

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The purposes of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is to promote agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals; optimize environmental benefits; and help farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental regulations.

EQIP is a continuous sign-up, voluntary, conservation program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provides financial and technical assistance for approved conservation practices based on a current conservation plan.

In order to be considered eligible for EQIP the applicant must have a vested interest in production agricultural or non-industrial private forest land and meet other program eligibility requirements.

About the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative

NRCS California is offering assistance to California farmers to support the protection of Tricolored Blackbird colonies nesting in grain and silage crops as a special wildlife initiative within EQIP. Tricolored blackbirds are federally listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern, a California state Species of Special Concern, and are also protected under the provisions of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Due to agricultural modifications to California's landscape, historical nesting habitat dominated by emergent marsh vegetation has been replaced by permanent row crops throughout the Central Valley. As a response to the lack of native habitat, Tricolored Blackbirds have adapted to colonize grain fields, particularly wheat varieties, in the spring. In the San Joaquin Valley, approximately 43 percent of the state's Tricolored blackbird population has been nesting in green chop silage crops such as Triticale and wheat where harvest schedules often conflict with the fledging dates of the juvenile birds. Due to the fact that Tricolored Blackbirds are colonial nesters, and often nest together by the thousands, the results from the harvesting activities can be devastating to the population.

In order to be eligible for participation, producers need to be able to demonstrate that they have nesting Tricolored Blackbirds on their property and that harvesting of silage will occur prior to the fledging of the birds. Fields with nesting Tricolor Blackbirds where the producer agrees to delay harvest will be eligible for financial assistance and the payment will be based on the actual acres with nesting Tricolor Blackbirds plus a buffer; actual acres and the buffer area will be determined by a biologist. This initiative is being coordinated through a partnership effort with Audubon California.

Eligible counties in California for this initiative include:

- Kern, Kings, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus and Tulare Counties.

Submitting an EQIP Application

Interested applicants may apply for EQIP by completing the application, Form NRCS-CPA-1200, Conservation Program Application, and submitting the application to the NRCS field



**Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
Fiscal Year 2013 EQIP Program Information
Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative**

office in person, by phone, email, or fax in the county which you own land or have an agricultural operation.

Interested owners and/or operators of land managed for agricultural in Kern, Kings, Fresno, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus and Tulare may be eligible for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative.

For more information about the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative and about conservation planning assistance please contact the field office in the county which you own land or manage cropland or pastureland.

Requesting Conservation Planning Assistance

Interested applicants are encouraged to request conservation planning and technical assistance from a local NRCS field office to help with the development of a conservation plan; the basis for any EQIP application is a conservation plan. Some of the benefits of developing a customized conservation plan include: helping you to comply with environmental regulations; preparing you for various conservation programs opportunities and identifying immediate or potential resource problems that could hurt your production.

How EQIP Works

EQIP initiatives are funding opportunities created to assure funds are available to resource priorities across various land use types, for special emphasis resource needs and to assure that underserved groups have access to assistance.

An EQIP initiative is a ranking and funding pool where similar applications are evaluated. Applications for an EQIP initiative will be evaluated based on screening and ranking criteria that consider the benefits of planned conservation practices as identified by local, state and national priorities. The basis for an EQIP application is a conservation plan.

Please contact your local NRCS field office about EQIP eligibility and the application process or visit http://www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/eqip_program_eligibility.html and http://www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/how_to_apply_for_eqip.html.

Program payments are limited to \$300,000 a person or entity for all contracts entered into during any six-year period. This limitation includes unpaid prior year contract obligations as of October 1, 2008, as well as new contract obligations. For the purpose of applying this requirement, the six-year period will include those payments made in fiscal years 2009-2014.

Approved NRCS Land Uses

Only approved NRCS land uses are eligible for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative. Approved land uses are:

- Cropland

Approved NRCS Resource Concerns

Only approved NRCS resource concerns are eligible for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative. Approved resource concerns are:

Animals: Fish and Wildlife

- Inadequate Cover/Shelter
- Threatened and Endangered Fish and Wildlife Species: Declining Species, Species of Special Concern

Approved NRCS Conservation Practices

Only approved NRCS conservation practices are eligible for financial assistance through the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative. Table 1 lists practices approved for the initiative.

