

Northwest CT Sportsman's Council
Conservation Notebook
The New England Cottontail Rabbit
Opinion & Observations

December 12, 2006

The November / December edition of CT Wildlife magazine features a lead article titled, "New England Cottontail Named Candidate for Endangered Species Act Protection". Candidate determination was first published in the September 12, 2006 Federal Register, by the USFWS, (US Fish & Wildlife Service) as part of their annual, Candidate Notice of Review. Listing the NEC as a candidate for ESA protection reportedly provides an opportunity to address conservation issues affecting the NEC before the species is given full federal protection.

This listing may well become an issue of importance to sportsmen and conservationists for several reasons including; how we have arrived at this current point with the federal listing of the New England Cottontail, (NEC) as a candidate species for ESA protection, how this process is affecting sportsmen, and finally, what actions are being taken by our wildlife managers to address this issue.

We arrived at this point beginning with a petition to list the NEC as an endangered species in 2000. The petition was submitted by several environmental organizations consisting of the Biodiversity Legal Foundation, Conservation Action Project, Endangered Small Animals Conservation Fund, and Defenders of Wildlife. The process to review the status of the NEC appears to have been driven by a threatened lawsuit in 2000, and a second lawsuit filed in June of 2006 by the Animal Protection Institute and the founder of the Endangered Small Animal Conservation Foundation. In 2004, the USFWS published its ninety-day finding followed by a final, twelve-month finding this year, which resulted in the current listing.

Since 2000 most New England States, including Connecticut have initiated new studies to assess NEC population dynamics. Connecticut's four-year study resulted in identification of preferred habitats, habitat locations throughout the state, and population estimates for NECs. In addition, most of the New England State Colleges have conducted research on NECs. There is no lack of data regarding NEC biology and current status. We can further state that there is agreement among most; if not all, of these organizations as to what has caused the decline in this species. All sources identify the decline of early successional habitat and the consequent fragmentation of remaining high quality habitat patches as the primary reason for the decline of the NEC. Research has demonstrated that habitat loss and increasing parcelization of remaining habitat; in combination, lead to increased vulnerability for the NEC to predation, lowered physical condition, and lowered dispersion and survival rates. (We might add that virtually the same observations would apply to the status of Ruffed Grouse in CT.)

As reported in the scientific literature, the NEC is a specialist of thicket type habitats, the result primarily of early successional forest growth and usually generated by some sort of disturbance within areas of a more mature forest. There is room to question how extensive this type of habitat might have been, and how abundant the NEC was throughout what is considered today as the historical range, prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America. New England was predominantly covered by mature forest. Natural disturbances such as resulted from fires, storms, and flooding; along with natural river corridors, beaver activity and Native American land uses created the early successional habitats of the time. A new and dramatic factor influencing forest age and diversity appeared with the arrival of Europeans to New England. Land clearing and forest use accelerated as the colonial population developed and spread throughout New England. Wholesale conversion from forests to town, agricultural and industrial use ensued without anyone paying much attention to the effect this development had on native plants and wildlife. Over the past several centuries, the majority of our New England forests have been subject to cycles of almost complete clearing and re-growth several times over. Each of these cycles had major influences on the native wildlife present at the time, including the NEC. Some species were eliminated completely while others prospered depending on the needs and adaptability of each. One can imagine the effect this changing landscape had on the NEC, with populations booming and spreading as land was cleared and during periods of re-growth after clear cutting, and plummeting during periods of deforestation and intensive land use.

Connecticut's forest cover is now at approximately 70%. Most of our mature trees average 80-85 years in age. This forest is the result primarily of an abandonment of family farms that began before 1900 and continues to some extent today. It is a mature, full canopy forest for the most part, and as such does not provide suitable habitat for the NEC.

The widespread dispersion and relative abundance of NECs during the middle and later years of the past century can be attributed to the accelerating conversion of our lands from agricultural use to forest growth throughout

the early and mid twentieth century. NEC populations appear to have been low in the several decades prior to 1920 and before significant agriculture abandonment. Evidence of this is the introduction by state agencies and sportsmen's groups of Eastern Cottontails beginning in the early 1900's. The Eastern stocking programs appear to have subsided in the 1940's. Successional habitat quality for NECs should have been near optimal by this time, and was continually being produced through farmland abandonment or conversion throughout the next several decades.

