

New England Cottontail Initiative

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program * Environmental Quality Incentives Program

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Connecticut

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Helping People Help the Land

What is the New England Cottontail Initiative?

The New England Cottontail (NEC) Initiative is a comprehensive strategy to accelerate restoration of critical habitats that support the New England Cottontail Recovery efforts. The primary objective is to support the recovery of the New England Cottontail in its historic range. The status

of the New England Cottontail is considered to be a species *at-risk* and listed as a Candidate Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This has prompted NRCS to participate in a regional NEC Initiative with federal and state agencies to develop local conservation plans on private lands to sustain critical NEC habitat.

Who are the Partners?

The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are working to develop a conservation strategy that will address the conservation needs of the New England Cottontail. This strategy will identify areas where NEC management efforts are likely to be most successful. DEP has over 12 years of research and experience tracking NEC populations in Connecticut.

Who is Eligible?

NEC prefers early succession forests, often called thickets, scrub and shrub lands, with thick and tangled vegetation (briar patches), typically in a young forest ecosystem less than 25 years old. Once large trees grow in a stand, the shrub layer tends to fade, creating habitat that the NEC no longer finds suitable. Private landowners will play a crucial role in the recovery of the NEC, since many of the known cottontail patches occur on private lands.

In Connecticut, landowners who have an interest in NEC are eligible to apply. If manipulation of forest lands is anticipated, landowners must have a current Forest Management Plan in place that addresses the habitat needs of the NEC. Producers must own or control the land, and agree to implement conservation practices according to the contract schedule.

Land is not eligible for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) if it is currently enrolled in another USDA Farm Bill Program such as the Conservation Reserve Program or the Wetland Reserve Program. Publicly owned lands are not eligible under WHIP. Privately operated, publicly owned lands may be eligible under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

How Does Funding Work?

Focus areas within the six states of the initiative (New England and New York) will be selected to ensure the highest potential for success. The focus areas will be based on data provided by state agencies. By providing a focused effort across multiple states, NRCS can ensure financial and technical assistance are prioritized consistently. A state-appropriate set of ranking criteria, core practices, and payment schedules will be used. Practices may not be started until the contract is signed by NRCS, unless the applicant requests a waiver from the state conservationist.

What is the Contract Period?

WHIP will offer contracts under the New England Cottontail Initiative for a 15-year period. Under EQIP, the contract is limited to 10 years.

According to a schedule developed with the producer, contracts provide pre-determined program payments to the producer for the implementation of the planned practices. The schedule lists the conservation practice extent (amount), date of installation, and payment, and must meet NRCS Technical Standards and Specifications, and any deviation from the contract is considered a violation.

What are the Terms and Payment Rate?

Under WHIP, NEC habitat has been determined to be Essential Animal Habitat for a candidate species. WHIP may pay up to 90% of the eligible costs associated with implementation of practices that develop, protect, enhance, or restore essential plant or animal habitat. The contract may contain both essential and non-essential practices. Non-essential practices would be paid at the standard rate of 75%. WHIP contracts are subject to payment limitations and no applicant may receive more than \$300,000 during any 6-year period, with an annual fiscal year payment limited to \$50,000. EQIP contracts do not have the same essential habitat provisions, and will be written with a standard payment rate of 75%. EQIP is **not** subject to the \$50,000/fiscal year limitation; however, EQIP is limited to \$300,000 over 6 years. For either program, if the applicant is a beginning farmer or socially disadvantaged or limited resource producer, the rates are higher – up to a maximum of 90%.

How Does Sign-Up for the New England Cottontail Initiative Work?

Applications may be submitted any time during the year. For Fiscal Year 2011, the first sign-up will end on **Friday October 29, 2010**. A signed application filed with the local NRCS office indicates an interest in developing a conservation plan as the first step in the application process.

What Conservation Practices are Covered?

CORE PRACTICES: *At Least 1 Required in Plan*

- Early Successional Habitat Development
- Restoration & Management of Declining Habitats
- Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management

SUPPORTING PRACTICES:

- Access Control
- Brush Management
- Conservation Cover
- Field Borders
- Forest Stand Improvement
- Forest Trails and Landings
- Riparian Forest Buffer
- Stream Crossing
- Tree/Shrub Establishment

Who Do I Contact for More Information?

Connecticut Offices		
<p>Danielson Field Office Raymond Covino, District Conservationist (860) 779-0557, Ext. 102</p>	<p>Norwich Field Office Javier Cruz, District Conservationist (860) 887-3604, Ext. 300</p>	<p>Windsor Field Office James Hyde, District Conservationist (860) 688-7725, Ext. 118</p>
<p>Hamden Field Office Diane Blais, District Conservationist (203) 287-8038, Ext. 101</p>	<p>Torrington Field Office Kathleen Johnson, District Conservationist (860) 626-8258, Ext. 200</p>	<p>Tolland State Office Joyce Purcell, ASTC-Programs (860) 871-4028</p>