Peck and Callahan Preserves:
A Home for the New England Cottontail

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Since the start of *Working Lands for Wildlife*, landowners all over the state have applied to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to create and preserve habitat for our native, but in-decline New England Cottontail rabbit.

This is just what the Avalonia Land Conservancy, Inc. did back in 2012 when they applied for a WHIP contract to create early successional habitat on their Peck and Callahan Preserves. As a non-profit and all volunteer land trust that began in 1968, The Avalonia Land Conservancy's mission is to conserve natural areas via acquisition. Since the start of the land trust, they have acquired land throughout southeast Connecticut, in towns including Stonington, North Stonington, Ledyard, Griswold, Preston, Sprague, Norwich, and Groton. To this day, Avalonia has acquired about 3200 acres. With the assistance of the NRCS, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), the Peck-Callahan New England Cottontail Project has been Avalonia's biggest undertaking of a land management project so far.

The project area consists of the roughly 23 acre Peck property and the adjoining 6 acre Callahan property, located in Stonington. Both are located inside a focus area, are near documented New England Cottontail locations. With intersecting power lines acting as a wildlife corridor, the site is more than ideal to create early successional habitat for the New England Cottontail.

Taken by photographer David Grande, with pilot Charles Levandoski – Image Provided by B. Sullivan

The project included an early successional cut totaling 22.1 acres, which is optimal for generating habitat for the New England Cottontail. The cut removed enough canopy to allow understory regeneration, while leaving beneficial seed trees to provide food and new tree growth. Best management practices were followed throughout the forestry operation. No cutting occurred within wetlands, distance was kept from watercourses, and coarse woody debris was left on the ground to reduce soil erosion and provide nutrients back to the soil. Once the cutting was complete, the leftover wood and slash was used to construct over 40 brush piles, as scheduled in the contract, to provide immediate cover and shelter for wildlife. Use of the brush piles by a variety of wildlife has already been documented.

Herbicide Treatment - Image provided by B. Sullivan

The practice Brush Management was scheduled to control the re-sprout of invasive species and to encourage growth of native vegetation. Thanks to Avalonia's good stewardship and tenacity to go above and beyond what's expected, the site is almost entirely free of invasive species. Initial mechanical cutting was followed with an herbicide treatment to suppress any regrowth of invasive species. Continual monitoring and treatment carried on throughout the growing season.

The regrowth of native plant species in the understory has been very successful. Low bush blueberry, sumac, green brier, and other native plant species now cover a large portion of the ground. Avalonia also went a step further, and with the technical and financial help from USFWS, planted about 100 native shrubs. These native shrubs included, willow, viburnum, dogwood, chokecherry, shad bush, meadow sweet/spirea, native rose, blackberry, and bayberry. Netting was used to protect the plantings from deer browse.

The USFWS provided other assistance, which included helping Avalonia to secure funds from *National Fish and Wildlife Foundation* and *Long Island Sound Futures Fund* for implementing practices not covered in the NRCS contract. This included money for additional herbicide applications, shrubs and supplies, and gravel for landings and road repair.

Patch of Low Bush Blueberry – Image provided by B. Sullivan

The Peck and Callahan Preserves are well on their way to becoming prime habitat for the New England Cottontail. A few more years of growth and monitoring will provide the thick, dense, understory New England Cottontail thrive on.

This project has been one of the most successful cottontail projects in this part of the state so far. DEEP's Jack Berlanda, and Contractor Ted D'Onofrio agree this is one of the best projects they've seen. This is due to the combination of the size and location of the project, proximity to known cottontail locations, good regeneration, and the dedication and commitment from Avalonia and the partners. Way to go, Avalonia!

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Information cited from: The Day: *"Avalonia makes way for cottontails in Stonington"*
http://www.avaloniaetrails.blogspot.com/