

New England Cottontail

Working Lands for Wildlife

Habitat Restoration Helps Prevent Listing of New England Cottontail

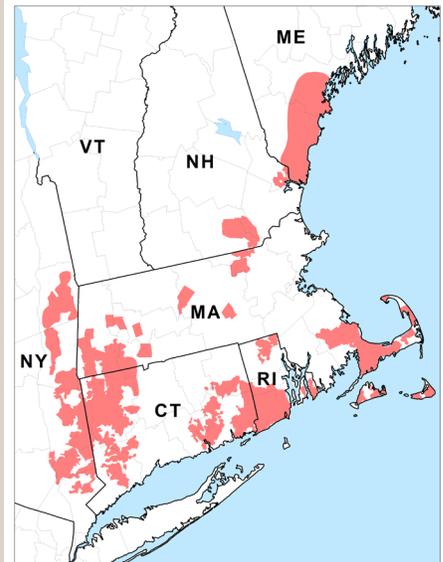
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined in September 2015 that the New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) does not require protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because of its increasing population and efforts underway to restore habitat. A coordinated public-private partnership brought together a variety of stakeholders to aid New England's only native rabbit.

The New England cottontail lives in early successional habitat – young forests, shrublands and thickets – in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York. Since the 1960s, development and maturing forests decreased the cottontail's range by 86 percent. In 2006, the FWS identified the New England cottontail as a candidate for listing under the ESA. The New England cottontail looks

similar to the more abundant eastern cottontail, an introduced species. State and federal biologists began a coordinated effort in 2008 to restore habitat for the cottontail. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was part of that effort, providing technical and financial assistance to owners and managers of private land to voluntarily restore early successional habitats.

NRCS and the Cottontail

NRCS uses Farm Bill conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), to provide assistance for habitat restoration. NRCS began ramping up habitat restoration efforts in 2009, and in 2012, launched Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), a partnership that accelerates habitat restoration work for seven species, including the cottontail.



NRCS targets its Working Lands for Wildlife effort in these priority areas.

Through WLFW, landowners restored more than 4,400 acres of early successional habitat in targeted areas between 2010 and 2014.



Improving Working Lands

This restoration benefits agricultural operations, too. It can make working lands more productive. WLFW also provides landowners with predictability, enabling them to continue their operations for up to 30 years as long as NRCS-prescribed conservation practices are maintained.

Restoring Habitats

The New England cottontail is reluctant to leave the cover and food found in early successional habitat. To create habitat, NRCS works with landowners to restore early successional habitat by planting shrubs and by removing trees and invasive plants.

This conservation work not only benefits the New England cottontail but 66 other

species, such as woodcock, roughed grouse, snowshoe hares, box turtles, frosted elfin butterflies and a variety of songbirds.

Success across the Country

The decision not to list the New England cottontail demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted, science-based conservation efforts on private lands. These efforts play a crucial role in helping wildlife populations rebound, evidenced recently in the FWS decisions to delist the Oregon chub, to not list the Bi-State sage-grouse and Arctic grayling, and to begin the delisting process for the Louisiana black bear.

**Fiscal Years 2012-2014
New England Cottontail
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and
Active and Completed Contracts**

State	Acres
Connecticut	818
Maine	867
Massachusetts	329
New Hampshire	986
New York	70
Rhode Island	1,346
Total	4,416

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, September 2015.

Tails of Success



Photo by Betty Anderson.



Photo courtesy of FWS.



Photo by Diane Petit

Spreading the Word

The more the merrier is New Hampshire landowner Rick Ambrose's philosophy when it comes to habitat restoration. After noticing declines in cottontail, he restored 60 acres of early successional habitat on his land. Ambrose recruits others to work with NRCS to restore habitat on their land – even bringing his own chainsaw to help others with their restoration work.

Connecting Corridors

The larger the habitat footprint, the better. In Connecticut, after the Magnuson family learned their land could sew together other tracts of prime cottontail habitat, they worked with NRCS to remove invasive plants and mature trees, allowing desired shrubs to flourish. Now, their land is home to 12 acres of perfect cottontail habitat.

Restoring Coastal Habitats

Cape Cod's beautiful seashore, inlets, salt marshes and woodlands are a natural draw for tourists the year-round. While a boon for the local economy, the associated development is not so good for the elusive cottontail. NRCS worked with tribes and land trusts in Massachusetts to restore nearly 100 acres of adjoining habitat on three sites, helping offset the loss of habitat.