DECISION
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR
REDUCING BLACKBIRD DAMAGE TO SPROUTING RICE
THROUGH AN
INTEGRATED WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM IN
SOUTHWESTERN LOUISIANA

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS) program responds to requests for assistance from individuals, organizations and agencies experiencing damage caused by wildlife in Louisiana. WS cooperates with land and wildlife management agencies to reduce wildlife damage effectively and efficiently according to applicable federal, state and local laws and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between WS and other agencies. Ordinarily, according to APHIS procedures implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), individual wildlife damage management actions are categorically excluded (7 CFR 372.5(c), 60 Fed. Reg. 6000-6003, 1995). To evaluate and determine if any potentially significant impacts to the human environment from WS planned and proposed program would occur; and to facilitate planning, interagency coordination, and the streamlining of program management, and to clearly communicate with the public the analysis of cumulative impacts an environmental assessment (EA) was prepared. The EA documents the need for blackbird damage management to protect sprouting rice crops in southwestern Louisiana and assessed potential impacts of various alternatives for responding to damage problems. The pre-decisional EA released by WS in August 2001 documented the need for blackbird damage management in the proposed project area of southwestern Louisiana and assessed potential impacts of various alternatives for responding to the request for assistance. Comments from the public involvement process were reviewed for substantial issues and alternatives which were considered in developing this decision. The EA is tiered to the programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Wildlife Services Program[1] (USDA 1997).

The scope and purpose of this EA is to address and evaluate the potential impact to the human environment from WS blackbird damage management to protect sprouting rice crops in the rice producing parishes of Acadia, Allen, Calcasieu, Cameron, Evangeline, Jeff Davis, St. Landry, and Vermilion in southwestern Louisiana. Damage problems can occur throughout the southwestern rice producing portions of the State, resulting in requests for WS assistance. Under the proposed action, sprouting rice damage management could be conducted on private lands in southwestern Louisiana upon request. Southwestern Louisiana encompasses about 4,680,000 acres. During Fiscal Year (FY) 95- FY(01), WS had 24, 62, 56, 37, 52, 38, and 50 Agreements for Control to conduct blackbird damage management for sprouting rice each year, respectively, with an average of 90 acres each year or less than 0.002% of the land area of southwestern Louisiana (Management Information System (MIS) 1995-2000).

WS proposed action is to implement an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) program on all land classes in southwestern Louisiana that would include lethal and nonlethal direct control and technical assistance to reduce damage to sprouting rice caused by blackbird species including red-winged blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), brown-headed cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*), common grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*), boat-tailed grackles (*Quiscalus major*), great-tailed grackles (Quiscalus mexicanus), Brewer's blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), rusty blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinus*) and European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Direct control assistance will only take place after a request for services has been received and where permission has been granted by the landowner or land manger. Based on the analysis in the EA, I have determined that there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment from implementing the proposed action, and that the action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

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[1] USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture). Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Animal Damage Control (ADC). 1997 (revised). Animal Damage Control Program. Final Environmental Impact Statement. Anim. Plant Health Inspection Serv., Anim. Damage Control. Operational Support Staff, 4700 River Road, Unit 87. Riverdale, MD 20737. Volume 1, 2 & 3.

Public Involvement

The pre-decisional EA was released to the public for a 30-day comment period with a legal notice being placed in two newspapers (Lafayette Daily Advertiser and Lake Charles American Press) encompassing the affected area and was mailed directly to agencies, organizations, and individuals with probable interest in the proposed program. Two comment letters were received by WS within the 30 day comment period. Both letters were from interested parties providing their support of the proposed program. All comments were analyzed to identify substantial new issues, alternatives, or to redirect the program. All letters and responses are maintained in the administrative file located at the Louisiana WS State Office, P.O. Box 589, Port Allen, Louisiana 70767-0589.

Major Issues

Several major issues were contained in the scope of this EA. These issues were consolidated into the following 6 primary issues to be considered in detail:

1. Effects on target species
2. Effects on other wildlife species, including T&E species
3. Effects on public health and safety
4. Economic impacts to stakeholders
5. Effects on aesthetics
6. Humaneness and animal welfare concerns of lethal methods used by WS

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

Four potential alternatives were developed to address the issues identified above. One additional alternative was considered but not analyzed in detail. A detailed discussion of the anticipated effects of the alternatives on the issues are contained in the EA. The following summary provides a brief description of each alternative and its anticipated impacts.

