

News Release

Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Assabet River NWR · Great Meadows NWR · Mashpee NWR · Massasoit NWR · Monomoy NWR ·
Nantucket NWR · Nomans Land Island NWR · Oxbow NWR

73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776

978/443-4661 Fax: 978/443-2898 https://www.fws.gov/refuge/nomans_land_island/

For Immediate Release
February 1, 2018

Contact: Eileen McGourty
978-579-4037

An island for bunnies?
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to
jumpstart new rare rabbit population

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to establish a population of New England cottontails on Nomans Land Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Chilmark, Massachusetts. The proposal is the latest in a decade's worth of efforts to restore the at-risk rabbit in New England and eastern New York. Nomans Land would join Patience Island, Rhode Island, as the only two islands home to captive-reared New England cottontails.

The initiative to save the New England cottontail, the only cottontail rabbit native to New England and eastern New York, has been lauded as a model for collaborative public-private conservation. When cottontail populations declined, the states, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, private landowners, academics, the Service and other conservation partners recognized both the urgency and the opportunity to conserve the at-risk species. The initiative designed and implemented proactive conservation efforts that began a reversal of those declines.

In 2015, the Service decided not to list the New England cottontail, but called for continued conservation efforts. The latest in those efforts is the Service's proposal to establish a population of New England cottontails on Nomans Land Island National Wildlife Refuge, a federally owned island of over 600 acres off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. The proposal is outlined in a draft environmental assessment released today. Habitat evaluation studies suggest the self-sustaining coastal shrublands found on Nomans Land Island NWR are capable of supporting a population of 600 cottontails or more, which will contribute to the goals described in the Conservation Strategy for the New England Cottontail. The population would be created through the release of wild caught rabbits from mainland sites or individuals reared through an already established captive breeding program.

Similar efforts were performed to establish a population of New England cottontails on Patience Island in Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay. Monitoring has indicated a breeding population of over 60 New England cottontails with healthy genetics. As envisioned in the rangewide conservation strategy for the species, some cottontails are being moved from Patience Island to boost other populations on the mainland.

Unlike the common eastern cottontail, the New England cottontail seeks protection in dense thickets associated with young forests, shrublands, and coastal barrens. Over several decades, the New England cottontail declined as young forest was cleared for development and as remaining forests matured into older and taller woods, reducing ground-level shelter and food for the species.

A draft Environmental Assessment (EA) will be released for public review and comment on February 1, 2018. The draft EA can be viewed on-line at https://www.fws.gov/refuge/nomans_land_island/ or in person at the Falmouth Public Library, Sandwich Free Public Library, Mashpee Public Library, Aquinnah Public Library, the refuge complex headquarters, located at Great Meadows NWR in Sudbury, Massachusetts or Monomoy NWR in Chatham, Massachusetts. Comments can be sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: New England Cottontail EA at 73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776 and must be postmarked by the close of the comment period, March 2, 2018.

All comments received from individuals become part of the official public record. We will handle all requests for such comments in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act and the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA regulations in 40 CFR 1506.6(f). Our practice is to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review during regular business hours. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments.

Nomans Land Island NWR is part of the Eastern Massachusetts NWR Complex, which is headquartered in Sudbury at the Great Meadows NWR. The refuge is part of a national network of lands and waters which are administered for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. There are currently 566 national wildlife refuges across the country, protecting over 150 million acres of land for wildlife conservation.

[Photos are available for download.](#)

More information on the New England cottontail conservation effort can be found at newenglandcottontail.org.