

Starling Control Works on Michigan Dairies

In Michigan, starlings often congregate at feedlots and dairies in the winter, causing damage by consuming and contaminating feed and contributing to the spread of diseases that are harmful to cattle. To combat the damage, USDA-Wildlife Services (WS) offers dairy producers a program to reduce starlings.

The key to the success of the program, says USDA Wildlife Biologist Tim Wilson, is the universal bait, which is treated with toxicant DRC-1339. The treated bait is registered for use in these situations by USDA employees only and acts by destroying kidney function of the starlings that consume it.

“The toxicant is very good, very safe and effective,” Peter Butchko, Michigan Wildlife Services State Director says. “There are virtually no hazards except to the starlings.”

After ingesting the toxicant, starlings begin to show signs of lethargy within 8 hours and die within 24 hours. By that time, virtually all the toxicant in their body has been metabolized, eliminating the possibility of secondary poisoning. WS points out that starlings are quite sensitive to DRC-1339 while mammals and hawks are generally resistant. Therefore, hazards to non-target animals are very low.

In general, two conditions should be met to get the best results. First, it is more successful when the weather is cold and snowy.

“It takes the proper weather for it to work.” MMPA producer Bob Shinn, of Crosswell, says. “The birds have to want to go inside to eat, so if it’s cold and snow covered you’ll get the best results with the program.”

The second is to establish good bait acceptance. This involves the producer providing a supply of bait in the same place everyday until the birds are feeding on it reliably. WS provides the bait and helps to

select the bait site. When the birds are feeding on the bait reliably, a WS employee delivers bait treated with the toxicant and remains on site while it is available to the birds. At the end of the day, the WS employee removes any remaining bait.

“The guy they’ve had to do the program on our farm has done a good job, he stops here several times to check, putting the bait and poison out,” Bob says. “We don’t have anything to do with it except to notify him and let him know when the best time is and tell him what the bird population is.”

Where good bait acceptance has been established, WS reports that significant starling reductions of 75 percent to 95 percent have been achieved in most cases, though they can’t guarantee results.

“The only time it hasn’t worked well for us is if we started baiting and if the weather warms up,” Bob says. “When the starlings don’t come in to eat then they don’t get enough of the poison.”

Even with the one incidence where the control program wasn’t ideal due to the weather, Bob says overall, he’s pleased with the program, noting the \$550 cost for the program is “very reasonable for what they do.”

Bob and WS both recommend contacting neighboring farms to bait the starlings on the same day.

“If you have more than one farm in the area, I think it works best if they do it all at the same time,” Bob says. “Otherwise birds have a tendency to go from farm to farm and you won’t have a good kill if you just do it on an individual farm.”

MMPA producer Jeremy Werth, of Alpena, agrees with the multi farm concept, explaining that “it does work better when we team up with another farm because starlings do travel from farm to farm.” Jeremy utilizes the starling control program each year, along

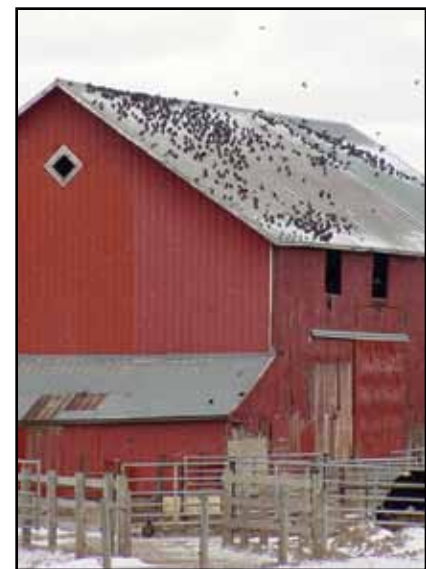
with other MMPA members in his area, reaping a two-fold benefit for both farms: a better starling kill and lower per farm costs to administer the program.

In addition, Jeremy says he has found starling control helps reduce the amount of false positive tests that can occur during Bovine TB testing.

“We found starling feces caused the cattle to be more prone to false positives during TB testing,” Jeremy says.

Contacting non-farming neighbors to let them know what is occurring on the day the bait is set out is always a good idea, says WS, considering that the birds that consume the treated bait die overnight, probably at their roost site. While it could be on the farm, it could also be on the property of a neighbor. Although the dead birds do not pose a threat to humans or pets, it is recommended that farmers advise their neighbors to avoid unnecessary concern. WS takes care of advising agencies such as the Michigan Departments of Natural Resources and Agriculture.

For more information, contact the USDA-Wildlife Services Starling Control Program at 517-336-1928.



Starlings on a barn at a Michigan dairy farm.