

USDA's Starling Control Program

- Removing pesky birds from dairy farms



Starlings can be a huge problem on dairy farms, stealing the cows' feed and leaving a mess everywhere they go.

What do you do when you realize that black cloud moving toward your dairy farm isn't a cloud at all, instead it is thousands of starlings ready to swoop in and steal your cows' high-fat/high-protein feed?

If it is a one-time occurrence, thank your lucky stars, if not, give the USDA-Wildlife Services Starling Control Program a call.

Now in its eighth year of operation, demand for the Starling Control Program is great enough to employ six field representatives during the fall and winter months when bird control is taking place. The program hit a peak a few years ago with over 100 farms participating, however, the number of farms varies from year to year.

"A lot of the farms are repeat business, but we are still getting many new farms each year," says USDA Wildlife Biologist Tony Duffinney.

Once starlings find a farm they like, the birds tend to return

year after year, causing headaches as they consume large quantities of high-fat/high-protein feed where the cattle are being fed. The birds are basically "stealing" food from the cattle, which has been shown to reduce production on at least one farm in mid-Michigan.

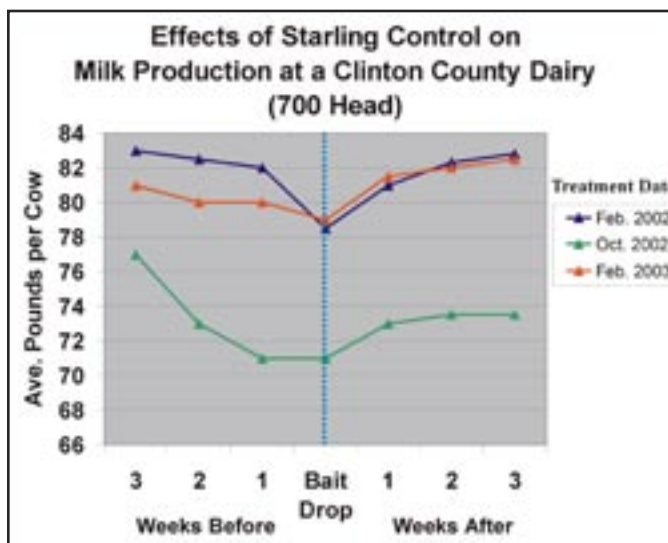
Results from three starling treatments in 2002 and 2003 at a Clinton County dairy show milk

75-90 percent at this location. After the bait drop, milk production was back to pre-starling levels within a week.

"During late summer and early fall is when you will start seeing large flocks of starlings," Tony says. "The number of birds continue to build until winter. Flocks of between 1,000 to 10,000 birds are not uncommon during this time period. They start consuming and contaminating dairy feed and water in late September or early fall. Once the snow cover hits in late November – early December, that's when the birds really hit the dairy farms."

By winter, the birds that are going to migrate south have already done so, and the farmer is stuck with at least the birds that are converging on the farm. Because birds will also search harvested fields for leftovers, USDA representatives usually wait until the snow is on the ground to begin the on-farm baiting process to ensure they will affect a majority of the birds.

"Snow cover is key," Tony says. "Winter is the best time to



production dropping as the bird numbers increased prior to treatment (see chart this page). Milk production was down 5-7 pounds of milk per cow. Bird reductions for the three treatments averaged

bait the starlings because consumption of the bait is higher when they do not have many feeding options. The birds can't go into the fields and eat the leftover crops when there is snow cover."

The process to reduce the number of birds on a farm begins with a call to the USDA-Wildlife Services Starling Control Program at (517) 336-1928. A USDA representative will visit the affected farm to determine how effective the program would be and where baiting should take place. For the program to be effective, the birds must be actually feeding on the farm. It is difficult to reduce the bird population if they are only roosting on the farm.

A baiting area is established and the producer is given instructions on when and how to administer the bait. Once the starlings are regularly feeding on the high-protein/high-fat bait, a USDA representative comes out to replace the untreated bait with one that has been treated with a toxicant.