Available Integrated Pest Management (IPM) options per county are dependent on established priorities, but generally include University of California, IPM Single Pest or Year-Round Program, Substitution of Soft Chemicals and/or Pheromone Mating Disruption.

Table 1. Eligible Conservation Practices for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative

Practice	Practice Name	Scenarios	Unit
511	Forage Harvest Management	Tricolor Mgt - Triticale silage	ac
511	Forage Harvest Management	Tricolor Mgt - Silage (Other)	ac

For more information about NRCS conservation practices visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/?cid=NRCSDEV11_001020 the website link for all NRCS conservation practice standards.

Application Screening Criteria for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative

The purpose of screening criteria is to prioritize applications into ‘High’, ‘Medium’ or ‘Low’ categories prior to application ranking. All eligible applications for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative will be screened and applications in the ‘High’ priority category will be ranked. ‘Medium’ priority applications will be ranked only if funding is available. An application screening worksheet is included at the end of this document and will be used by NRCS to screen applications submitted for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative; the following is for reference.

High Priority Category:

- The applicant has nesting Tricolored Blackbirds present in agricultural fields and the planned harvest of the crops is scheduled to occur before the birds have fledged.

Low Priority Category:

- The applicant does not have nesting Tricolor Blackbirds present in agricultural fields.

Application Ranking Criteria for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative

The purpose of the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative ranking criteria is to evaluate the environmental benefits of conservation treatments included in an EQIP application, i.e. the EQIP schedule of operations and conservation plan. An application ranking score is based on national, state and local ranking criteria and the cost-efficiency of conservation practices in the EQIP application. The cost-efficiency score is based upon broad averages of the cost and environmental benefits of each practice in the EQIP application.

The following sections list the national, state and local ranking criteria for the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative and are provided for reference; applications will be evaluated electronically by NRCS using the Application Evaluation and Ranking Tool (AERT).

National Ranking Criteria

Only questions 6a, 6b, and 7b are applicable to the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative; all other questions will be answered “No” in the AERT.

- 1) If the application is for development of a **Conservation Activity Plan (CAP)**, the agency will assign significant ranking priority and conservation benefit by answering “Yes” to the following question. Answering “Yes” to question 1a will result in the application being awarded the maximum amount of points that can be earned for the national priority category.
 - a. Is the program application to support the development of a Conservation Activity Plan (CAP)? If answer is “Yes”, do not answer any other national level questions. If answer is “No”, proceed with evaluation to address the remaining questions in this section.
- 2) **Clean and Abundant Water: Water Quality** - Will the proposed project assist the producer to:
 - a. Meet regulatory requirements relating to animal feeding operations, or proactively avoid the need for regulatory measures?
 - b. Reduce sediment, nutrients or pesticides from agricultural operations located within a field that adjoins a designated "impaired water body" (TMDL, 303d, etc.)?
 - c. Reduce sediment, nutrients or pesticides from agricultural operations located within a field that adjoins a "non-impaired water body"?
- 3) **Clean and Abundant Water: Water Conservation** - Will the proposed project assist the producer implement conservation practices which:
 - a. Decrease aquifer overdraft?
 - b. Conserve water from irrigation system improvements and saved water will be available for other beneficial uses?
 - c. Conserve water in an area where the applicant participates in a geographically established or watershed-wide project?
- 4) **Clean Air: Treatment of air quality from agricultural sources** - Will the proposed project assist the producer to implement practice(s) which:

