

OFFICIAL MINUTES: Business Meeting
Eliot Conservation Commission
Eliot, Maine 03903

DATE: June 5, 2019
APPROVED: July 10, 2019

OFFICERS:

Chair: Kari Moore

Vice Chair: Kimberly Richards

Secretary: Lisa Wise

Treasurer: Lisa Wise

The meeting was called to order at 6:35PM at the Eliot Town Hall.

In attendance: Lisa Wise, Kari Moore; *absent: Kimberly Richards*

New England Cottontail Update, Jeff Tash, US Fish and Wildlife Service (rescheduled from last meeting) – Jeff is a wildlife biologist with Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve. His job is to coordinate conservation efforts of a variety of groups; interested in conserving New England cottontails.

- New England cottontail (NEC) background: Also known as the “coney” in Maine; Maine’s only native cottontail
 - We also have snowshoe hare (much larger, turn white in winter, VERY abundant in Maine, tend to be a more northern species) and eastern cottontail (invasive to New England; compete with NEC)
 - Mortality – NEC are prey for many other species (canids, felids, mustelids, raptors); very high winter mortality (85% don’t make it to the following spring to breed); no cottontail hunting in Maine
 - Habitat specialists – require dense shrublands or young forest habitat (e.g., aspen-birch forests, native shrublands (rare in southern Maine due to development), alder swales, riparian shrub swamps, pine barrens (Kennebunk, Wells), powerline rights-of-way, abandoned old fields, regenerating clear-cuts
 - Invasive species (e.g., oriental bittersweet, buckthorn) – often colonize regenerating fields – provide good dense cover, but not sure about quality as winter food source for NEC
- NEC Status: Declining throughout its range (occupies <15% of former range); was a “candidate” for federal threatened or endangered species status; extirpated from VT, endangered in ME and NH (state-listed), special concern in NY, RI, CT, MA
 - ME: Recent surveys show NEC only in Cape Elizabeth, Scarborough, Wells, York, Kittery, Eliot; estimated 300 total; priority 1 species of greatest conservation need in 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan
 - Low genetic diversity, low effective population size
- Why the decline? Habitat loss: 1970s, about 50% of forests in York County were in early succession → by 2010, less than 5%. Reduction in natural disturbances that help maintain early successional habitat (e.g., beaver activity). Development increases generalist predators, decreases connectivity of remnant habitat patches. NEC much more likely to occupy larger habitat patches vs. smaller patches. Most of the habitat patches in southern Maine are small and isolated.
- Dozens of species of greatest conservation need require early-successional habitat in Maine! Young forest songbirds have also declined (e.g., common yellowthroat, woodcock, brown thrasher).
- What is US Fish and Wildlife Service doing about this?
 - Regional Conservation Strategy – coalition of state agencies, federal agencies, academic institutions, NGOs, zoos working together to set goals, implement conservation strategies, monitor progress

- Maine NEC Working Group – state agencies, federal agencies, town governments (opportunity for us to engage more), NGOs, academic institutions, private landowners
- Monitoring – winter tracking surveys, collect pellets to confirm species identity
- Outreach – workshops, presentations, education, publications, signage, landowner outreach
- Research – supplemental feeding, artificial burrows, connectivity and population genetics, detection and monitoring, best management practices
- Recently began population augmentation (captive rearing/releasing, monitoring)
- Dealing with threats
 - Eastern Cottontail (EC) – population of EC discovered on Badger’s Island in Kittery in July 2017, 30 captured and relocated to NH – significant threat to native cottontail populations (very close to Eliot NEC population); no ECs detected in this area in 2018-19
 - Habitat restoration – state, federal, town, private – managing lands as shrubland and young forest
 - When starting with a field: Plant/seed (greenhouse at Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge)
 - When starting with a forest: Canopy removal/clear-cuts to get to the shrubland habitat (incentives = funding available for this management, timber revenue)
 - Habitat maintenance – canopy removal, brush piles, apple tree release (produce more fruit)
 - Land protection – NEC focal areas → Great Thicket NWR (areas in all the states where NEC exist; currently includes just one parcel in NY – slow process)
 - Most of Eliot falls within the Great Thicket focus area; additional spatial modeling to identify specific focal areas) (Jeff will share the information soon)
- Eliot summary – 5 of 17 patches surveyed were occupied by NEC; currently have 3 management projects in Eliot; working on land protection within Great Thicket NWR; monitoring threat from EC
- Cape Elizabeth has the most robust NEC population, Eliot has #2 → very high priority
- How we can help: share info; help make connections re: surveys, habitat management, land protection
- Available resources:
 - Technical assistance – Jeff Tash, Andrew Johnson (USDA NRCS)
 - Financial assistance – USDA NRCS (reimburse landowners for the management work), Wildlife Management Institute (WMI), Partners for Fish and Wildlife
 - www.newenglandcottontail.org
 - *The Young Forest Project: Growing Wildlife Habitat Together*, www.youngforest.org
- York Pond area – DIFW is doing some NEC habitat management projects right now; potential opportunity to align with forest management plan work
- Plan a winter NEC walk
- Post Jeff’s slides on our webpage

