
New England Cottontail Initiative

An update of activities being conducted to benefit this declining species

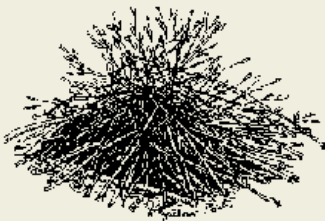
NRCS will soon announce funding awards for projects on private lands, implementation continues on state lands



The New England cottontail continues to be the focus of wide-ranging, targeted attempts to reverse the long-term population declines this species is experiencing. Efforts are concentrated on creating large acreages of the tangly, thorny, thick, brushy vegetation that this species prefers; continued research and monitoring in order to learn more about the needs of the species; and public outreach in order to engage private landowners in this endeavor.

Private Land Efforts Initiated

In its first year, the Working Lands For Wildlife program awarded funding for seven projects, now in various stages of implementation, which will create 235 acres of habitat. Year Two brought 19 applications for consideration; the NRCS is in the process of notifying applicants; those deemed high priority (ie. within a focus area) will be awarded funding. Stay tuned for updates on these projects! There is still an opportunity to have new projects considered for funding. Interested parties should work with their local NRCS office before the April 19th deadline.



State Land Efforts Continue

We continue to make good progress in creating NEC habitat on state lands. Two pro-



jects have recently been completed: a 57-acre cut at Goshen WMA and a 35-acre cut at Sessions Woods WMA. Other ongoing state lands cutting activities include:
Bear Hill WMA—41 acres
Camp Columbia WMA—20 acres

Research Continues

When the listing petition was filed with the USFWS, the CT DEEP Wildlife Division initiated several research projects to learn more about NEC distribution, abundance, and population demographics in Connecticut. Initial efforts focused on determining where in Connecticut we had NEC. Between 2000 and 2010, The Wildlife Division collected over 1,675 specimens from live-

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trapping, road-kills, and hunter-donated specimens. This effort, combined with a region-wide survey conducted by the University of New Hampshire documented that NEC were in at least 41



Connecticut towns, mostly in the eastern and western 1/3 of the state. For all specimens, we recorded pelage characteristics and confirmed species identification using DNA. Although pelage characteristics are not 100% reliable, we found that if a rabbit had a white spot on the forehead, there was a 99% likelihood of it being an eastern cottontail. If there was a black spot between the ears, there was a 94% chance of it being NEC. However, many specimens had both white and black spots or had no spot at all, and could only be identified by DNA or skull morphology, if the specimen was dead. We also looked at how often New England and eastern cottontails were found living in the same patch of cover. Over this time period, we trapped rabbits in 154 patches of suitable habitat; 97% of all patches were occupied by EC, 18% were occupied by NEC and 15% were co-occupied by both eastern and New England cottontails.

Current research involves assessing habitat restoration sites, manipulating eastern cottontail populations, and studying metapopulation dynamics. At

habitat restoration sites, we are quantifying changes in vegetative structure and use by cottontails at newly created habitat restoration sites. At sites co-occupied by both EC and NEC, we are manipulating eastern cottontail populations to determine if removing EC will result in an increase of NEC. Throughout NEC focus areas, intense pellet surveys are being conducted to look at genetic barriers and connectivity between populations. This information will allow us to better plan how the landscape needs to be manipulated to benefit NEC population expansion.

Workshops

Two very successful workshops were held in March; one at Franklin WMA and one at Sessions Woods WMA. Each workshop had a turnout of over 60 people! Presenters included both DEEP Wildlife Division staff and the NRCS; topics included the NEC Regional Initiative, ongoing NEC research in Connecticut, and private landowner participation opportunities. Both workshops included a tour of an active NEC habitat management project: Franklin WMA workshop participants saw a cut at Bear Hill WMA, while the Sessions



Field session—Bear Hill WMA

Woods WMA workshop participants remained on site. An informative and enjoyable time was had by all. We look forward to holding additional workshops later this year.



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New Webpage and Brochure

Staff has been hard at work spreading the word about the importance of young forest and shrubland habitat. A new webpage has been developed devoted to [Connecticut's Young Forest and Shrubland Initiative](#), and a new brochure detailing the [Benefits of Clearcuts](#) has been published.

Other Species - Spotlight on Prairie Warbler

Highlighted in both the new webpage and brochure is the fact that it is not just New England cottontails that will benefit from this flush of habitat creation. There are 46 additional species of Greatest Conservation Need that also



utilize early successional habitat, including the prairie warbler. This beautiful

songbird may be at risk due to decreasing shrubland habitat as well as predation. They are found in a variety of shrubland habitats, including overgrown, tangle-filled, viny thickets. In fact, surveys conducted over the last 3 years found the highest densities of prairie warblers in the NEC project area in Housatonic WMA, as well as forest cuts implemented in Pachaug SF. It is expected that these birds will take advantage of recent work done at Rora-back WMA, current work at Bear Hill WMA, and future work planned for Pachaug SF.

Contact Information

For more information, or to discuss a

potential project, please contact the following:

- Paul Rothbart
NEC Project Manager
paul.rothbart@ct.gov
- Judy Wilson
NEC Project Biologist
judy.wilson@ct.gov
- Lisa Wahle
NEC Project Wildlife Specialist
lisa.wahle@ct.gov
- Jack Berlanda—
NEC Project Certified Forester
john.berlanda@ct.gov

Our office location is:
CT DEEP Eastern District HQ
209 Hebron Road
Marlborough, CT 06447
(860) 295-9523

The following websites offer further information pertaining to New England cottontails:

www.newenglandcottontail.org
www.ctnrns.usda.gov/cottontail
www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit

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