Chapter 5

USFWS

Karner blue butterfly

Coordination and Consultation

- Partners
- New England Cottontail Coordination
- Refuge Acquisition Focus Areas
- Public Involvement

Partners

The matter of declining wildlife associated with early successional habitats has become a major conservation issue facing partners in the Northeastern United States. In addition to Service and NALCC concern for this suite of species, all six state partners have identified shrubland and young forest wildlife as high priorities for conservation in the first round of SWAPs completed in 2005. Updates to these plans, currently in progress, continue to highlight this high priority. Over the last 10 years, this situation has been the topic of much discussion, consultation, and coordination between the Service and partner agencies and organizations, and internally between and among Service programs.

Conservation agencies in the Northeast have established a broad range of partnerships for fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation, including PIF for birds, the Northeast Partners for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (NEPARC), the Joint Ventures and Atlantic Coast Fish Habitat Partnership for migratory bird and fish conservation, and, most recently, the LCCs. A driving force behind these and other wildlife conservation initiatives has been regional coordinating bodies such as the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) and its Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee (Fish and Wildlife Diversity Committee), which operate on a separate and broader level than the individual partnerships.

Wildlife management agencies from the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia participate in the NEAFWA. The NEAFWA is tasked with promoting and coordinating conservation activities across the Northeastern United States. The Fish and Wildlife Diversity Committee has led wildlife diversity conservation projects for the NEAFWA and comprises the Wildlife Diversity representative from each Northeast state and District of Columbia.

In executing their charge under the Region 5 State Wildlife Grant Regional Conservation Needs Program (RCN), the Fish and Wildlife Diversity Committee in 2007 named NEC as the top-priority Species of Greatest Conservation Need for regional landscape-scale habitat conservation. The Committee then began a cooperative effort to secure Competitive SWG funding for a multi-state conservation effort, with the goal of averting the need for the Service to list the NEC as threatened or endangered.

Shrublands and young forests were identified by the Northeast Monitoring and Performance Reporting Framework of NEAFWA (NEAFWA 2008) as one of eight habitat types for monitoring the status of wildlife in the Northeast states. It is acknowledged that active management will be required to retain these habitats, and to maintain a certain proportion of early successional habitat on the landscape, and that strategic planning and placement of these habitat patches will be critical.

Extensive coordination has taken place between the Service's WSFR, Migratory Birds, and Science Applications programs with the states and numerous other partner organizations with respect to joint prioritization of shrublands, during both the development of the first round of SWAPS and the current update. This habitat type has been highlighted as a priority in numerous SWAP public informational meetings, open houses, and during draft review and comment periods.

New England Cottontail Coordination

Beginning in 2008, state and Federal wildlife biologists convened to organize the conservation effort for NEC and shrublands. A governance structure was formalized in 2011 when MDIFW, NHFG, MDFW, RIDEM, CT DEEP, NYDEC,

NRCS, and the Service, facilitated by WMI, convened an Executive Committee and adopted bylaws. The bylaws set forth guidelines to coordinate efforts among the participating agencies "to promote recovery, restoration, and conservation of the NEC and their associated habitats so that listing is not necessary." Critical to this effort was the commitment to produce a conservation strategy to effectively conserve the NEC.

A Technical Committee was formed to oversee the creation of the conservation strategy, development of habitat models to identify high priority landscapes for conservation, identify NEC/shrubland focus areas, and set population objectives and conservation goals for each focus area, among other things. Multi-agency state land management teams have been an important part of the effort to develop the strategy and deliver conservation projects, many already in progress, on the ground. The Technical Committee also involves designated working groups, including a Land Protection Working Group (LPWG). The conservation strategy itself identifies numerous objectives, including several that recommend securement of additional lands in focus areas that are lacking in adequate secured lands upon which to perform management.

The LPWG began working in November 2011 on the development of draft rangewide land protection ranking criteria, to be used by state management teams during the development of their business plans. It also drafted the initial proposal for this LPP, worked to support the SWG-funded business plan development by assisting state management teams to identify locations and level of contribution by partners for land protection, and helped develop a strategy to acquire lands for NEC conservation. Its primary function was to identify land protection priorities for each state and identify areas for potential inclusion into the Refuge System.

