

## **Establishing 'Great Thicket' is a great idea**

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The Great Thicket sounds like an area travelers want to avoid. However, if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plan to create a new national wildlife refuge with this name succeeds, we could one day view it with pride, and a lot of outdoors enthusiasts will have yet another reason to visit the Seacoast.

As described in a recent Fish and Wildlife proposal, this refuge would encompass 15,000 acres in six states. Included are sections of southern York County, Maine, and the Dover-Durham-Rollinsford area of New Hampshire.

The idea behind establishing a Great Thicket wildlife refuge is that New England is losing its shrublands and young tree thickets to development and mature forests. This means a loss of habitat for lots of valuable and diverse wildlife species that depend on such places.

New England's now-rare cottontail rabbit is one of those. So are more than 60 other species of animals and birds we may not even know about because they stay hidden in low vegetation or fly through at night on migratory journeys. These species include the American woodcock, golden-winged warbler, Monarch butterfly, bog turtle and more.

Not only is Fish and Wildlife's plan ambitious because of its scope, it's unique because it foresees a wide, scattered area of protected acreage spread over six states. Most national wildlife refuges are in one location.

Talk of the federal government controlling land is a hot button issue following the latest news out of Oregon, where a standoff between federal marshals and ranchers over land use just ended. There also has been opposition to a proposed national park in northern Maine whenever talk about that surfaces.

What is intriguing about the Great Thicket idea is the land won't all be owned and controlled by the government. Instead, wildlife experts will oversee the protection and management of scattered parcels that in many cases will continue to be privately owned.

The Great Thicket will be open for use by the public. Angling, hunting, birdwatching and other activities will be encouraged. It should be an asset to the area, especially as our superb quality of life continues to attract population growth and increased development.

Fish and Wildlife says its acquisitions for the Great Thicket will only involve willing landowners. and could be ongoing for a generation.

Fish and Wildlife proposes to protect lands within the Great Thicket by buying parcels when landowners want to sell or by acquiring conservation easements. These would allow landowners to continue to own and use their land, but have areas protected and managed for wildlife value.

“Service police is to work with willing sellers as funds become available,” explains Fish and Wildlife in a press release.

The primary sources for funding will be the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. The money for these funds comes from royalties paid by firms drilling for offshore oil and gas, and the sale of federal Duck Stamps and import duties. So no one can complain our income tax dollars are being used to protect rabbits and birds.

Although some of us would argue this would be a better use of tax dollars than some other things Washington does.

It is important to recognize that Great Thicket is only an idea at this point, and public comment is needed and wanted.

The boundaries of this refuge include many existing businesses, landowners and uses. (Maps and more information can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/refuges/planning/landprotectionplans.html>.)

Public comment on the idea will be accepted until March 4.

We think the Great Thicket is a great idea, especially because it will only involve willing landowners and because a healthy mix of land uses is in all of our interests.