

Record Of Decision

Final Environmental Impact Statement and Land and Resource Management Plan

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Located within Will County, Illinois

Responsible Agency: United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service, Eastern Region
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Responsible Official: Donald L. Meyer
Acting Regional Forester

Recommending Official: Frank Koenig
Prairie Supervisor

This document presents the decision to select a Land and Resource Management Plan for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. It summarizes the reasons for choosing the selected alternative as the basis for the Prairie Plan that will be followed for the next 10-15 years. The long-term environmental, economic and social consequences contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement are considered in this decision.

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and
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1. INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision (ROD) approves the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Land and Resource Management Plan (also referred to as the Prairie Plan) and gives the reasons for selecting Alternative 4 of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) as the Prairie Plan.

A Land and Resource Management Plan is required for each National Forest unit as directed by the rules implementing the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resource Planning Act of 1975 (RPA), as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), and for Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie by the Illinois Land Conservation Act (ILCA). The purpose of a Prairie Plan is to provide for multiple use and sustained yields of goods and services from National Forest System lands in an environmentally sound manner. The ILCA established Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie “to be managed for National Forest System purposes, including the following:”

- 1) “To manage the land and water resources . . . in a manner that will conserve and enhance the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants.” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(1)).
- 2) “To provide opportunities for scientific, environmental, and land use education and research.” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(2)).
- 3) “To allow the continuation of agricultural uses of lands within Midewin consistent with section 2915(b).” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(3)). Section 2915(b)(3) states that special use or grazing permits may be issued “ . . . for purposes primarily related to erosion control, provision for food and habitat for fish and wildlife, or other resource management activities.”

- 4) "To provide for a variety of recreation opportunities that are not inconsistent with the preceding purposes." (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(4)).

The Prairie Plan will remain in effect for 10 to 15 years until revised or amended. The Prairie Plan may be revised sooner if conditions or demands change significantly and may be amended as needed. In preparing the Prairie Plan, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie planning team followed the 1982 version of rules established in 36 C.F.R. §219 for preparing Forest Service land and resource management plans.

The Final EIS is a companion document to the Prairie Plan. The Final EIS has been prepared following Forest Service and Council on Environmental Quality rules implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Final EIS describes a reasonable range of alternatives that were considered and discloses their significant environmental effects. Each alternative could have been the basis for a land and resource management plan. One alternative (Alternative 4) has been further developed as the "Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Land and Resource Management Plan."

Planning records contain the detailed information and decisions used in developing the Prairie Plan and Final EIS. These records are incorporated by reference into the Final EIS and Prairie Plan. Some of these documents are available for review on the Midewin web site at www.fs.fed.us/mntp and all are available at the Prairie Supervisor's Office:

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
30071 S. Illinois Route 53
Wilmington, IL 60481
Phone (815) 423-6370

2. MAJOR FEATURES OF MIDEWIN NATIONAL TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was created from land that was part of the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant when Congress passed the ILCA in 1996. The first 15,080 acres were transferred from the Department of Defense (Army) to the USDA Forest Service on March 10, 1997.

Additional land, representing approximately 1,650 acres, may eventually be transferred from the Department of Defense following environmental cleanup during the next decade. Anticipating eventual transfer to the USDA Forest Service once these lands are cleaned to environmental standards, they have been assigned management prescriptions, goals, objectives and applicable standards and guidelines in the Midewin Prairie Plan. Several other land parcels,

representing approximately 110 acres, have also been acquired from other sources since Midewin was established. These acquired lands have been assigned management prescriptions, goals, objectives and applicable standards and guidelines in the Prairie Plan. The boundaries of Midewin, as shown on the Land and Resource Management Plan maps, include National Forest System land, the recent acquisitions, and the Army land to be eventually transferred. Together these lands on 16,840 acres include four highly altered and channelized streams, the rare dolomite prairie habitat, and large open grasslands. Much of the land is still under agricultural use as authorized by the ILCA, including cattle grazing for grassland bird habitat management and crop cultivation. Most of these fields have been drained with an extensive system of drain tiles and ditches. Major features of Midewin today are the presence of numerous arsenal buildings and infrastructure, including 392 concrete bunkers, fields of warehouses, 118 miles of road and 116 miles of railbed remaining from 50 years of land use as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant.

