

For The Birds

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There are certain things in life we can be certain of; death, taxes and starlings flocking the barn looking for free meals during the winter. Of course, you can't blame them, all that grain lying there with no one to eat it but dopey cows. The problem is, starlings are not who we purchased that feed for. Some educated consultant developed a nutritionally balanced total mixed ration just the your dairy herd. It was carefully loaded into the mixer and spread out so the cows could eat just their portion, maximizing milk production in the herd. When your back is turned, in come the starlings to fill their little gullets with the expensive grain we measured so carefully. Its no wonder the cows never seem to produce as well as the nutritionist says they will. The birds have stolen a large portion of the energy and protein out of the feed bunk and unbalanced the ration.

Assuming each bird will eat half a pound of grain each day (That is probably a conservative estimate) and there are 500 birds, that equals 250 pounds of feed lost each day or nearly four tons per month. As bird populations rise so will feed losses, and some barns have thousands of birds! To add insult to injury, along with the starlings come other unwelcome guests. They carry diseases such as E. Coli or Salmonella, which tends increase the potential for health problems in the herd. This feeding pattern also is not doing the bird population much good either. Living off the feed in Michigan barns disrupts the migratory pattern of birds. They should be somewhere much warmer than

Michigan in January, eating their grain. So, in the long run it would be good for everyone to get these birds out of the barn. So how do we get rid of this pest?

Attempting to exclude these birds from the barn before they get accustomed to the free buffet can be a first step. While the fields are open and the weather is relatively warm these birds can forage for themselves. But as temperatures drop and snow cover limits the availability of feed, they tend to gravitate to the easy pickings in the barns. Our first chore is to make the pickings less than easy. Most of the barns built in the recent years have bird proofing built in. This usually consists of netting on the sidewalls, end-vents and doors on all the rest of the large openings. Keeping the large garage doors on the ends of barns closed when not in use and the bird netting in good repair will help thwart many birds from entering the barn. Unfortunately, these types of proactive maintenance jobs tend to drop lower on the list of things to do, during the rush of the fall harvest. By the time that is done it is often too late. There are mechanical additions and guards to limit roosting space in rafters and trusses available. These of course are an expense that might not seem to provide much return when we think about it in July. If we try to present a farmstead to the birds that provides little if any opportunity to find feed, they will quickly move on to someplace providing better feeding opportunities. But if we fail to exclude the starlings from our facilities, we need to look for other ways to remove the excess bird population. Traditional methods such as noisemakers and trapping tend to be difficult to sustain or are often ineffective in the long term. But in the last few years the United States Department of Agriculture has developed a new starlicide and has run a fairly successful starling-baiting program in Michigan.

The starlicide used is licensed only for use by employees of the federal government. It is a single time baiting product, which is very specific to starlings. Within 6 to 8 hours following consumption the birds will begin to die, so that means they will often be back in their nighttime roosting sites when they die and not in your manger. The poison is completely metabolized by the birds body prior to death and as such it is not a health hazard for the various scavengers that might feed on the carcasses. That includes cats and birds of prey. The bait is mixed with a carrier that is palatable to the birds and spread in a place where the cows cannot get at it. The carrier by itself is fed to the starlings for several days prior to baiting, so that as many birds as possible are feeding from the bait when the starlicide is added.

There is a charge associated with the use of this baiting program and its cost is planned to increase slightly for the 2001/2002 season. But in relation to the potential for feed loss and lost production, it is usually a good value. To investigate and arrange for the use of this starlicide on your farm contact the USDA Field Office in Okemos, MI at 517-336-1928.