



Northeast Regional Cohesive Strategy Success Story

MASHPEE COLLABORATIVE WORKS TO RESTORE RABBIT HABITAT, PROTECT COMMUNITIES

In New England, conditions are far from normal for the region's only native rabbit species, the New England Cottontail, *Sylvilagus transitionalis*. In the wake of human development, fire and other natural disturbances that once maintained thicket and brush habitats, the species have all but disappeared from the landscape. This threatens not only the cottontail, but also humans. Without periodic fire, flammable mid-story, "ladder" vegetation accrues to potentially carry ground fires to tree crowns, posing a risk to nearby homes. For the rabbits, which have already lost early successional habitat in 86 percent of their range (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine), a solution to this problem is critical.

On Cape Cod, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has joined forces with the Town of Mashpee, State of Massachusetts, Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, and other partners to return fire to the land and restore resilient habitats for both New England cottontails and people. This team is managing the Wildland Urban Interface by targeting areas with the most burnable vegetation and strategically cutting undergrowth, thinning the forest, and conducting controlled, planned burns that continue the natural renewal process and reduces fire danger to nearby homes and businesses.

"The tribal people feel strongly about helping species that are indigenous like us," said Chuckie Green, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe's Assistant Director of Natural Resources. "People have not allowed Mother Nature to be in control, so we are responsible for bringing back the habitat that this rabbit needs." With over 8,000 homes valued at over \$2.5 billion, the town of Mashpee was designated a community at risk to wildfire in 2001 due to volatile pitch pines and scrub oaks in the neighboring Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge. This is a major concern for the fire department, which is responsible for protecting Mashpee.

In 2008, the US F&WS contracted to do a wildland fuel hazard assessment in and around the 6,000-acre refuge. The Barnstable County Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) was also developed to address wildfire risk by mapping wildfire hazard and identifying the level of threat for the entire county (including the Town of Mashpee). The plans are designed to enable municipal natural resource managers, planners, and fire departments to collaborate in addressing wildland fire risk. Because the assessment identified the highest priority as opening up roads to improve access and protect firefighter safety, partners cleared over 64,000 feet of roads in 2009 and 2010. Then the team began planning for prescribed burns to reduce fire risk and stimulate new, dense growth of scrub oaks for New England cottontails. In 2012, that planning became reality as the team successfully burned 13.5 acres with two burns next to a subdivision.

It's too early to tell if New England cottontails have benefitted from these initial actions, but partners are trying to find out with studies. What is clear is that fire risk has been reduced to protect an estimated 250 homes worth \$87 million. Efforts such as this in Mashpee, MA provide opportunities for integrating activities that contribute to all three Cohesive Strategy goals by enabling fire and land management partners at the federal, state, tribal and local levels to work together to:

- Restore critical habitat and landscapes;
- Reduce risks of wildfire to communities by working on priority areas identified through community wildfire protection plans (CWPPs); and
- Enable all wildland fire management partners to work and train together on projects in a non-emergency situation that will help them deal with the inevitable wildfires that start in the WUI.