When we read the scientific literature regarding the population decline of NECs, it is important to note that almost all of the population data indicating a "crisis" is based upon the artificial, population high point reached during the mid-1900s! The agenda driven environmental organizations responsible for petitioning listing of this species and filing the lawsuits; as well as the time, effort and money invested by many state agencies and the federal government to respond to this issue are as aware of this as we are. The motivations of these radical environmental non-profits transcend good conservation interests and seem to be based more on maintaining a crisis mentality to aid their fund-raising efforts.

To anyone who truly respects the environment and mankind's role as stewards of our natural heritage, it is worth observing that regardless of the motivations, the issue presented here, and so thoroughly researched throughout the past five years, presents an opportunity to our wildlife managers to develop management plans based on the blueprint research conducted to date to address the needs of all early successional wildlife species by actively incorporating an early successional habitat component into all appropriate wildlife and forestry management plans.

The Northwest CT Sportsman's Council, (NWCSC) submitted a proposal to the CT Wildlife Division dated July 16- 2006 advocating the identification of newly created early successional growth resulting from logging operations and other natural or man-made disturbances. Our understanding of Connecticut's NEC population; as reported by the DEP, is fairly sizable and quite stable in many areas. We suggested that a limited transplant program into suitable habitat be developed, and a corresponding radio-telemetry research follow-up to the transplant program be established to determine the outcome of the effort.

We have not received a formal reply from the Division. Since several of our members hold seats on the Conservation Advisory Council to DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources, (BNR) the issue was brought up at the December 2006 meeting of the CAC. Dale May, BNR Wildlife Director was in attendance for this meeting.

Director May acknowledged receiving our letter and understands our concerns regarding the federal listing of this species. He too is concerned about the possible loss of rabbit hunting should the USFWS add the NEC to the endangered species list. (We have already seen restrictions placed on cottontail hunting in New Hampshire and elimination of the cottontail season in Maine. Both states, to their credit are reportedly in the process of developing recovery plans.) Director May feels that federal endangered species status could occur within the next four to five years. He went on to state that the research by our CT Wildlife Division and research conducted by the University of New Hampshire indicate that Connecticut has a sizable population of NECs and that they are fairly well distributed throughout most, if not all regions of the state. We were informed by Director May that the results of these studies would not qualify the NEC for our CT State Endangered Species list, or even as a species of Special Concern. We received no positive indication that a program for the NEC or early successional habitat would be developed.

It is our belief that conservationists and sportsmen should pursue this initiative with our state agency. We have advocated for various habitat programs, and have waited patiently for years to see our state agency pursue a meaningful agenda of habitat diversity and enhancement on a landscape or regional level. We do see the need for this planning recognized in virtually every division plan emanating from the Bureau of Natural Resources; however, any actual planning or implementation of large-scale early successional habitat projects are unknown to us.

To a large extent, this inaction may be due to the continued lack of State funding for DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources. Everything we talk about with our resource managers has a price tag. Most current habitat projects are funded through federal programs such as WHIP, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and LIP, Landowner Incentive Program. The sad fact is that our state legislature is not willing to adequately fund this agency, and in fact has a history of diverting agency funding to the general fund whenever a new federal source is introduced. Without legislative change, the agency will continue to be funded primarily by sportsmen through state and federal mechanisms. If this continues to be the case, we should demand a re-prioritization of programs and direction to at least partially address our conservation-oriented concerns.

We can wait for federal listing of the NEC as an endangered species, and with that listing will come dollars from Washington and programs to address the situation. Having read the 12-month findings of the USFWS, I find no reference to the relatively positive research conducted in CT regarding the NEC. Did our wildlife managers attempt to make a case for conservation and management rather than endangered species listing based on Connecticut's research?

Did our wildlife managers talk to their counterparts in contiguous states to develop a regional strategy for early successional management and collaborative restoration projects? Is it possible that our state agency views Endangered Species listing as the preferred method to address this issue? I don't want to believe that, but I see nothing happening to offer an alternative to continued manipulation by agenda driven, non-profit radical environmental groups and state dependency on federal funding and programs. If we conservationists and sportsmen do not demand responsible action from our state agencies and legislators, we can surely anticipate more manipulation of natural resource issues and more restrictions upon our natural heritage in the future.

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