

Rhode Island State Office
60 Quaker Lane, Suite 40
Warwick, Rhode Island 02886
www.ri.nrcs.usda.gov

Working Lands for Wildlife Fact Sheet

New England Cottontail Background



In 2006, the New England cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) was listed as a candidate species under the Federal Endangered Species Act due to an 86 percent decline in its historic range. New England cottontail is listed as a priority species for the States in which it occurs (Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York), and it is listed as an “endangered” species by State law in Maine and New Hampshire.

The primary threat to the New England cottontail is loss of habitat through succession. As forests mature, understory thins to such an extent that the habitat is no longer suitable for New England cottontail. Fragmentation serves to further degrade habitat on a larger scale. Isolation of occupied patches by surrounding areas of unsuitable habitat, coupled with high predation rates, are causing local extirpation of New England cottontail from small patches.

In order to sustain local populations, New England cottontail requires at least 25 acres of continuous early successional habitat intermingled with smaller suitable parcels that are 12 or more acres in size. These core areas need to be connected by dispersal corridors or be within the species dispersal distance. Landscape fragmentation, loss of habitat from succession, infestations of invasive plants, and alterations of hydrology, are the most common resource concerns affecting the New England cottontail.



Because New England cottontail often lives in landscapes suitable for agriculture, formal federal listing of the species will impact agricultural producers who have lands designated as critical habitat. Working Lands for Wildlife will develop and maintain habitat within priority areas, and work with landowners to support New England cottontail recovery, precluding the need to federally list the species.

Goals and Objectives

Over the next five years, Working Lands for Wildlife will assist private land owners to create and enhance approximately 2,500 acres of shrub thicket and early successional forest. The habitat improvements will support New England cottontail recovery and reduce the need to federally list the species.

Core Practices

643 Restoration and Management of Rare and Declining Habitats

644 Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management

645 Upland Wildlife Habitat Management

Actions

- Brush management and/or herbaceous weed control to manage invasive plants.
- Reestablishment of native woody vegetation.
- Cutting trees and shrubs to encourage dense forest regeneration and rehabilitation of shrublands.
- Restoration of wetland seeps within priority areas.
- Increase connectivity of habitat in core areas.
- Development of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances.

Outcomes and Impacts

Habitat improvements will preclude the need to federally list the species and to enable potential down-listing from endangered under Maine and New Hampshire law. In addition, 59 species of greatest conservation need in New England depend on early successional habitats will benefit from this effort.

Rhode Island - New England Cottontail Focus Areas 2012