Alternative 1. Continue the Current Integrated Blackbird Damage Management program (No action/Proposed Action). An IWDM strategy would be recommended and used, encompassing the use of practical and effective methods of preventing or reducing damage while minimizing harmful effects of damage management measures on humans, wildlife species, and the environment. Under this action, WS could provide technical assistance and direct operational damage management, including non-lethal and lethal management methods by applying the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992). When appropriate, alteration of cultural practices and habitat and behavioral modification would be recommended and utilized to reduce blackbird damage. In other situations, these birds would be lethally removed as humanely as possible using: shooting, trapping, and registered pesticides. In determining the damage management strategy, preference would be given to practical and effective non-lethal methods. However, non-lethal methods may not always be applied as a first response to each damage problem. The most appropriate response could often be a combination of non-lethal and lethal methods, or there could be instances where application of lethal methods alone would be the most appropriate strategy. WS damage management services would be conducted as authorized by various federal and state regulations and would be partially funded by service recipients. WS technical assistance would be funded through WS appropriations. Under this alternative local blackbird populations would be reduced but not to the extent that statewide, regional or continental populations would be adversely affected. Other wildlife species, including threatened and endangered species are not expected to be negatively impacted by this alternative with some bird species receiving beneficial effects from reduction of inter-specific nest competition. No adverse effects are expected to public health and safety from WS use of control methods. This alternative would allow WS to respond to all requests for assistance and has high potential of reducing crop damage to acceptable levels. Some persons aesthetic values would be both positively and negatively affected by this alternative. Species removed during control activities would remain common and abundant throughout their range. Lethal control methods used by WS would be considered humane by most people, but others may consider any method of killing to be inhumane.

Alternative 2. Technical Assistance Only. This alternative would only allow Louisiana WS to provide technical

assistance and make lethal and non-lethal management recommendations to individuals or agencies requesting blackbird damage management in southwest Louisiana. Private landowners, contractors, or others could conduct their own damage management on federal, state, county, and private lands. The *"technical assistance only"* alternative would place the immediate burden of operational damage management work on other federal, state or county agencies, private businesses, and property owners. Individuals experiencing blackbird damage would, independently or with Louisiana WS recommendations, carry out and fund damage management activities. Some individuals or agencies would implement damage management as part of the cost of doing business, while other agencies or property owners may choose not to take action to resolve blackbird damage problems. WS technical assistance would be funded through WS appropriations. WS would have no direct impacts under this alternative. Impacts of other persons conducting control activities would be variable dependent upon actions taken. This alternative would allow WS to respond to requests for technical assistance, but would leave some people without a means to effectively reduce blackbird damage on rice crops.

Alternative 3. Non-lethal Damage Management and Technical Assistance. Under this alternative, only non-lethal operational blackbird damage management and lethal and non-lethal technical assistance would be provided by WS. Individuals or agencies might choose to implement WS recommendations or other methods not recommended by WS, contract for WS non-lethal damage management services, or take no action. WS non-lethal damage management services would be conducted as authorized by various federal and state regulations and would be partially funded by service recipients. WS technical assistance would be funded through WS appropriations. WS would not lethally remove any target bird species under this alternative and would expect to have no adverse affects on other wildlife species including threatened and endangered species. No adverse effects are expected to public health and safety from WS use of control methods. This alternative would not allow WS to respond to all requests for assistance and would not reduce crop damage to acceptable levels for some individuals. Some persons aesthetic values would be both positively and negatively affected by this alternative. Target species populations would remain common and abundant throughout their range. Most people would consider this alternative humane since WS would not be conducting lethal removal activities. Impacts of other persons conducting control activities would be variable dependent upon actions taken.