Review and Approve Past Minutes: Kari made a motion to accept the minutes from 4/3/19 and 5/1/19 as written. Lisa seconded. All in favor. Lisa will submit final minutes to post online.

Update on Action Items from May meeting:

- Kari: Follow up with Chagnons re: NEC
- Vernal pools project – Infinite Imagery is printing materials (should be ready next week)

Public Input: Tom Dundzila

Financial Report: Nothing new. Kari will submit vernal pools supplies receipts.

80 **Education/Outreach**

81 *Speaker series*

- 82 • 5/15 Natural Neighbors event (Center for Wildlife) – great program and turnout (at least 21 youth + 11 adults)
- 83 • 6/10 Emerald Ash Borer workshop, 4:30-6:30pm, William Fogg Library
- 84 ○ Lisa: Check in with Melissa to see if she needs any A/V setup, any additional info for publicity
- 85 • Late summer yardscaping workshop: Kari connect with Mary Wicklund
- 86 *Spring cleanup (5/11)* – Roadside cleanup along Beech Road, good turnout, picked up lots of trash, plan another
- 87 one in the fall, police chief and public works were very helpful (#s?)
- 88 *Town meeting (6/11)* – Limited availability to staff the ECC table at town meeting. Kari will let Wendy know.
- 89

90 **Land Bank Acquisition (Crowell property)**

- 91 • ECC sent a letter of support to the Select Board; they were all in favor of using the land bank funds to
- 92 purchase the property for the Town Forest; Kari has been working with Dana
- 93 • Then roll it into the Forest Management Plan
- 94

95 **Town Conservation Areas, Mapping and Hiking Trails, Great Works Land Trust:**

- 96 • Kari talked to GWRLT – parking area/kiosk project is on hold for the summer
- 97 • Goodwin Farm parcel – working on the trail; GWRLT will let us know if they need volunteers
- 98 • Town Forest Eagle Scout project (trails/signs/benches) – submitted paperwork, likely starting work soon
- 99 • Lisa: Follow up with Oliver (District Forester) re: scheduling town forest visit/management plan discussion
- 100

101 **Project Development/Permit Review:**

- 102 • 6/18 Public hearing/site walk for a change of use application (does not appear to impact natural resources)
- 103

104 **Roundtable**

105 *1. Commission members*

- 106 • Kari: Call with Christine Bennett, Aram Calhoun, and Liz Hertz re: vernal pools project – meeting in July with
- 107 Mt. A to Sea team to outline the plan for next year; still waiting for the maps so we can get those online
- 108 • July ECC meeting – vote on positions
- 109

110 *2. Non-commission members*

- 111 • Tom: Identifying an ash tree for emerald ash borer monitoring (up through early June – probably too late)
- 112 ○ Keep it in mind for next year
- 113

114 **Next meeting:** July 10, 6:30pm (tentatively rescheduled from 7/3 – Kari will check with Wendy)

115

116 Kari made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Lisa seconded. All in favor. Adjourned at 8:08pm.

117

118 Respectfully submitted,

119

120 Lisa Wise

121 Secretary, ECC

122 Cc: Eliot Town Clerk, Commission Members, Commission File