



Massachusetts State Office

451 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002
413-253-4350, fax 413-253-4375
www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Diane Baedeker Petit
USDA-NRCS Public Affairs Officer
413-253-4371, cell 413-835-1276
diane.petit@ma.usda.gov

Public-private partnership to protect rare turtles and other wildlife on agricultural lands in Massachusetts

AMHERST (September 23, 2009) -- A partnership involving the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game and the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Amherst College, and two farmers from the Connecticut River Valley will help to protect about 40 acres of critical field habitat for wood turtles, a state listed species of special concern, under an innovative cooperative agreement announced today.

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) have partnered through the cooperative agreement to identify and promote conservation opportunities to Massachusetts's agricultural community. At the event at Amherst College today, NHESP and NRCS recognized landowners who willingly manage their land for rare species habitat.

"In implementing the 2008 Farm Bill conservation programs, NRCS has identified wildlife habitat enhancement as a state priority in Massachusetts," said Christine Clarke, Massachusetts State Conservationist for NRCS. "We're pleased to partner with the state Department of Fish and Game and to be able to provide federal funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to help these private landowners protect important habitat."

A wood turtle protection program is just one opportunity that resulted from the cooperative agreement. NRCS and NHESP are working together on a number of rare wildlife restoration efforts, including various grassland and bird habitat restoration projects, restoration of habitats for the New England cottontail rabbit, best management practices for managing cranberry bog habitats for Eastern box turtles, and bald eagle restoration efforts, among others.

In the first year, Leonard Roberts enrolled 29 acres of hayfield and Howard Streeter Jr. agreed to place 5.5 acres of hayfield into the program. Amherst College did not officially apply for the program, but agreed to place a 100 foot buffer around all of the college's properties that border wood turtle habitat (a total of about five acres), without accepting compensation. The hayfields will be safely managed for three consecutive years and will help to protect the wood turtle.

"I would like to recognize and thank the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Amherst College, Mr. Roberts, and Mr. Streeter for their role in managing these grassland habitats in a manner that will protect the wood turtle and many other wildlife species," said Mary Griffin, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game. "This effort will benefit wood turtles and nesting bird species such as bobolink and Eastern meadowlark, birds of prey like American kestrel, northern harrier, short-eared owls, and other wildlife."

-- MORE --

The wood turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) is a medium sized turtle (14-20 cm; 5.5-8 in) that can be recognized by its sculpted shell and orange coloration on the legs and neck. The wood turtle occurs throughout New England in riparian areas, especially slower moving mid-sized streams with sandy bottoms and heavily vegetated stream banks. It is a state listed Species of Special Concern under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. Wood turtles are active from mid-March through October. They spend most of the spring and summer in early successional habitats such as fields, hay-fields, riparian wetlands including wet meadows, bogs, and beaver ponds. They return to the streams in late summer or early fall to overwinter.

Direct threats to wood turtles are hay-mowing operations in spring and summer, development of wooded stream banks, roadway casualties, incidental collection of specimens for pets, unnaturally inflated rates of predation in suburban and urban areas, pollution in streams, and forestry activities.

The wood turtle protection program is a voluntary program that aims to maintain wood turtle habit and reduce the mortality of wood turtles in agricultural fields by compensating landowners for a delayed mowing of their hayfields. Farmers were given the option to enroll their entire field or a section of field into the program. Hayfields enrolled in the program cannot be harvested until after September 15th. In return, farmers receive \$800 dollars an acre each year of enrollment, and are able to sell the late harvest as mulch quality hay. This program benefits wood turtles and many other wildlife species, including birds such as bobolink, Eastern meadowlark, American kestrel, northern harrier, and short-eared owls; butterflies such as swallowtails, monarchs, and fritillaries; and mammals such as red fox and white-tailed deer.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary federal program, authorized under the 2008 Farm Bill, that provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers and forest land owners who want to improve and protect the condition of soil, water, air, plants and animals. Through EQIP, NRCS provides financial compensation for part of the cost of establishing and maintaining conservation practices that improve natural resources on private land.

For information on the wood turtle and how to promote turtle conservation please visit: http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhesp/conservation/herps/turtle_tips.htm. For information on the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, visit: <http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip>.

###