Since 2011, there has been a succession of regular meetings of state land management teams, and annual meetings, more frequent as necessary, of the Technical and Executive Committees. One major result has been the development and approval of the NEC Conservation Strategy, which identifies habitat goals and objectives for shrubland restoration and maintenance. The strategy identifies objectives for restoration and management of shrubland habitat on existing state, Federal and other secured lands; creation of additional habitat on private lands; and proposes expansion of land protection efforts associated with appropriate NWRs. In addition, continual coordination through recent years has occurred through workgroups designated by the Technical Committee:

- Population Management Working Group
- Research Working Group
- Habitat Management Working Group
- Communications and Outreach Working Group
- Land Protection Working Group
- Land Management Teams

Refuge Acquisition Focus Areas

Our proposed RAFAs have been developed through direct interaction with each state's Shrubland/NEC Land Management Team and the NEC Technical Committee, with concurrence from the NEC Executive Committee, to identify areas where additional strategic securement of land is needed to contribute to the rangewide effort. Refuge acquisition focus areas were developed through review of NEC Focus Area evaluations provided by each state team, along with further Technical Committee and state team involvement and guidance. This information was then paired with biological data on Federal trust resources such as listed species and migratory birds. Maps with draft Refuge Focus Areas were then reviewed by NEC Technical Committee members, State Land Management

Teams, Federal partners, conservation organizations, university researchers, Refuge Managers, and others to further shape the proposal.

Coordination meetings with land management teams were held in each of the six states, and generally included Service program staff (NWRS LPP planning staff, refuge managers and biologists, and Endangered Species, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Coastal Program biologists); state agency biologists, land managers, and migratory bird specialists; NRCS biologists; WMI representatives; and in some cases other conservation organizations and researchers from universities. The goal of these meetings was to present and analyze biological data and identify overlapping resource priorities. Primary working meetings were as follows:

Maine—May 5, 2014	USFWS, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Maine Bureau of Public Lands, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS, Maine Coast Heritage Trust.
New Hampshire—May 20, 2014	USFWS, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS, University of New Hampshire.
Massachusetts—May 15, 2014	USFWS, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS.
Rhode Island—June 3, 2014	USFWS, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS, University of Rhode Island.
Connecticut—July 9, 2014	USFWS, Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS, University of Connecticut, Audubon Society, Ruffed Grouse Society.
New York—December 4, 2014	USFWS, New York Department of Environmental Conservation, Wildlife Management Institute, NRCS.

There were several rounds of individual meetings with each state team, and additional coordination occurred through webinar and conference calls. The resulting draft RAFAs were further refined and developed through review by state representatives and other members of the full NEC Technical Committee at its January 13, 2015, annual meeting. The draft Refuge Acquisition Focus Areas ultimately received review and support by vote of the full NEC Executive Committee, including all six state directors, at its February 26, 2015, annual meeting.

Public Involvement

In January 2016, we released for public review the draft LPP/EA which outlined two alternatives for managing the refuge. Alternative B was identified as the "Service-preferred alternative."

We initially released the draft LPP/EA for 45 days of public review and comment from January 19 to March 4, 2016. In response to several requests, we subsequently extended the public comment period through April 3, 2016. In total, the comment period was 75 days in length.

During the comment period, we held information sessions upon request. Two were held in Maine, three in New Hampshire, two in Massachusetts, two in New York, one in Connecticut and six in Rhode Island. Audiences included sportsmen's groups, land trusts, and town and county officials. All six congressional

delegations were contacted initially via email, and follow-up phone calls or in-person visits occurred with most district staff offices.

In total, we received 6,064 separate written responses (some letters had multiple signatures), and five telephone calls. Of the 6,064 written comments, 5,523 were a form letter. We also received one petition signed by approximately 2,455 individuals. We evaluated all the letters and e-mails sent to us during the comment period. Appendix C summarizes all of the substantive comments we received and provides our responses to them. These comments informed our decision.

Generally, public interest in young forest/shrubland habitat and NEC management is positive, although sometimes it is met with resistance or concern when trees are cut. Many local groups, land trusts, schools, and conservation commissions have voiced their support for preserving shrubland habitat for birds and NECs. In addition, all six state fish and wildlife agencies support Federal land acquisition benefiting early successional habitat. The NEC Outreach Working Group is working to develop a communications and outreach plan to coordinate and streamline outreach messages on the importance of this habitat. These messages are intended to foster support and awareness about the importance of shrublands and to educate the public about controversial shrubland management methods, such as even-aged stand management.

All refuges within the project area have approved CCPs, and all have goals and objectives related to the restoration, maintenance, and continuing management of shrubland and young forest habitat. All of the CCPs were released for public and partner review and comment, with accompanying public meetings in their respective areas. The importance of this declining habitat, and the intentions of each refuge to contribute attention to this issue, has been discussed in numerous CCP-related meetings.