

# Conservation Programs & Practices for: **New England Cottontail Habitat**

## About NRCS

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works to protect and conserve natural resources on our nation's private lands.

A part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, NRCS administers conservation programs funded primarily through the 2008 Farm Bill.

The conservation provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill will affect farmers for years to come. New provisions continue to build on the conservation gains made by U.S. citizens over the past decade. Existing programs have been simplified and new programs created to address high priority environmental protection goals.

In addition to addressing a broad range of environmental goals, the 2008 Farm Bill includes increased financial assistance for new, limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers.



Contact your local NRCS field office for more information and assistance.

## Contact NRCS:

### Massachusetts USDA Service Centers

Barnstable: 508-771-6476

Greenfield: 413-772-0384

Hadley: 413-585-1000

Holden: 508-829-4477

Pittsfield: 413-443-1776

West Wareham: 508-295-5151

Westford: 978-692-1904

The future of the New England cottontail, New England's only native cottontail rabbit, is in jeopardy. Dense thickets—also called early successional habitat—are the only places where these rabbits can live. This habitat type provides cottontails with shelter, food and protection from predators, but has been disappearing from the landscape as our forests age and lose their understory plants and shrubs.

Fortunately, private landowners can help to restore the New England cottontail population by establishing and managing thicket habitat on areas of their land.

NRCS offers technical and financial assistance to landowners to establish, maintain and improve early successional habitat in Massachusetts through the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). NRCS and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife are working together to identify and promote conservation opportunities for private landowners.

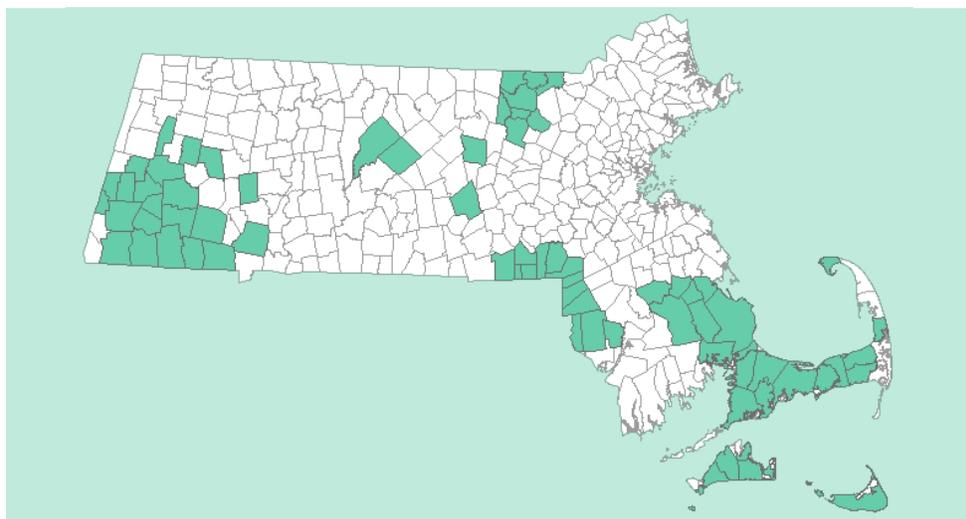
## What will WHIP pay for?

WHIP provides compensation for part of the costs of managing identified New England cottontail habitat. Management techniques include **forest clearcuts to create young forest, brush hogging, prescribed fire, selective tree removal, shrub planting** and **invasive species treatment**.

There are two different ways to participate in this program:

- If your land **is** in the shaded areas on the map below, you may be eligible to receive up to 90 percent of the cost of habitat restoration through an essential habitat agreement. These agreements last for a minimum of 15 years.
- You may also participate through a regular WHIP agreement.

If your land **is not** in one of the shaded areas on the map below, the land may not be considered as New England cottontail habitat.



TOWNS WHERE NRCS WILL FOCUS EFFORTS TO MANAGE ESSENTIAL HABITAT AREAS  
FOR NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL IN MASSACHUSETTS

As determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife



Photo of New England Cottontail by John Litvaitis, UNH

## NRCS Conservation Programs for New England Cottontail Habitat

### Why New England Cottontail?

The New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) has been designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection.

Historically, the New England cottontail inhabited nearly all of New England.

Now, the cottontail is restricted to small, isolated populations in parts of Massachusetts, eastern New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine. This species can no longer be found in Vermont.

Since 1960, the range of this rabbit has decreased by 86 percent.

Habitat management is part of a range-wide effort called the New England Cottontail Initiative focusing on distribution and habitat restoration of New England cottontails throughout New England and New York.

This initiative involves partnerships with state and federal natural resource agencies, conservation organizations and other large landowners focusing on surveys, habitat identification, and habitat restoration efforts.



Photo of New England Cottontail by Linda Cullivan

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT  
[WWW.FWS.GOV/NORTHEAST/INDEPTH/RABBIT](http://WWW.FWS.GOV/NORTHEAST/INDEPTH/RABBIT)

[www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov)

### Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)

WHIP is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to people who want to improve fish and wildlife habitat and restore natural ecosystems on their land.

In Massachusetts, there are about 30 different conservation practices that are eligible for funding through WHIP.

### Who can apply?

To participate in WHIP, you need to:

- be an individual, entity or joint operation.
- have control of the land for the term of the proposed contract. Renting and leasing land is fine, as long as you have documented control of the land.
- be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation (HELWC) provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985.
- have an average adjusted gross income (AGI) of \$1 million dollars or less annually.
- be in good standing with the terms of all other active USDA contracts.

### What sites will be considered?

All potential sites state-wide will be considered and reviewed by trained staff.

- The potential to manage suitable habitat for New England cottontail exists in coastal shrublands, shrub swamps, pitch pine-scrub oak barrens, old fields, old orchards, young aspen stands and young forests.
- Habitat patches should be large enough or adjacent to other suitable habitat so that management can be rotated allowing for continual available habitat.
- All potential sites will be reviewed by trained staff.
- Essential habitat agreements, which pay for up to 90 percent of restoration costs, are only available on sites that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife identify as areas that will provide habitat for known populations of New England cottontail.

See the map of the reverse of this page for included areas, or call one of our offices.

Essential habitat agreements must be a minimum of 15 years in length.

### How do I apply?

Contact your local USDA Service Center to speak to one of our conservation professionals to begin the program application process. Information and application forms are available on our website.

### When should I apply?

Applications may be submitted anytime. All applications will be evaluated periodically in a competitive ranking process as funding becomes available. Ranking criteria for each program is available on our website. Please call your local NRCS field office or visit us online to learn more.