

# Feds say New England cottontail doesn't need protection

September 11 2015

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The federal government said Friday that public and private conservation efforts have helped the New England cottontail rebound to the point where it can be taken off the list of species under consideration for protection.

The small, brown rabbit has been threatened by a loss of habitat throughout its range in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New York. It's vanished from Vermont. It's endangered in Maine and New Hampshire, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been studying whether to list it under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The cottontail does best in tangled, low-growing shrubs in younger forests. The rabbit's habitat is destroyed when forests mature and large trees replace small ones. Habitats also have been lost to development. Since the 1960s, the rabbit's range contracted by 86 percent.

The New England cottontail is the only rabbit native to New England and east of the Hudson River in New York. It was named a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection in 2006 and, in 2008, state and federal biologists began working on conservation efforts.

The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates 10,500 New England cottontails now live in the area; the goal is 13,500 cottontails in healthy, young forests by 2030.

During the past three years, federal officials worked with private landowners to restore more than 4,400 acres of habitat by removing trees and invasive species, planting native shrubs and creating brush piles. To date, state, federal and private entities have spent \$33 million for land management and acquisition, research, monitoring and outreach to protect the cottontail. The project is expected to cost \$66 million by the time it ends in 2030.

The decision to delist the [rabbit](#), the first time a species has come off the list in New England, means the agency has a "high certainty" that conservation programs would be successful and the species will recover without formal protections.

Mollie Matteson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, is disappointed with the decision because it doesn't give the cottontail the full protections afforded to species listed as endangered. While she applauds the efforts made so far, she worries that there won't be a long-term commitment to protecting the cottontail.

"The law provides that legal safeguard," she said.

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