousands of birds – a significant portion of the state's population – may build their nests on a single farm or even a single field.

### **Dairy-Audubon RCPP seeks long-term solutions**

In December, the California Fish and Game Commission enacted emergency protections for tricolored blackbirds in response to a petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity. The emergency listing provides 180 days of protection under the California Endangered Species Act, with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) further evaluating the petition to recommend whether protection should be granted on a permanent basis.

The Tricolored Blackbird RCPP seeks a sustainable solution for managing nesting colonies on farms, with the goal of increasing the statewide population. Over the five-year project, dairy and conservation groups will work together to continue implementation and promotion of the existing NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, also known as EQIP, which provides silage buyouts to farmers who delay harvest when tricolored blackbirds are nesting in their fields.

The project will also focus on habitat restoration and enhancement projects aimed at attracting the birds away from dairy silage fields, instead encouraging them to nest on existing or to-be-developed wetlands or private agricultural lands specifically intended to provide habitat for tricolored blackbirds. Program partners will also implement an educational campaign for farmers about the role they play in protecting the species. Western United Dairymen and the Madera and Tulare County Farm Bureaus will host [workshops](#) on Monday, January 26 for farmers interested in learning more about tricolored blackbird issues and resources for protecting the species. Representatives from Audubon California, CDFW, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NRCS will also be on hand to answer questions and provide additional information.

### **Looking ahead**

Dairy families know that a sustainable California depends on a vibrant, healthy environment, one that includes strong biodiversity. They will continue to work cooperatively with conservationists, assisting in the recovery of tricolored blackbirds while supporting improvement of habitat away from dairy forage fields. These efforts are part of the larger sustainability work undertaken by dairy families daily to produce jobs, protect the environment and care for their animals while continuing to produce safe, affordable and nutritious dairy products for millions of families.

*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 Dairy Research Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-Western Area Council, Dairy Institute of California, GHD, Inc., Hilmar Cheese Co., 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 [DairyCares.com](http://DairyCares.com) or call 916-441-3318.*