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ORCHARD BIRD CONTROL WITH DECOY TRAPS

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CHAIRMAN BECK: Gentlemen, we will begin the second session this morning by examining more solutions to problems—orchard problems. In these problems we are dealing with something we have not brought into the picture yet, and that is the killing of birds around food crops that are especially sensitive to residues. A corn crop going into the feed lots is subject to the same regulations; but I think, we realize that the scrutiny on corn crop for animal feed purposes is not going to be as critical as the scrutiny given to orchard fruit crops.

We have to discuss these topics and available methods. Mr. Bill Shake, is the Assistant State Supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Michigan. Bill was relating a story to me recently about cherry bombs. It seems that he was on the street in one of the cities of Michigan and was trying to find out what he could do with firecrackers on English sparrows. He hadn't been on his job very long, only since last July, and one of the policemen came up with, I suppose, one of his benign expressions and said, "Well, well, is this all we have to do today?" Actually the problems that Bill is working with up there are quite sensitive; we do have serious problems in our fruit areas. I'm sure you're going to be interested in his presentation on decoy traps and other methods.

Following him will be Dr. Lloyd Mitterling from the Connecticut Agriculture Experiment Station at Storrs. We had a nice chat last night, and he has among other things a rather puckish sense of humor. I think you'll be interested in his approach not just from the standpoint of repellents that might be used, but his whole presentation. These are the last two gentlemen we have on this panel-type presentation this morning. Again I'll ask both of them to speak and then we'll ask them questions.

SHAKE: Thank you John. I was interested in Joe Watkins' comment that he was a neophyte at bird control. If he's a neophyte, then I haven't even been born yet, because I'm just getting started in this and am finding many frustrations that go along with it. Before I begin my talk, I'd like to say that much of the information I'll relate here today is a result of considerable hard work and efforts put on by people in Ohio, as well as by previous personnel in Michigan.

Trapping is probably one of the oldest methods of obtaining birds that there is. Ever since man found out that birds were fairly good to eat, he's tried

to find ways to snare or trap birds for himself. Since most of the problem species of birds are quite gregarious, we found that the decoy-type trap is very efficient in some situations when you're trying to protect various crops. There are several types of traps, and I'm sure you're familiar with them; but perhaps we can briefly go over them before we get into the meat of the subject.

One type of trap is the modified Australian crow trap or what we commonly call a decoy trap. The standard size is usually six foot by eight foot. And if you write in for a leaflet on how to trap starlings from any of our offices, this is the type of trap you'll get plans for.

Another kind that we find to be quite successful is a large trap. This happens to be 100 feet long and 50 feet wide. We found these to be considerably more successful, and we'll go into this a little later.

Traps can range in size from six to eight feet to 50 by 100 feet, or even bigger, depending on your own sites. The site limits the size of the trap you will use. The traps can either be mobile as many of these smaller traps are, or permanent as the larger ones would be. (Once you put up a large one, you're happy it's up, and you don't want to take it down unless you have to.)

Before you put up a trap of any kind to protect any type of a crop, selecting the location is a problem of utmost importance. In other words, you should spend a good bit of time looking around the area, be it a fruit orchard or in corn, to determine the best site. We've set up some criteria for an ideal site. The area for the trap should be in a relatively high location in relation to your protected crop. We've also found that it's advantageous to have it in close proximity to woodlots. Birds will find the trap easier on high ground; if a woodlot happens to be near, the birds will perch in these trees, drop down to inspect the trap, and eventually go into it.

The trap site itself should be kept well-mowed or the weeds kept down with the use of herbicides. It should be kept well-baited with any kind of fresh fruit; some growers, however, use popcorn and other types of grain. Most growers after they've used a trap for a while will tell you that water is of great importance in the trap. You can increase your success tremendously by just cutting tires in half, using poultry waterers, etc. and keeping them full of fresh water. Not only does this keep the decoys alive, but this also, during dry times of the year especially, will attract birds to the trap.

Another important factor is that the trap should be tended regularly, removing the surplus birds, and leaving about a dozen or so for decoy purposes. Without this, especially in your smaller traps, the traps will "fill up." What we postulate is that these birds can stand only so much "crowding" in a small trap; other birds have no desire to get involved in a mess like you might have with 500 or so birds in one small trap—they're unwilling to go into a trap if it's too crowded.