Alternative 4. No Federal WS Blackbird Management. This alternative would result in no assistance from WS in managing blackbird damage to sprouting rice in southwestern Louisiana. WS would not provide technical assistance or operational damage management services. All requests for blackbird damage management assistance would not be responded to by WS and would be referred to local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations. Assistance may or may not be available from any of these entities. Damage management methods could be implemented by resource owners, private businesses, or volunteers. WS would have no direct impacts under this alternative. Impacts of other persons conducting control activities would be variable dependent upon actions taken. This alternative would not allow WS to respond to any requests for assistance and would leave some people without a means to effectively reduce blackbird damage on rice crops.

Alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail were:

Population stabilization through birth control. Under this alternative, blackbird populations would be managed through the use of contraceptives. Blackbirds would be sterilized or contraceptives administered to limit their ability to produce offspring. However, at present, there are no chemical or biological contraceptive agents for blackbirds. Theoretically, a blackbird contraceptive or chemosterilant, if delivered to a sufficient number of individuals, could temporarily suppress local breeding populations by inhibiting reproduction. Reduction of local populations would result from natural mortality combined with reduced fecundity. No birds would be killed directly with this method, however, and these birds would continue to cause damage. Populations of dispersing birds would probably be unaffected. The use of contraceptives is not realistic, at this point, since there are no effective contraceptives nor legal methods of delivering contraceptives to blackbirds.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The analysis in the EA indicates that there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment as a result of this proposed action. I agree with this conclusion and therefore find that an EIS

need not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Blackbird damage management, as conducted by WS in Louisiana, is not regional or national in scope.

2. Based on the analysis documented in the EA, the impacts of the proposed action will not significantly affect public health or safety. Risks to the public from WS methods were determined to be low in a formal risk assessment (USDA1997, Appendix P).

3. There are no unique characteristics such as park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic areas, or ecologically critical areas that would be significantly affected by the proposed action. Built-in mitigation measures that are part of WS standard operating procedures and adherence to laws and regulations will further ensure that WS activities do not harm the environment.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there is some opposition to wildlife damage management, this action is not highly controversial in terms of size, nature, or effect.

5. Mitigation measures adopted and/or described as part of the proposed action minimize risks to the public, prevent adverse effects on the human environment, and reduce uncertainty and risks. The effects of the proposed activities are known and are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

6. The proposed action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects.

7. No significant cumulative effects were identified through this assessment. The number of blackbirds killed by WS, when added to the total known other take does not significantly effect blackbird populations.

8. The proposed activities would not affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would they likely cause any loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Wildlife damage management would not disturb soils or any structures and, therefore, would not be considered a "Federal undertaking" as defined by the National Historic Preservation Act.

9. WS has determined that the proposed action would not adversely affect any federal or Louisiana state listed threatened or endangered species.

10. The proposed action would be in compliance with all federal, state, and local laws imposed for the protection of the environment.

Decision and Rationale

I have carefully reviewed the EA and the input from the public involvement process. I believe that the issues identified in the EA are best addressed by selecting Alternative 1 (Continue the Current Integrated Blackbird Damage Management program - No Action & Proposed Alternative in the EA) and applying the associated mitigation and monitoring measures discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA. Alternative 1 is selected because (1) it offers the greatest chance at maximizing effectiveness and benefits to resource owners and managers while minimizing cumulative impacts on the quality of the human environment that might result from the program's effect on target and non-target species populations; (2) it presents the greatest chance of maximizing net benefits while minimizing adverse impacts to public health and safety; and, (3) it offers a balanced approach to the issues of humaneness and aesthetics when all facets of these issues are considered. The comments identified from public involvement were minor and did not change the analysis. Therefore, it is my decision to implement the proposed action as described in the EA. For additional information regarding this decision, please contact Dwight LeBlanc, State Director, Louisiana WS State Office, P.O. Box 589, Port Allen, Louisiana 70767-0589, telephone (225) 389-0229.

Charles S. Brown, Acting Regional Director
APHIS-WS Eastern Region

9/13/01
Date

Literature Cited:

Slate, D. A., R. Owens, G. Connolly and G. Simmons. 1992. Decision making for wildlife damage management. Trans. North Am. Wildl. Nat. Res. Conf. 57:51-62.

USDA U.S. Department of Agriculture). Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Animal Damage Control (ADC). 1997. Final Environmental Impact Statement. USDA, APHIS, ADC Operational Support Staff, 4700 River Road, Unit 87, Riverdale, MD 20737.