

Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Midewin Hotshot Fire Crew Facility

USDA Forest Service
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
Will County, Illinois

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Midewin Hotshot Fire Crew Facility documents the analysis of the proposal to construct a permanent facility to support the Midewin Interagency Hotshots, an elite firefighting crew based at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Phased construction over the next several years has the potential to cover 2 acres of a 5.9-acre parcel that is to be transferred from the U.S. Army to Midewin. This parcel is located north of, and adjacent to, the Supervisor's Office (SO) tract on the east side of Illinois State Highway 53. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2003, only 1/3-acre will be impacted by the initial stage of construction, which will include the office, garage, and parking lot. The analysis includes removal of approximately 12 acres of woody vegetation situated 2 miles northeast of the Hotshot site that fragment 325 acres of grassland bird habitat. The EA also documents analysis of the No Action Alternative and an alternative that does not include the vegetation treatment. On February 26, 2003, the EA was sent to interested individuals, organizations, and those who participated during the analysis process. The EA was also posted on Midewin's website for public review.

I have decided to approve construction of the Hotshot facility in order to provide an adequate fire training and mobilization center for the Midewin Interagency Hotshots. To mitigate for the temporary and localized loss of grassland bird habitat from construction activities, I have also decided to approve the removal of approximately 12 acres of treelines and fencerows within 325 acres of grassland habitat to reduce fragmentation. The current temporary Hotshot base will be dismantled and that site, located a mile north of the SO along Illinois State Highway 53, will become available for restoration. I believe that this decision best positions Midewin to meet fire program and restoration expectations.

My decision is based on the results and findings of the EA, a review of the Biological Evaluation, Public Comments on the EA, the Agency Response to the Public Comments, and a review of the Prairie Plan. The EA is available for review at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Supervisor's Office located in Wilmington, Illinois, and it can also be viewed on the Forest Service website at www.fs.fed.us/mntp.

Reasons for the Decision

The reason for initiating construction of the Hotshot facility now is because the crew is in a temporary facility and \$750,000 is available in FY 2003 for this purpose. The National Fire Plan outlines the national strategy to provide relatively consistent Hotshot environments, and the FY 2003 funding will allow construction of key components that will substantially improve the work and training environment for the Hotshots. If the available funds are not spent this year, new funding may not be obtained until after FY 2008.

Currently, a temporary modular Hotshot fire crew office is located over a mile north of the Midewin Supervisor's Office at a site that is not suitable as an office and training facility over the long term due to inadequate water, electricity, and infrastructure. These needs will be met at a reduced cost because the infrastructure is already in place at the new Supervisor's Office. This centralized complex will be more cost effective and efficient than new construction at another location or reconstructing an existing building used by the U.S. Army Arsenal.

Because the 5.9-acre tract to be transferred is grassland bird habitat, and because up to 2 acres of this habitat type will eventually be impacted by construction of the Hotshot facility, 12 acres of fragmenting woody vegetation within a separate 325-acre grassland area will be removed to provide for a contiguous area of grassland bird habitat. This action will mitigate for any short-term, localized loss of grassland bird habitat that will occur as this project is implemented. The 325-acre area is the closest Midewin-managed land that provides similar habitat and is expected to be somewhat protected from development along Midewin's boundaries.

Decision

Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 2, to construct the office, garage, and parking lot in FY 2003. Construction will impact 1/3 acre of the 5.9-acre transferred tract because most of the construction planned for FY 2003 will occur on the existing SO site previously analyzed under a separate EA. Future construction of crew quarters, an exercise area, and parking lot will be phased over the next several years as funding permits and potentially cover up to 2 acres of the transferred tract. The temporary Hotshot facility will be dismantled and that site made available for future restoration. Removal of 12 acres of fragmenting treelines and fencerows to enhance a 325-acre area for grassland birds will mitigate for any short-term, localized loss of grassland bird habitat resulting from constructing the new Hotshot facility.

My decision takes into account the mission of the U.S. Forest Service to "care for the land and serve people" by providing an appropriate training and mobilization facility in response to the nation's need for firefighting capabilities. My decision also takes into account project objectives designed to enhance our tallgrass prairie restoration efforts through implementation of the prescribed burning program by the Hotshots and workforce objectives.

In making this decision, I have considered the direction and intent of the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act (ICLA), compliance with other Federal and state laws, and the Midewin Prairie Plan to promote the purposes for which Midewin was established. While the crew was

not envisioned at the time the ICLA was enacted, I feel fortunate to have the crew at Midewin and access to their skills for Prairie Plan implementation.

