



TELE CASE STUDY

The New England Cottontail Initiative

Key Takeaways

- Unless dealing with habitat creation for a very charismatic or iconic species, it is better to talk about the benefits of young forest habitat for a broad range of animals.
- Asking landowners to clear-cut their land for young forest creation can be controversial. It is important to secure the support of the local forestry and conservation community, such as land trusts and service foresters, so they can endorse the program and validate your message.
- Landowners are much more likely to take action if funds are available and can be easily accessed. This Initiative had three “buckets” of funding and was able to direct landowners to the best one for them. Some states also worked closely with funding agency staff to expedite and simplify the funding process for landowners.
- It is important to maintain regular communication with landowners both while they are deciding whether or not to take on a habitat project and during the planning and implementation phases.

TELE (tools for engaging landowners effectively) is an approach and planning methodology that emphasizes understanding landowners' perspectives and interests and tailoring outreach messages to be more persuasive. TELE case studies showcase projects that have used the TELE methodology to engage more landowners in land stewardship and conservation. TELE is a project of the Family Forest Research Center and Center for Nonprofit Strategies.

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YOUNG FOREST AND NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL

INTRODUCTION

The New England Cottontail (NEC) Initiative is a comprehensive, collaborative strategy to accelerate restoration of critical habitats to support the recovery of the NEC—the only rabbit species native to northeastern United States. Over the last 50 years the range of this once-common rabbit has shrunk and its population has dwindled. Today, biologists believe there are no more than 13,000 New England cottontails in the region.

The NEC Initiative is being implemented in six states (CT, MA, ME, NH, NY and RI) with the support of state forestry and wildlife agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and other partners. The NEC Technical Committee has set a goal for creating and maintaining 51,655 acres of NEC habitat in 47 focus areas offer the best opportunities for restoring NEC across its range.

STEP 1: SET OBJECTIVES

NEC collaboratives of three states—Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire—participated in this project. Maine aims to create 1,800 acres of NEC habitat by 2030, which amounts to roughly 140 acres per year, Massachusetts aims to create 1,000 acres of NEC rabbit habitat by 2030, and New Hampshire needs to create 1,100 additional acres by 2030.

This strategy is designed to help these states accomplish their goals in a targeted, efficient way. Each state has identified high priority parcels of land and needs to convince a small number of landowners to create and maintain 12-20 acre habitat patches on their land.

STEP 2: DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE

There are three key audiences for the initiative:

Multigenerational locals: People who have lived in this area a long time and have a background in farming and/or forestry operations. Often, they have larger tracts of land (e.g., 50+ acres).

Relocated Exurban: People who have moved to a rural or exurban setting, embracing a simpler lifestyle oriented towards outdoor recreation and their local community.

Absentee Urban: People who live and work in large cities or suburbs but have vacation properties in our focus areas.



STEP 3: PROFILE YOUR AUDIENCE

These three types of landowners have different levels of knowledge and financial resources. They also have different values and attitudes and are likely to be receptive to different messages. The initiative developed tailored outreach materials for each type of landowner.

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STEP 4: CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE

Message appeals were tailored for each audience. Materials for Multigenerational landowners invited them to access NEC funds to pay for improvements on their land. For Relocated Ex-Urban owners, we highlighted the importance of local, community-based actions to save native animals. For Absentee Urban landowners, we positioned habitat creation as an exceptional opportunity to have a marked impact on the fauna and ecology of New England.

All outreach materials also made the following points: (1) your land is especially important for saving the NEC, (2) the habitat will support many animals, and (3) dedicated funding is available for the program.



STEP 5: CHANNELS AND MATERIALS

The teams' overall goal is to reach a few targeted landowners to get them to participate in habitat projects creating young forest. Every year, each state's NEC staff will:

- Place stories about the initiative in local media
- Send targeted mailers to landowners.
- If possible, get partners who know the landowner to introduce the NEC staff-person and co-sign the mailer
- Meet with interested landowners to discuss the project and give them a packet of informational materials
- After the site visit, send landowners a thank you card and a video displaying young forest habitat
- Once the landowner agrees to habitat creation, give them a standard habitat management plan, introduce them to funding partners, and follow up to help the landowner at critical points in the project.

