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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Agriculture and Interior departments announce joint wildlife conservation efforts

Innovative partnership preserves working lands and supports efforts of private landowners to conserve habitat for at-risk species in New England

AMHERST, Mass. (April 10, 2012) — The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in partnership with the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service have announced funding for a new Working Lands for Wildlife partnership, which allows farmers and forest landowners to use innovative approaches to restore and protect habitat for at-risk wildlife species such as the New England cottontail rabbit.

Working Lands for Wildlife is a national effort with \$33 million in funding nationwide from the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). The partnership will demonstrate that productive working rural lands are compatible with the needs of sensitive wildlife species.

The agencies have strategically identified seven at-risk species nationwide that would benefit from conservation investments made by landowners on private lands. New England cottontail habitat is targeted in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island.

Interested farmers and landowners in targeted areas of Barnstable, Berkshire, Dukes, Hampden, Hampshire, Middlesex, Nantucket, Plymouth, and Worcester counties can contact their local NRCS office to determine if their land is eligible and, if so, apply to receive technical and financial assistance. Applications are accepted anytime, but the application ranking cut-off for current funds is **April 30, 2012**.

A map of towns with targeted habitat areas and more information is available on the NRCS Massachusetts website at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov. USDA Service Center locations are listed on-line at <http://offices.usda.gov> or in the phone book under Federal Government, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"The Working Lands for Wildlife initiative allows us to focus our resources where we can do the most good to improve the health and diversity of working landscapes in a more efficient, more effective, and more cooperative way," said Christine Clarke, NRCS Massachusetts State Conservationist.

"This innovative partnership allows people to continue working their lands, while at the same time helping to conserve imperiled species, such as the New England cottontail. The Working Lands for Wildlife initiative will allow us to focus our resources where we can do the most good in New England," said Wendi Weber, Northeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The New England cottontail was listed as a candidate species under the Federal Endangered Species Act due to an 86 percent decline in its historic range. The primary threat to the New England cottontail is the loss of habitat through ecological succession, or the gradual process by which ecosystems change and develop over time. As forests mature, the understory thins to the point where the habitat is no longer suitable for the New England cottontail. Fragmentation, invasive plants and hydrology changes also degrade habitat.

(more)

Increased shrub thicket and early successional habitat will benefit an additional 59 species of wildlife in New England, as well, including wild turkeys, woodcock, migratory song birds and ruffed grouse.

Specific conservation practices for habitat improvement include brush management and weed control to manage invasive plants, reestablishment of native woody vegetation, and cutting trees and shrubs to encourage dense forest understory regeneration.

Additional species targeted in other parts of the U.S. under the Working Lands for Wildlife initiative are greater sage-grouse, bog turtle, golden-winged warbler, gopher tortoise, lesser prairie-chicken and the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

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