My decision to construct a permanent Hotshot fire crew facility and remove fragmenting woody vegetation from a 325-acre tract of grassland habitat is consistent with the Prairie Plan's long-term goals and objectives (Prairie Plan, pp. 2-3 through 2-5). This project was designed in conformance with Prairie Plan standards and incorporates appropriate guidelines for habitat restoration, sensitive species, and facilities construction (Prairie Plan, Chapter 4). I have also reviewed Chapter 3 of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Prairie Plan, and conclude that the environmental effects associated with this project are consistent with those described in that Chapter 3 on *Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences*.

I weighed several other factors in making my decision, including impacts on the physical, biological, and socio-economic environment, along with public comments, issues, and concerns.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I also considered Alternative 1 and the No Action Alternative. A summary table comparing the alternatives can be found in the EA on page 16. Unlike the selected alternative, Alternative 1 for construction of the new Hotshot facility does not provide for mitigating for the short-term, localized loss of grassland bird habitat prior to project implementation. I can further more Prairie Plan objectives with the alternative I have selected.

No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, the current modular Hotshot facility would continue to be used until an appropriate site could be found and analyzed per requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. I did not select this alternative because it would fail to provide an adequate facility for training the Midewin Interagency Hotshots to respond to fires throughout the nation. The Hotshots are permanently based at Midewin, and an appropriate facility for this elite crew of firefighters would probably not be revisited until FY 2008 or later because of national budget issues and priorities.

Public Involvement

A proposal to construct a new Hotshot facility was described in the Midewin Quarterly newsletter editions for winter, spring, summer and fall 2002. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during the public scoping period from December 3, 2002 to January 6, 2003. The EA was sent to interested parties and was available for public review and comment from February 25 to March 28, 2003. Seven public scoping comments were received. The comments were summarized and responded to by the Forest Service, and are [included with this Decision Notice](#) (also included as Appendix B of the Environmental Assessment).

Using the comments from the public and other agencies received during the initial scoping period, the Interdisciplinary Team of resource specialists identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. The primary issue of concern was for the need to maintain

grassland bird habitat for sensitive bird species (EA p. 8). To address this concern, the Forest Service developed the alternatives described above.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

After thorough consideration of the environmental effects described in the EA, public comments received, and the Prairie Plan, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following intensity factors:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. The overall effects of implementing Alternative 2 will both provide for an adequate facility to train and mobilize the Midewin Interagency Hotshots for fighting wildland fires throughout the nation, and for reducing fragmentation within a 325-acre tract of grassland habitat. Although not envisioned in Midewin's establishing legislation (1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act: PL 104-106), Alternative 2 is within the context of the Act to manage Midewin as part of the National Forest System under direction unique and specific to the management needs of Midewin. Construction activities, to be phased over several years with appropriated funding, are also consistent with Midewin's Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan), which guides all resource management activities and sets programmatic direction for managing the land and resources of Midewin (EA pp. 3, 4-5, 7).

A member of the public suggested that we utilize existing buildings constructed by the U.S. Army for the Joliet Arsenal starting in the 1940s rather than construct a new facility adjacent to the SO. Reasons for not considering use of one of old Army buildings include substantial costs, the likelihood of permanent habitat fragmentation in existing or restored habitat, and reduced administrative efficiency at Midewin (EA pp. 11-12).

In reaching my conclusion of no significant impact, I recognize that this construction project may have some local and temporary impacts on the land. However, there are no significant effects, either individually or cumulatively, which would preclude implementation, either of construction activities for a new Hotshot facility or removal of 12 acres of woody vegetation to reduce fragmentation in a 325-acre tract of grassland habitat (EA p. 34).

No significant adverse effects on the environment were identified in the environmental analysis. There are no irreversible commitments of resources and there are no known significant irretrievable commitments of resources, such as loss of soil productivity, water quality, unmitigated wildlife habitat, or recreational opportunities (EA p. 34).