The toxicant is for USDA use only and must be administered by a USDA employee. Once the birds have fed on the treated bait, the USDA representative must remove and dispose of any leftover bait.

The toxicant affects the starlings by destroying kidney functions, killing the birds within 24 hours. Starlings are very sensitive to the toxicant, DRC-1339, but mammals and other birds are not.

The toxicant is broken down in the birds and excreted in a harmless form before they die so pets and wild animals that may eat the birds do not become sick.

MMPA members Tim Kubacki, Mike and Andy Zagata, Darren Lutz and Bryce Kunderinger highly recommend the program. They have found it to be most effective when area farms use the treated bait on the same day.

"If you have every farm in the

neighborhood do it on the same day, that's when you get a good kill," Mike says.

A successful baiting session can create thousands of dead birds. Producers should be prepared to clean up and dispose of the birds once they have died. Because the toxicant is no longer in the birds, they can be disposed of in a variety of ways: in the trash, placed in the manure pit to decompose, buried or incinerated as long as it complies with local regulations.

Starlings do not always roost in the same place they eat, so it is important to tell the neighbors what is going on to avoid any problems. It is possible for the birds to return to a neighbor's stand of pine trees or other roosting area before they die.

"Because we cannot control where starlings will end up after consuming the treated bait, we have developed a notification list that our technicians contact at least 24 hours before introducing the treated bait," Tony says. "We want to be sure that if there are concerns over the work we are doing that those individuals receive the correct information in as few phone calls as possible."

The list consists of the Michigan Department of Agriculture, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, MSU County Extension, and the County Environmental Health Director.

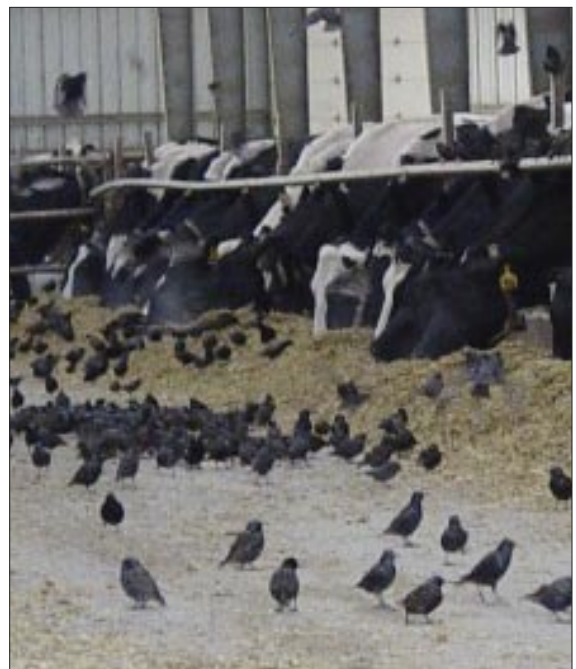
"We contact a neighbor so she will know what is happening," Bryce says. "She has a beauty shop and is bothered by the birds, too. She looks forward to it."

Most farms see around a 75 percent reduction in starlings on the farm for the winter season. However, there is no guarantee that new crop of birds won't find the farm later in the season or the next year. Most farmers participating in the program view it as a yearly expense that helps keep their cows healthy, keeps milk production levels up and reduces headaches caused by thousands of screeching birds eating their cows' feed.

"We have found the numbers do go down over time," Tony says. "On one farm we started with approximately 15,000 birds and were able to get them down to 1,000 birds after five years of treatments."

The Zagatas have been using the program for the past 6 years and say the reduction in birds is well worth the cost.

In Michigan, the program costs \$500 in the Lower Peninsula and \$600 in the Upper Peninsula. For more information, contact the USDA-Wildlife Services Starling Control Program at (517) 336-1928.



Starling numbers rise on dairy farms in late fall and early winter.