All NEC campaign materials are available at:

<https://newenglandcottontail.org/resources/tele-resources>

Customizable templates of selected outreach materials can be downloaded from:

<https://engaginglandowners.org/resources/example-materials-young-forest-creation>

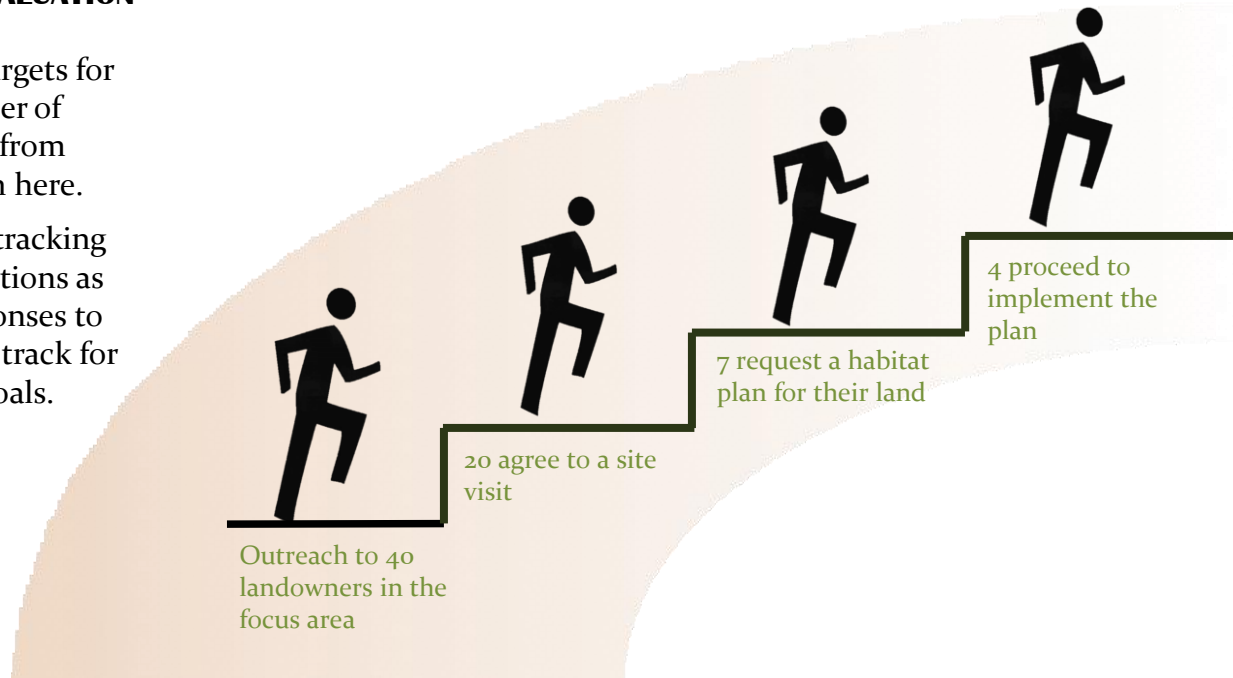
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STEP 6: EVALUATION

Each state developed targets for every step on their ladder of engagement. A sample from Massachusetts is shown here.

NEC teams are using a tracking tool to monitor their actions as well as landowner responses to ensure that they are on track for meeting their annual goals.



CHALLENGES

- Working with three different types of landowners: In addition to sending different outreach materials, NEC staff are also using different talking points for each landowner audience segment.
- Getting landowners to agree to management on their land: While many landowners agree that habitat creation is good, they are not convinced that it is right for *their* land. It is especially important to convince them that their land is right for this project, that habitat creation fits with their land use and future plans, and that it can be done at little or no cost to them.