- a. Meet on-farm regulatory requirements relating to air quality or proactively avoid the need for regulatory measures?
 - b. Reduce on-farm generated green house gases such as CO₂ (Carbon Dioxide), CH₄ (Methane), and N₂O (Nitrous Oxide)?
 - c. Increase on-farm carbon sequestration?
- 5) **Soil Health:** Will the proposed project assist the producer to implement practice(s) which:
- a. Reduce erosion to tolerable limits (Soil "T")?
 - b. Improve soil tilth, organic matter, structure, health, etc.?
- 6) **Healthy Plant and Animal Communities Wildlife Habitat Conservation** - Will the proposed project assist the producer to implement practice(s) which:
- a. Benefit on-farm habitat associated with threatened and endangered, at-risk, candidate, or species of concern as identified in a State wildlife plan?
 - b. Help retain wildlife and plant habitat on land exiting the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)?
- 7) **High Quality, Productive Soils, Healthy Plant and Animal Communities:** Will the proposed project assist the producer implement practices which:
- a. Help manage or control noxious or invasive plant species on non-cropland?
 - b. Increase, or improve habitat to benefit pollinator or other targeted wildlife species?
 - c. Properly dispose of livestock carcasses?
 - d. Are identified in an Integrated Pest Management plan?
 - e. Are identified in a Nutrient Management plan?
 - f. Apply principles of adaptive nutrient management?
- 8) **Energy Conservation** - Will the proposed project assist the producer to implement practices which:
- a. Reduce energy consumption on the agricultural operation?
 - b. Increase on-farm energy efficiency with practices and improvements identified in an approved energy audit equivalent to criteria required in Ag EMP (122,124)?
 - c. Assist in implementing energy conservation measures that also reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants?
- 9) **Business Lines - Conservation Implementation Additional Ranking Considerations** - Will the proposed project result in:
- a. Implementation of all conservation practices scheduled in the contract on the CPA-1155 within three years of date of obligation?
 - b. Improvement of existing conservation practices or conservation systems already in place at the time the application is accepted?
 - c. Implementation of practice(s) which will complete an existing conservation system or suite of practices?

State Ranking Criteria

All questions are applicable to the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative.

- 1) **State Category One – Tri-color blackbird Nesting Population**
(ANIMALS – FISH AND WIDLIFE: Threatened and Endangered Fish and Wildlife Species: Declining Species, Species of Special Concern)
 - a. The size of the nesting population as determined by state or federal resource agency biologists is greater than 25,000.
 - b. The size of the nesting population as determined by state or federal resource agency biologists is between 15,000 and 25,000.
 - c. The size of the nesting population as determined by state or federal resource agency biologists is between 5,000 and 15,000.
 - d. The size of the nesting population as determined by state or federal resource agency biologists is between 1,000 and 5,000.
 - e. The size of the nesting population as determined by state or federal resource agency biologists is less than 1,000.

- 2) **State Category Two: Percentage of Silage Fields Containing Tricolor Blackbirds**
(ANIMALS – FISH AND WIDLIFE: Threatened and Endangered Fish and Wildlife Species: Declining Species, Species of Special Concern)
 - a. 80 – 100 percent of the producer’s planted silage fields contain nesting Tricolored Blackbirds.
 - b. 50 – 79 percent of the producer’s planted silage fields contain nesting Tricolored Blackbirds.
 - c. Less than 50 percent of the producer’s planted silage fields contain nesting Tricolored Blackbirds.

Local Ranking Criteria

All questions are applicable to the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative.

- 1) **Local Category One: Regulatory Compliance**
(ANIMALS – FISH AND WIDLIFE: Threatened and Endangered Fish and Wildlife Species: Declining Species, Species of Special Concern)
 - a. Conservation treatment will assist applicant in regulatory compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

- 2) **Local Category Two: Timing of Harvest**
(ANIMALS – FISH AND WIDLIFE: Inadequate Cover/Shelter)
 - a. Conservation treatment will delay harvest of silage fields until nesting Tricolor Blackbirds have fledged.



Contact a NRCS Field Office

For more information about the Tri-color blackbird EQIP Initiative and about conservation planning assistance please contact the field office in the county which you own land or manage cropland.

USDA-NRCS, Kern County

Bakersfield Service Center
5000 California Avenue, Suite 100
Bakersfield, CA 93309
(661) 336-0967
Brandon Bates, District Conservationist

USDA-NRCS, Tulare County

Visalia Service Center
3530 West Orchard Court
Visalia, CA 93277
(559) 734-8732
Joe Williams, District Conservationist

USDA-NRCS, Kings County

Hanford Service Center
680 Campus Drive, Suite E
Hanford, CA 93230
(559) 584-9209
Hugo Calvillo, District Conservationist

USDA-NRCS, Stanislaus County

Modesto Service Center
3800 Cornucopia Way, Suite E
Modesto, CA 95358
(209) 491-9320
Diana Waller, District Conservationist

USDA-NRCS, Madera County

Madera Service Center
425 North Gateway Drive, Suite K
Madera, CA 93637
(559) 674-2108
Jennifer Johnson, District Conservationist

USDA-NRCS, Merced County

Merced Service Center
2926 G Street, Suite 102
Merced, CA 95340
(209) 722-4119
Malia Hildebrandt, District Conservationist