2. Public health and safety are not adversely affected by the proposed action (EA p. 8-9).

3. Geographically, the areas have little relief and have been modified by past agricultural practices, grazing, unpaved roads, fences, and a rail bed . There are no significant adverse effects to prime farmlands, floodplains, wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness Areas, or ecologically sensitive areas. At Midewin there are no Wilderness Areas and no Wild and Scenic Rivers. Short-term and localized effects on ecologically sensitive grassland bird habitat will be mitigated by removing 12 acres of fragmenting woody vegetation, thus opening up a 325-acre grassland tract northeast of the Hotshot facility construction area for sensitive birds requiring short-stature grasses. With appropriate mitigation measures, I have concluded that this project will not adversely impact unique resources or ecologically sensitive areas, including grassland bird habitat (EA pp.13-14, 17-18, 20).
4. Based on the involvement of prairie resource specialists and members of the public, I do not expect the effects of the proposed actions on the quality of the human environment to be highly controversial. I believe we have addressed the known significant biological, social, and economic issues sufficiently to avoid scientific controversy over the scope and intensity of effects. Based upon reports and discussions with professional resource specialists, there is agreement by my staff and other professionals and agencies consulted about about the effects and conclusions identified in the analysis. I conclude that the effects of this project do not represent a controversial impact upon the quality of the human environment, provided the mitigation measures outlined in the EA are implemented (EA pp. 13-15).
5. We have experience with the type of construction activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows that the effects are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. Construction of facilities on public land is not without precedence and is consistent with the National Fire Plan. Construction of a Hotshot facility is specific to the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. These construction and woody vegetation removal projects represent an opportunity to move toward the goals of the Midewin Prairie Plan (EA p. 7). This project is also an opportunity to support the Forest Service mission of “caring for the land and serving people” by training firefighters and mobilizing Hotshots to wildland fires throughout the nation (EA p. 5). I conclude that the effects of this project are non-significant and will be short-term and localized in nature. Using the selected site is consistent with the Plan-designated Administration and Developed Recreation management areas.
7. The actions do not individually, or with other activities taken cumulatively within the areas affected, reach a level of significance; therefore there are no known cumulative adverse effects associated with either woody vegetation removal or with construction of a Hotshot facility. Where appropriate, design features will keep effects to scenic quality, vegetation, soils, the existing waterhole, and sensitive wildlife below a threshold level of significance (EA pp. 18-19, 21-22, 26-28, 30-31, 32-33, 34). Based on the discussion in the EA, I conclude that there will be no significant cumulative effects.

8. The Prairie Archaeologist has reviewed and compiled relevant information, and I conclude that the action will have no effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The action will not cause loss or destruction of significant archaeological or historical resources; no archaeological or historical sites were located during surveys for this project (EA p. 32).
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, with implementation of my decision and appropriate mitigation measures (EA pp. 13-15). The Biological Evaluation (BE) prepared for these projects, which is available to the public at the Midewin Supervisor's Office, found that there will be no effects on Federally listed threatened or endangered (T/E) species. Based on the conclusions documented in the BE, I conclude that there will be no significant adverse effects on T/E species or their habitat determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has concurred with this conclusion (letter from USFWS, March 25, 2003).
10. The actions authorized by this decision will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Based on my review of the project and applicable laws and regulations, I conclude that this project is in compliance with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws and their implementing regulations (EA p. 35).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

I have considered the numerous statutes governing the management of Midewin, and have determined that this decision complies with all applicable mandates. Facilities construction and restoration at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie are consistent with the Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and other relevant laws, regulations, and Forest Service direction.

Implementation Date

If no appeal is received, this project will be implemented on or after five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.7. A notice of appeal must be in writing and clearly state that it is a Notice of Appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. Appeals must be filed within 45 days of the date of the legal notice of this decision in the Joliet Herald Newspaper, Joliet, Illinois.

The written notice of appeal must be submitted to:

USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region
Attn: Appeals Deciding Officer
310 W. Wisconsin Ave
Milwaukee, WI 53203

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Enid Erickson, 30239 S. State Route 53, Wilmington, IL 60481 or by phone at (815) 423-6370.

/s/ Logan Lee

LOGAN LEE

Prairie Supervisor

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

April 4, 2003

Date

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Appendix B:

**AGENCY RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS
CONCERNING
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR
MIDEWIN HOTSHOT FIRE CREW FACILITY**

Agency Response to Public Comments Concerning Environmental Assessment

Below are agency responses to the public comments received during the February 25 – March 28, 2003 public comment period on the Environmental Assessment for construction of a new Hotshot fire crew facility at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie adjacent to the Supervisor’s Office (SO). Letters received are available for review at the Midewin SO.

Comment 1 (letter from Tom Flattery, Acting Director, IL Department of Natural Resources):

Forthcoming comments on the EA will be made by IDNR staff.

Forest Service Response to Comment 1:

Thank you. Your comment is noted.

Comment 2 (letter from Daniel Ludwig, Ph.D., Regional Administrator, Natural Heritage, Region 2, IDNR):

Supports Alternative 2 because it addresses species of concern (6 birds, 2 plants) that may be impacted by the proposed project, including: upland sandpiper, bobolink, Henslow’s sparrow, loggerhead shrike, northern harrier, short-eared owl, Sullivant’s coneflower, and Crawe’s sedge. The EA incorporates measures suggested by IDNR to 1) improve and defragment existing pastures by removing woody vegetation, 2) increase acreage for cattle grazing, 3) create new pastures and grasslands, and 4) reintroduce seed and plants for Crawe’s sedge and Sullivant’s coneflower elsewhere at Midewin. The EA addresses the need to initiate the first three mitigation actions prior to the start of construction activities in order to account for “lag time between habitat planting and habitat use by grassland birds.”

