

Farmers alter harvest schedule to save rare birds

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

Shortly before harvest this spring, thousands of rare birds suddenly flocked to a Tulare County wheat field and nested – setting the stage for a vast killing field with baby birds.

But the dairy farmer who was growing the wheat as feed for his cows delayed long enough to save thousands of tricolored blackbirds, averting a wildlife disaster.

He was one of four dairy farmers in the San Joaquin Valley who held off harvests this year to protect more than 20 percent of the tricolored blackbird's global population. The federal government spent \$100,000 helping the farmers replace the feed.

It's a success story that seems as rare as the tricolored blackbird. In an era when regulation and lawsuits drive environmental reform, this voluntary collaboration saves birds, keeps dairy farms in business and leaves out lawyers.

"Dairy farmers see this as a win-win," said Michael Marsh, chief executive officer of Western United Dairymen, a Modesto-based industry group representing 900 dairies.

Western United works with Audubon California and government agencies to save the remaining blackbirds, which once numbered in the millions. There are 260,000 left in the world, and more than 95 percent of them are in California.

For dairy owners, the partnership makes sense because it is a major influence in keeping the bird off the protection list for the federal Endangered Species Act, which can be stifling to business and industry.

But nature also plays a part. The tricolored birds gather in huge breeding colonies – they are the most colonial birds in North America. It's not unusual to see 30,000 in a single farm field.

Decades ago, they nested in the coastal wetlands and inland marshes of Central California. But their historic breeding grounds have disappeared as development and farming spread during the last century.

The birds still nest wherever they can find freshwater marshes among the cattails in the Valley. But the blackbirds will readily settle for alfalfa, hay and wheat fields where they can easily fill their dietary needs.

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