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## Governor Rell and Governor Patrick announce collaborative effort to protect habitat on the Connecticut-Massachusetts border

By Governor Rell's Office

*States partner to preserve 450-acre property important to grassland birds*

Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell and Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick today announced the preservation of approximately 450 acres of land straddling the Connecticut and Massachusetts border. Comprising 254 acres in Southwick, Massachusetts, and 196 acres in Suffield, Connecticut, the property will be managed jointly by the two states as habitat for a variety of migratory birds and other species.

"This is truly an historic day and demonstrates remarkable cooperation between states, private conservation groups and business," Governor Rell said. "The types of lands suitable for grassland habitats are under tremendous development pressure, especially along the Connecticut River corridor. This purchase helps ensure that our states retain enough suitable land to continue attracting important migratory bird species, which are a part of the tremendous biodiversity that makes this region such a special place to live."

"By reaching across state borders, we will be able to protect and restore this significant grasslands area and boost the Commonwealth's land protection efforts," said Governor Patrick.

The Conservation Fund, a national organization dedicated to preserving land and protecting natural resources, facilitated the \$4.4 million purchase, working with the two states and former property owner Swedish Match Co. – the successor to Culbro Tobacco and General Cigar. A former tobacco farm located east of the Congamond Lakes, the new two-state Wildlife Management Area comprises approximately 450 acres of mostly meadow and is ideal habitat for endangered birds.

With the land deal complete, the states will begin enhancing habitat on the property for upland sandpipers, grasshopper sparrows, eastern meadowlarks, and savannah sparrows – all of which are expected to increase in number in both states as a result of the new protected area. The Wildlife Management Area will also likely attract a variety of mammal, reptile, amphibian and invertebrate species. Wetlands on the property already harbor a sizeable great blue heron rookery.

"Wildlife knows no state boundaries," said Larry Selzer, president and CEO of The Conservation Fund. "We thank Governor Rell and Governor Patrick for their strong support and for working together toward the common goal of restoring and protecting vital habitat for endangered grassland birds. Their cooperation serves as a model and inspiration for conservation across the country."

"Audubon applauds the States of Connecticut and Massachusetts for this important conservation success," said Thomas R. Baptist, vice president and executive director of Audubon Connecticut. "This site is among the most promising areas in southern New England to establish a viable nesting area for state-endangered birds such as Upland Sandpiper and Grasshopper Sparrow. Its large size, well-drained soil conditions, existing vegetation structure and the fact that there are grassland birds nesting there already combine to make this site the perfect preserve to ensure the continued presence of these unique creatures in our state."

"Grasslands are one of the top priority habitats recognized by both the Connecticut Audubon Society's 2006 Connecticut State of the Birds Report and the DEP's Connecticut Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy," said Milan G. Bull, senior director for science and conservation at Connecticut Audubon Society. "This acquisition provides the most significant protection of important grassland habitat in our time and it promises to protect not only threatened and endangered bird species, but a host of other plants and animals dependent upon this unique environment."

The Connecticut River Valley – especially from the Hartford area north into Massachusetts – includes grassland areas that serve as a prime nesting and breeding grounds for more than 80 bird species. Thirteen of these species are listed under the Connecticut Endangered Species Act, eight of which breed in the Connecticut River Valley. In Massachusetts, the state's Endangered Species Act protects eight grassland bird species - five of which breed in the Connecticut River Valley. As these grasslands have become attractive to residential and commercial developers, both states have made preserving this habitat a priority. Both Connecticut and Massachusetts have identified the need to protect grassland birds through their respective State Wildlife Action Plans (mandated by the federal government in 2000).

Connecticut formally adopted a Grassland Habitat Conservation Initiative to protect critical grassland areas in 2006, while the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game (DFG) uses a variety of tools and initiatives to manage and restore the Commonwealth's grassland habitats as part of Governor Patrick's \$50 million annual commitment to land conservation. The purchase announced today mitigates the loss of grasslands elsewhere along the Connecticut River corridor.

In Massachusetts, the DFG's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife spent six weeks this fall removing 27 miles of wire, 3,000 tobacco poles, and tobacco shade tenting from the Southwick land in order to restore the former tobacco fields to open meadows for wildlife. The Division is also moving to repair damage from illegal ATV use on the property and to curtail future illegal ATV trespass. Citizens are asked to report ATV violations in Massachusetts to the Environmental Police at 1-800-632-8075.

In Connecticut, similar efforts are underway on the Suffield portion of the property to address the remaining wire, poles, and shade netting, and to undertake removal of debris and demolition and removal of structures that are unsafe or no longer needed. In addition, wildlife biologists have begun collecting information on the great variety of species that live in this unique habitat complex. As knowledge of wildlife use of the area increases, a management plan will be implemented to enhance the fields, woods and wetlands to benefit species from native bees to musk turtles to great blue herons to upland sandpipers and more.