Forest Service Response to Comment 2:

Thank you for your support of the selected alternative and for your suggestions on appropriate mitigation measures for potential loss of habitat for the species of concern.

Comment 3 (letter from Kenneth Westlake, Chief, Environmental Planning and Evaluation Branch, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency):

EA has been reviewed and there are no significant concerns.

Forest Service Response to Comment 3:

Thank you for your review of the EA on construction of a Hotshot fire crew facility.

Comment 4 (letter from John Rogner, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service):

The EA addresses concerns raised by U.S. FWS during scoping for the proposed construction project on potential impacts to grassland birds and amphibian habitat. Supports Alternative 2, which includes mitigation measures to: 1) “discourage grassland bird use of the pre-construction area”, 2) expand grassland bird habitat elsewhere to mitigate for any displacement of birds, and 3) avoid impacts on potential amphibian breeding habitat.

Forest Service Response to Comment 4:

Thank you for your support of our selected alternative and your comments on mitigation measures outlined in the EA for protecting grassland birds and amphibian habitat.

Comment 5 (letter from John Rogner, U.S. FWS):

Construction of a Hotshot fire crew facility as specified in the EA will not affect any federally listed threatened or endangered species or “adversely modify designated critical habitat.” Consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, is precluded, and U.S. FWS comment is provided under provisions of the Act barring any modifications to the construction as proposed.

Forest Service Response to Comment 5:

Thank you for your comments under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

Comment 6 (letter from Gerald Heinrich, Sauk-Calumet Group of the Sierra Club):

Supports Alternative 2 to “best serve the needs of Midewin and its visitors,” and “addresses any concerns that our group may have had concerning this project.”

Forest Service Response to Comment 6:

Thank you for your group’s support of Alternative 2. We agree that this alternative will best fulfill our need to construct a permanent Hotshot facility, while at the same time allowing us to expand our restoration goals for enhancing grassland bird habitat.

Comment 7 (letter from Colin Duesing, Planner, Will County Land Use Department):

Regarding compliance with the requirements of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission Model Ordinance of 1999, notes that Will County “has adopted and enforces its own stormwater detention and erosion control ordinances, as well,” and also notes a recent amendment to the stormwater ordinance, not yet in print.

A typographical error in the last mitigation measure listed on page 15 of the EA should be changed from “Alternative 1” to “Alternative 3.”

Notes a discrepancy between EA figures in Section 4.6 for “per capita income, poverty rate, and minority populations” and those of the Bureau of the Census for 2000, which lists Will County as “fifth in the state for per capita income,” with a 4.9% poverty rate for Will County and a 10.6% rate in the state; the minority population is 22.6% in Will County and 32.1% in Illinois.

Notes a discrepancy between the EA Section 4.6 “regarding the percentage of the various land uses” and the Will County Land Resource Management Plan Update, 2000, which states that “57% is in agricultural use and 20.6% is developed.”

Forest Service Response to Comment 7:

We appreciate your comments on our Environmental Assessment for construction of a Hotshot facility at Midewin. Thank you for submitting for our review the enclosure on Will County’s ordinances on stormwater detention and erosion control.

The typographical error in the last bullet under Mitigation Measures is noted. This bullet should read: *“Utilize vegetative screening to minimize the impact of parking and the temporary modular buildings within the Illinois State Highway 53, interim trails, and proposed trail viewsheds if Alternative 3 is selected.”*

Following review of the 2000 Bureau of the Census data, please note that our figures have been changed to reflect those numbers listed in your comment. Thank you for submitting for our review and comparison the background report for the Will County Land Resource Management Plan Update 2000. EA figures on land use in Will County have also been changed to coincide with those from the LRMP 2000 update.

Comment 8 (Geoffrey Levin, Director, Center for Biodiversity, IL Natural History Survey):

Supports selection of Alternative 2 because it “provides the benefits of centralizing administrative facilities” to improve efficiency and “minimize negative impacts that

would result from spreading intense human activities across Midewin.” Alternative 2 also “enhances restoration at Midewin through the mitigation actions proposed.”

Forest Service Response to Comment 8:

Thank you for your comments and support of Alternative 2, which we agree best maximizes potential for “restoration of prairie ecosystem diversity and function.”