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Grant offers hope for cottontail

Federal money to help restore, link habitats

By CHELSEA CONABOY Monitor staff

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The future is looking a little brighter for New England cottontail rabbits and other at-risk species thanks to \$1.72 million in federal grant money to the state Fish and Game Department.

The department won two grants through a new program in which states compete for money aimed at restoring populations of threatened species and preventing the need to list them for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The cottontail is a candidate for classification as endangered. The state has partnered with the Wildlife Management Institute to use \$731,975 in grant money and a match of \$315,299 in nonfederal money to restore the shrubland habitat the rabbits need in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

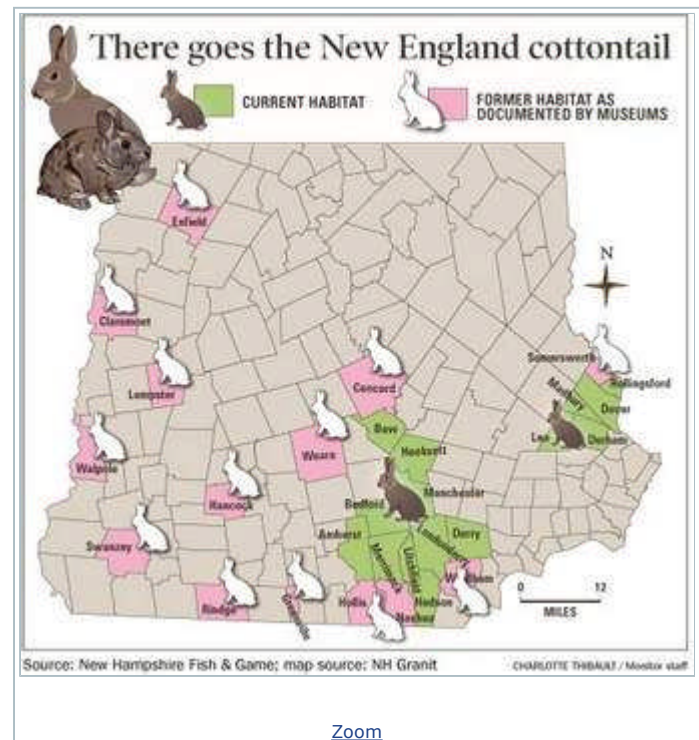
Another grant for \$992,592 in federal money, and a \$719,519 match, will help jump-start a long-term project to connect tracts of forest stretching from northern New York through the northern forest of New Hampshire and on to the Canadian Maritimes.

Both grants will be applied across state boundaries, and nonprofit partners will provide most of the matching money required. But New Hampshire Fish and Game spearheaded the applications. The agency won two of the 13 grants awarded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and nearly 20 percent of the \$9 million available nationally.

Hopping habitat

The cottontail's habitat in New Hampshire used to extend the length of the Connecticut and Merrimack river valleys. Now, the rabbit is known to live along the Merrimack south of Concord and in a few communities in eastern New Hampshire.

It needs dense thickets that once had a chance to grow after floods and fires cleared sections of forest. Fire prevention and flood controls have been good for humans but bad for rabbits. In some areas, shrubland has matured into full forests. In others, development has destroyed it.



"None of us want to see a mammal go extinct in our backyards, during our lifetimes, but the New England cottontail is quickly going in that direction," said Steve Fuller, a Fish and Game biologist.

Early successional habitats, or those areas of young growth, are some of the most diverse in the Northeast. The cottontail is an indicator of their decline. The grant money will be used across the three states to identify the places with the best potential for restoration.

Scot Williamson, vice president of the Wildlife Management Institute, said his group will work with willing landowners to come up with a plan to create the habitat by clearing land so that shrubs and saplings have room to grow. The goal is to create up to 1,200 acres.

If the cottontail were listed as endangered, there could be implications for humans, too: Developing near rabbit territory could become more difficult.

Fuller said, both from a conservation perspective and an economic one, it makes sense to help the cottontail now. The goal is to make the cottontail the first species ever to be taken off the candidacy list because of conservation efforts, he said.

Forest corridor

Northern New Hampshire is part of a unique ecological region of largely unfragmented forest that stretches across 80 million acres from the Tug Hill plateau in New York to the Maritime provinces. A group called 2 Countries 1 Forest has identified key areas where conservation efforts should be focused to link already protected lands and protect that massive wildlife corridor.

The new grant money, totaling \$1.71 million, would build on that group's work.

Fourteen partners, led by The Nature Conservancy, will use computer modeling to identify individual parcels most in need of protection - land used heavily by "things that need a lot of room to roam," such as black bear and Canada lynx, said Mark Zankel, deputy state director for The Nature Conservancy.

They will also look for parcels where development or transportation patterns pose the biggest potential roadblocks for migrating wildlife. And they'll reach out to community planners, state transportation agencies and private landowners to educate them about the need for the wildlife corridor and how to protect it, Zankel said.

"What we really don't want is a series of islands in the Northern Forest," he said. "We want to interconnect the landscape."

Zankel said wildlife communities need a certain level of in- and out-migration to keep their gene pools healthy.

Climate change could increase the need for mobility.

"We feel pretty confident that, over time, there's going to be some changes in habitat," he said. "Some of the vegetation cover is going to change as things warm up. So species are going to have to be able to move around to adapt to those changes."

Both grants provide a somewhat rare opportunity for agencies to work across state boundaries at what Zankel called "biologically meaningful scales."

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