



**Massachusetts State Office**

451 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002  
413-253-4350, fax 413-253-4375  
[www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov)

# NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

MEDIA CONTACT: Diane Baedeker Petit  
Public Affairs Officer  
413-253-4371  
[Diane.Petit@ma.usda.gov](mailto:Diane.Petit@ma.usda.gov)

## **Federal program available to help Massachusetts landowners improve wildlife habitat**

AMHERST, Mass. (December 4, 2009) — Massachusetts landowners who would like technical and financial help protecting wildlife habitat and valuable ecosystems on their property should sign-up for the federal Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) by **February 1, 2010**. WHIP is a voluntary program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

While WHIP sign-up is continuous throughout the year, land owners are encouraged to apply now in order for their applications to be reviewed and ranked for possible funding from the total \$98,000 currently available for Massachusetts projects.

Interested landowners should contact their local NRCS field office at a USDA service center for more information. USDA service centers are listed on-line at <http://offices.usda.gov> or in the phone book under Federal Government, U.S. Department of Agriculture. General program information is available on the NRCS Massachusetts website at [www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov).

Examples of eligible lands in Massachusetts include privately owned grasslands, shrub lands, and young forest, freshwater wetlands, upland oak forest, pitch pine/scrub oak habitat, coastal habitats, and rivers and streams.

Through the 2008 Farm Bill, WHIP now offers additional conservation practices to benefit forest land and pollinator habitat. The new Farm Bill also provides higher payment rates to beginning, socially disadvantaged and limited-resource farmers.

This year, landowners in areas of Barnstable, Berkshire, Hampden and Plymouth counties where known populations of the New England Cottontail rabbit exist may be eligible for a higher rate of compensation for adopting certain conservation practices for a minimum of 15 years.

The region's only native rabbit, the New England Cottontail's populations are declining because its preferred habitat – known as early successional habitat or thickets – has been reduced by aging forests, introduction of invasive plant species and development.

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“In the last federal fiscal year, some 46 Massachusetts WHIP projects received a total of nearly \$1.4 million for conservation practices that addressed early successional habitat, oak regeneration, timber stand improvement and pollinator habitat,” said Christine S. Clarke, State Conservationist for NRCS in Massachusetts. “USDA is committed to providing conservation tools and resources to ensure that Bay State land remains healthy and productive.”

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that helps people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment. NRCS has seven Massachusetts field offices in Greenfield, Hadley, Holden, Hyannis, Pittsfield, Westford, and West Wareham, which work with local conservation districts and other partners to serve farmers and landowners throughout the commonwealth.

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**NOTE TO EDITORS AND REPORTERS:** If you would like to include local contact information for your readers, please cite the office below that serves your area. If you have any questions or need more information, please call the public affairs contact above or your local office below.

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