In Michigan (and Ohio) the decoy trap has been used for several different crops. With one method, we tried to see if we could reduce redwinged blackbird damage to corn. We put up the larger traps—25 x 50 or 50 x 100 feet—near corn fields that were being heavily hit or next to marshes where birds are roosting. Although we captured thousands of birds and destroyed them, we were working with such large numbers of birds that we found it was actually like pouring sand

down a hole—there were just too many birds and too big a turnover to have any effect at all in reducing damage to corn. Also it's not an efficient method in this type of a situation; it takes a lot of time to tend these traps, and when you get several hundred birds in there, they're continually drinking up your water and eating up your bait. It's quite an effort on the tender's part.

In fruit crops, however, we found this to be quite an entirely different case, at least in our area. We found that the large, permanent-type traps (usually the standard one we will set up is 25 x 50 feet) were quite successful in reducing starling depredation. As far as trapping other protected birds, traps don't seem to be too effective. What we think is that large populations of starlings will feed in the same areas, returning to the same orchards day after day; and by reducing these numbers with traps, we found that we can significantly reduce damage.

I must admit at this point that we have one problem as far as evaluating the reduction of damage. To my knowledge there is no good method of determining bird damage; we can estimate, we can talk to the grower, but this usually results in an amount higher than what you might think it to be (this has been our experience with corn). So the only figures I can give you here are grower's estimates and our own personnel's estimates on how much we've reduced damage. In Ohio, in the Clyde area, growers have estimated that they have reduced damage to fruit crops from 10 to 95%, which is in sweet and sour cherries and peaches as well. Birds will also be in blueberries and any other kind of fruit you can imagine; if they are starlings we have found that the traps will be effective.

In Michigan we've had similar results with traps; we've placed three large traps in areas of Michigan that are strategic fruit growing areas to demonstrate to growers the value of these. Researchers, many years ago, moved into southwestern Michigan, and set up an extensive trapping program, and it proved very successful. At one orchard in Michigan, we thought we were late in setting up the trap because the birds were really hitting the blueberries, but we thought that next year the grower would really benefit from it. Much to our surprise and delight as soon as he closed up the trap, he began catching 500 birds a day; the first four days he had over 2000 starlings, which put quite a dent in the starling population which was feeding in his area.

Our results indicate that larger traps are much more efficient than the smaller ones, as I stated before, because you can actually put more birds in there. The more birds you have in there, the more decoy effect you will have.

In some cases we've gotten fruit growers to band together to form a "bird protective association." In an area you might have twenty growers band together. They will build their own traps, and then each will kick in so much money, maybe depending on how much fruit they sell, and then hire two individuals, retired persons, college students, etc., and these men will tend the traps during the spring and summer months. This had worked out very well because then the grower doesn't have to worry about getting out every day to bait, fill water, etc. The tenders have a certain trap route, I guess you could call it, and they do the job every day; and it's working out quite satisfactorily. Also it seems to help reduce the damage over a considerable area.

As I said earlier, traps of these types do not greatly attract protected species. You will catch the occasional robin, Baltimore oriole, things like this; but they're not an efficient tool to reduce damage from these species. There have been robins trapped in traps like this in numbers, but I haven't seen it, so it's just been by word of mouth.

One advantage of a trapping program is that you have a selectivity factor. When you get to working with fruit growers, automatically you begin to think of Auduboners. These people are quite conscious of what's going on in orchards; they know growers are out there killing birds. In our day of controversial bird control, we can tell them that the protected species, when taken in the traps, are turned loose, and still we are doing a service to reduce the numbers of harmful species, like starlings.

In conclusion I think we'll just run over this real quick. We found large traps were much more effective than the smaller ones because of the "crowding factor." In corn, traps seem to be inefficient because of the large number of birds we're working with. In most fruit situations, if you put a trap in a suitable site from the above mentioned criteria, we found them to be quite satisfactory; and we recommend it in almost every fruit situation with starling problems. Thank you.