

CONTROLLING TROUBLESOME STARLINGS

As I travel the county I'm seeing large flocks of starlings, sparrows and feral pigeons. Populations are more noticeable during winter months when the weather is cold and snow often limits access to food and water. Barns provide warm shelter on cold days, and feed mangers and bunkers provide an easy source of food. Birds consume and spoil large quantities of feed intended for livestock. Milk production and weigh gains are always reduced when troublesome birds congregate and contaminate livestock feed. It is not easy to keep bird populations to tolerable levels, but it must be a farm priority.

A study in New York State revealed that 200 starlings may consume 175 pounds of grain each week and contaminate even more with their droppings. It is not uncommon to see flocks of starlings that far exceed 200 or even 1,000 birds. Where high protein supplements are added to feed rations, starlings often selectively eat the high protein portion. It quickly becomes pricey to feed flocks of hungry birds. Birds also transmit diseases such as Salmonella and Cryptococcus. They may also create fire hazards by nesting on light fixtures and wiring in barns.

A variety of techniques is recommended to control damage caused by birds, but most are not very effective. Starlings and some other birds can be trapped, shot, frightened (temporarily) or excluded from buildings if there are no openings larger than one inch. Heavy plastic strips hung in open doorways of farm buildings have been helpful in some areas in excluding birds, while allowing people, machinery or livestock to enter. These strips may also be useful in protecting feed supplies such as commodity sheds. Starlings roosting inside buildings can be deterred by covering the underside of the rafters with netting. Birds usually form a strong attachment to a site so effective control requires persistence and a variety of methods.

When starling numbers are out of control, the use of toxic starlicides such as DRC-1339 may be necessary. Pre-baiting in the areas starlings like to congregate is the key to getting good control. This process consists of establishing a feeding pattern by making attractive untreated bait, such as rolled corn or barley, available to starlings for several days. After acceptance of the pre-bait is established, and no non-target birds are present, the toxicant is added. Toxicants must be applied in such a manner that livestock do not have access to the bait.

DRC-1339 is toxic to starlings, blackbirds, pigeons and magpies, but when used according to label directions, will not kill mammals or English sparrows. The product will usually kill birds within 12-36 hours and they die a non-violent death, usually while on the roost. The mode of action is irreversible kidney and heart damage. The toxicant is metabolized and excreted from all animals quickly (90% is lost in 2 hours), thus eliminating the potential for secondary poisoning. This toxicant is presented in a technical form, and can be mixed with different baits, at different strengths.

DRC-1339 is a restricted-use pesticide and is registered for use only by USDA-Wildlife Service's personnel, trained in the use of toxicants for bird control. Agricultural producers who are experiencing serious starling problems should contact USDA/WS employee, Brook Zscheile, at 801-503-5072. Brook will work with specific requests and administer DRC-1339. Hopefully, neighbors can work together in geographic areas so we can control as many birds as possible with limited treatments. The predator control assessment fee that is withheld each time producers sell livestock is used to help offset the initial cost of treatments. The cost of additional treatments will be the responsibility of the producer.

Because of the rapid metabolism of DRC-1339, there is little potential for secondary hazards to non-target animals. Cats or owls could be at risk only if their diets consist wholly of DRC-1339 poisoned starlings for more than 30 continuous days.

Clark Israelsen
USU Extension Ag Agent
Cache County

