

Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge

Release of Final Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment

New Refuge Approved

We are pleased to announce that in October 2016, the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) approved a new national wildlife refuge dedicated to managing shrubland habitat for wildlife in the Northeast.

Alternative B was selected from the final Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment (LPP/EA). The Service may now acquire up to 15,000 acres of wildlife habitat from willing landowners as part of Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The final plan depicts 10 Refuge Acquisition Focus Areas (RAFAs, focus areas) in New England and New York which represent the outer boundaries of areas of interest.

An electronic copy of the final document is available on our website (see inset). To request the document in print or on CD-Rom, contact Beth Goldstein, Natural Resource Planner (see page 2).

Highlights of the Decision

The actions incorporated into the final decision will:

- Establish 10 RAFAs spanning six States: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York. While

the total acreage in these 10 focus areas adds up to 257,639 acres, the Service has acquisition authority for up to 15,000 acres from willing sellers across all 10 areas.

- Continue work with our partners to conserve, manage, and maintain shrubland and young forest habitats which provide food and shelter for New England cottontails, American woodcock, ruffed grouse, monarch butterflies, box turtles and scores of other shrubland-dependent species.
- Contribute to habitat and population objectives for numerous declining priority breeding landbirds identified in the New England/Mid-Atlantic Bird Conservation Region Plan 30, including prairie warbler and blue-winged warbler.
- Provide direct, immediate, and long-term positive effects on federally listed threatened and endangered species, including bog turtles and the Massachusetts population of the northern red-bellied cooter.
- Make measurable contributions towards habitat and population goals identified in the multi-agency Conservation Strategy for the New England cottontail by increasing the long-term certainty of shrubland management and success in strategic locations throughout the Northeast.

Summary of Public Comments on the Draft LPP/EA

We initially released the draft LPP/EA for 45 days of public review and comment from January 19 to March 4, 2016. In response to several requests, we subsequently extended the public comment period another 30 days.

During the comment period, we held information sessions upon request. Two were held in Maine, three in New Hampshire, two in Massachusetts, two in New York, one in Connecticut and six in Rhode Island. Audiences included sportsmen's groups, land trusts, and town and county officials. All six Congressional delegations were contacted initially via email, and follow-up phone calls or in-person visits occurred with most district staff offices.



Northern red-bellied cooter (left) and painted turtle

USFWS

Our website (<https://www.fws.gov/northeast/refuges/planning/lpp/greatthicketLPP.html>) provides additional details about the planning process for Great Thicket NWR and offers:

- A downloadable electronic copy of the final LPP/EA
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the Service's land acquisition program
- Refuge overview maps and individual RAFA maps organized by State
- A media release
- Landowner Interest Form

After the 75-day public comment period ended, we compiled all of the comments we received. In total, we received 6,064 written comments, of which 5,523 were a form letter in support of the proposal. We also received one petition signed by approximately 2,455 individuals in support of the proposal. All comments received are addressed and summarized in appendix C of the final LPP/EA.

Changes from Draft to Final LPP/EA

Our modifications from the draft to final LPP/EA include additions, corrections, clarifications, and changes to the Service-preferred alternative. We have also determined that none of those modifications warrants our publishing a revised or amended draft for comment before releasing the final LPP/EA.

As part of our changes to the draft plan, we reduced the Plymouth RAFA in order to better complement the current efforts and future priorities of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in this area. The draft LPP/EA proposed a Plymouth RAFA of 43,035 acres. The revised area in the final LPP/EA encompasses 3,698 acres and will exactly match the Critical Habitat area designated in 1980 for the federally listed northern redbellied cooter. Our target acquisition will remain at 500 acres in this RAFA. We believe this revised focus area boundary still allows us to support cooter recovery efforts, as well as assist with shrubland and young forest management and protection in the Plymouth area.

We also modified the Northern Housatonic RAFA to exclude all lands west of Route 22, resulting in the removal of about 4,000 acres from this focus area. In addition, we extended the southern boundary of this focus area to include portions of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. We believe this newly added area of over 2,000 acres has the potential for significant

partnership and conservation opportunities. With these modifications, the revised Northern Housatonic RAFA is now 33,883 acres, compared with the draft plan's original size of 35,727 acres. Our target acquisition will remain at 2,000 acres in this RAFA.

Implementation

The Service now has the authority to acquire lands within the 10 Great Thicket RAFAs. We will work with partners and willing-seller property owners to identify opportunities to acquire priority lands in fee simple or conservation easement. If the plan is approved, it could take many decades to acquire all 15,000 acres, as the Service works with willing sellers only and depends on funding availability to purchase land. Willing sellers will be compensated for their land based on the appraised market value. Landowners within RAFAs choosing not to sell will retain all the rights, privileges, and obligations of land ownership.

If you are a landowner within one of the 10 Great Thicket RAFAs and are interested in selling or donating your fee simple interest or a conservation easement on your land, please complete and submit the "Landowner Interest Form" on the Great Thicket website (see front page) and submit it to: USFWS, Northeast Region, Realty Chief; 300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley MA 01035. If you are unsure of whether you are within one of the 10 Great Thicket RAFAs, please contact the Realty Chief at 413-253-8590.

Great Thicket NWR is currently in an interim period which is defined by policy as the "time between establishment of a new refuge... and the completion of an approved Comprehensive Conservation Plan" (602 FW 1). During this time, management of the refuge will be directed by the conceptual management plan which can be found in appendix A of the final LPP/EA.

Other Benefits

National wildlife refuges do not just benefit wildlife. They are strong economic engines for local communities across the country. A 2013 national report *Banking on Nature* found that refuges pump \$2.4 billion into the economy and support more than 35,000 jobs. Spending by refuge visitors generated nearly \$343 million in local, county, state and federal tax revenue in 2011. Recognizing that there can be a tax loss when placing land in government ownership, the Service offsets this loss by annually contributing funds through the refuge revenue sharing program to the county or other local unit of government.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the largest network of lands in the nation dedicated to wildlife conservation, with 565 national wildlife refuges covering more than 150 million acres. A hundred years in the making, the refuge system is a network of habitats that benefits wildlife, provides unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protects a healthy environment.



Monarch butterfly

Glen Smart

For more information:

Contact Beth Goldstein, email: beth_goldstein@fws.gov, phone: 413/253 8564, or Bill Zinni, email: bill_zinni@fws.gov, phone: 413/253 8522

Learn more at:

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/refuges/planning/lpp/greatthicketLPP.html>

