

**NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*)**

**SPOTLIGHT SPECIES ACTION PLAN**

Prepared by:

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for:

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Approved:

  
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4-6-09  
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Date

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE - SPOTLIGHT SPECIES ACTION PLAN****Common Name:** New England Cottontail**Scientific Name:** *Sylvilagus transitionalis***Lead Region:** Region 5**Lead Field Office:** New England Field Office**Species Information:**

Status: Candidate

Listing Priority Number: 2

Recovery Plan or Candidate Assessment Form: May 9, 2008

Most Recent 5-year Review: NA

Other: Conservation strategy in preparation.

**Threats:** The present and threatened destruction, modification, and curtailment of habitat and range are significant factors affecting the New England Cottontail (NEC). Habitat succession is considered to be the most important cause of habitat loss for the species (Litvaitis 1993b, p. 866). However, at a local or individual patch scale, loss or modification of habitat due to development is also significant. Most NECs now occur on small parcels where food quality is low and predation in winter is high (Barbour and Litvaitis 1993, p. 321; Brown and Litvaitis 1995, p. 1005).

**Goal:** The five-year goal for the NEC is to reduce the magnitude and imminence of habitat-based threats.

**Measure:** Within the five-year planning horizon, change the Listing Priority Number (LPN) from 2 to 8. To accomplish this measure, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will assess the following indicators:

- ✓ The proportion of the NECs range where actions have occurred that address the threats.
- ✓ The effectiveness of those actions in providing for the persistence of NEC as indicated by survey results.
- ✓ Completion and projected longevity of the actions recommended below and/or other opportunistic actions.

**Actions:** In February 2007, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Service, and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies was finalized. The purpose of the MOU is to strengthen cooperation among the parties in identifying and creating opportunities to work collaboratively to conserve plant and animal species at-risk and their habitats. The MOU identifies the roles and responsibilities for the parties. The Service will work with our State and Federal partners in fulfilling the purposes of the MOU. The various partners identified below may take actions to meet the goals of this plan with respect to the NEC.

**USFWS** - As lead for the species, the New England Field Office's (NEFO's) Endangered Species Program will coordinate conservation efforts by other Ecological Services offices (Maine FO, New York FO, and Southern New England Coastal Office), other Service programs (Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW), Coastal, Refuges, Migratory Birds, and Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR)) and other partners (States, NRCS, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), Environmental Defense (ED), and private landowners). To remove the disincentives to private landowner participation in NEC conservation, the Service is working with the States of New Hampshire and Maine and the ED in the development of programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs). WSFR, through Section 6 Grants and State Wildlife Grants (SWG), will provide needed funding to States to carry out conservation programs. The PFW and Coastal programs will provide technical assistance to private landowners, often in conjunction with NRCS, State agencies, and ED. Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge is leading NEC conservation on Service lands and nearby off-refuge lands. Because of the importance of early-successional habitats for migratory birds, NEFO is working with Migratory Birds to identify opportunities to achieve multiple species objectives. A strategic habitat conservation (SHC) approach is being used to plan NEC conservation efforts at a landscape scale. Outreach will be key to encouraging private landowner participation in NEC conservation. Specific tasks that are needed by the Service to accomplish the objectives of this plan include:

- ✓ Conduct annual status reviews that provide updated information on NEC.
- ✓ Provide timely processing of voluntary conservation agreements.
- ✓ Provide technical assistance to landowners who are interested in participating in NEC conservation activities.
- ✓ Manage Service-owned lands for NEC where possible.
- ✓ Request and provide funding to achieve the goals of the plan.

**NRCS** - NRCS should target Farm Bill activities toward management of early-successional habitats. NRCS has expressed a strong desire to support NEC conservation upon completion of CCAAs that will provide regulatory assurances to participating landowners that are NRCS customers. Specific tasks that are needed by NRCS to accomplish the objectives of this plan include:

- ✓ Encourage and promote NEC conservation through NRCS administered programs.
- ✓ Participation in the development of regulatory assurance programs.

**State Fish and Wildlife Agencies (States)** - The historic range of NEC includes Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont. All of the States in the range of the NEC have identified NEC and other early successional wildlife as "Species of Greatest Conservation Need" in their State wildlife action plans. The States of New Hampshire and Maine are developing programmatic CCAAs to provide regulatory assurances to private landowners. Habitat management on State-owned lands is likely to play a key role in initial conservation efforts. Following successful competition of a multistate-SWG, the States will also convene a working

group to develop a conservation strategy and coordinate NEC conservation across the species' range. Specific tasks that are needed by NRCS to accomplish the objectives of this plan include:

- ✓ Encourage and promote NEC conservation on State-owned lands.
- ✓ Participation in the development of regulatory assurance programs.

**NFWF** - As part of its "Keystone Initiative" for NEC, NFWF has developed a business plan in coordination with Federal, State, and non-Government organization partners. The plan will establish goals, measures for assessing progress toward the goals, and actions necessary to achieve the goals. NFWF has awarded considerable funding for NEC conservation efforts in New Hampshire and Maine. NFWF is interested in developing additional sponsorship for the purposes of achieving the goals of the business plan. Broadening the geographic scale of NFWF's initiative would help promote additional measures that could meet the goals of this plan.

**ED** - ED is working closely with the Service and a private landowner in Maine to develop a CCAA. It is also working with New Hampshire Fish and Game and the Service to develop a programmatic CCAA. These agreements will serve as examples for future programmatic and individual CCAAs.

**Together** - Specific tasks that are needed by the NRCS, the Service, the States, the NFWF, and the ED to accomplish the objectives of this plan include:

- ✓ Participate in working groups and other discussions regarding the development of rangewide and State specific conservation strategies, or recovery plans, which meet the measures identified in this plan. These plans should be strategically designed to provide habitat conservation for NEC and, where appropriate, other early successional dependent wildlife of conservation need.
- ✓ Coordinate to ensure that each partner's conservation programs are complementary and are, together, achieving the goals of this plan.
- ✓ Collaborate and encourage participation by other conservation partners through information sharing, outreach and providing assistance, including both technical and financial.
- ✓ Collaborate in the development and implementation of voluntary conservation agreements and assurances.
- ✓ Target NEC conservation through the development and implementation of practices that result in the creation and management of habitat, to the maximum extent practicable.

*Estimated costs of the actions:* Cost estimates for conservation actions are being developed as part of the NFWF business plan.

**Role of other agencies:**

See above.

**Role of other Endangered Species Act programs:**

See above.

**Role of other Service programs:**

See above.

**Additional funding analysis:** Additional funding would enable the Service to accelerate and expand conservation efforts, further reducing the listing priority and possibly making listing unnecessary. Additional funds would be used to support additional Service coordination of conservation efforts by all Service offices and programs, State and Federal agencies, non-Government organizations, and other partners; development of conservation programs by the States; and on-the-ground research, monitoring, and habitat management.