Less than 3% of Midewin remains as upland prairie remnants and it will take a major effort to restore the prairie ecosystem with native vegetation. Prairie restoration projects are already underway with three native seed gardens beginning to produce seed needed to restore vast acres. It may be decades before Midewin's restored prairie begins to resemble the prairies once found in northeast Illinois.

The extent and diversity of habitat found within Midewin today provide for some of the most significant wildlife habitat in northeastern Illinois. The large acreage of short stature grassland habitat supports the state's largest population of upland sandpiper. The upland sandpiper is listed as an Illinois State Endangered Species and Regional Forester Sensitive Species. Midewin is also a refuge for other grassland birds such as the bobolink and loggerhead shrike, (also on the Regional Forester Sensitive Species list), whose numbers are declining in the Midwest due to loss of grassland habitat as pastures are converted to suburban housing, commercial/industrial development or to corn and soybean crop fields. In northeastern Illinois, Midewin provides perhaps the last opportunity to create relatively large grasslands for upland sandpiper, bobolink, and loggerhead shrike, and to restore a prairie ecosystem from remnants of wetlands, dolomite prairie, and native upland prairie plant communities.

The rare dolomite prairie is home to a recently discovered population of leafy prairie clover, listed as a federal endangered species. The habitat condition for both plants and animals is dependent on the careful management of the prairie vegetative communities. Native seed gardens have been established to supply needed native prairie and grass seed for restoration in the coming years.

Because it has large open grasslands that have been maintained as pasture lands for decades, Midewin provides habitat for a rich diversity of plants and animals, despite many years of arsenal production and intensive agriculture.

Over one hundred bird species nest and breed at Midewin, and an additional 68 bird species utilize habitat at Midewin during migration or as winter range. Midewin is also home to 27 mammal species and 53 fish species. The diversity of plants includes over 600 plant species identified so far, including a number of invasive and non-native plant species.

Midewin has a rich cultural history dating back over the last 12,000 years. Early people used the area's resources for subsistence and hunting. Later native people incorporated horticulture into their livelihood by approximately 900 A.D. Early French explorers were Louis Joliet and Pere Marquette, who traveled the nearby Des Plaines River in 1673, followed by fur traders in the next two centuries. American and European settlers continued to move into the region after the Black Hawk War of 1832, when members of several tribal groups resisted encroachment of settlers onto their ancestral lands. Early settlers were encouraged with construction of the Illinois and Michigan canal connecting the Great Lakes to the Illinois River. Homesteads were established in the 19th century and agricultural use patterns have continued through today.

In 1940 the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant (Joliet Arsenal) was authorized and the US Army bought land from local farmers. Over 1,000 buildings were constructed including 392 concrete bunkers, loading plants, bomb filling plants, warehouses, family housing, sewage plants, administration buildings, and TNT processing facilities. To complete construction of the Joliet Arsenal, almost half of the natural landscape was modified to some degree. During its heyday, 14,000 people were employed at the Joliet Arsenal and peak production resulted in 5 million pounds of TNT per week. The Joliet Arsenal produced ammunition for World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Production ceased in 1977 and the Army declared the Joliet Arsenal as excess federal property, initiating studies to decommission the site in 1993. Following the concept plan developed by the Joliet Arsenal Citizens Commission, the Joliet Arsenal was divided into several land uses with the majority becoming Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Other properties created with passage of the ILCA from the former arsenal include the Deer Run Industrial Park, owned and managed by CenterPoint Properties, Ltd., Island City Industrial Park, the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, and a Will County landfill.

Midewin is the largest public conservation land parcel located in the greater Chicago metropolitan region, and lies within a 1½-hour drive of more than 6 million people. It lies in Will County, the fastest growing county of the entire Chicagoland region. At the present, public access is extremely limited at Midewin, owing to the need to protect the public from safety risks and potentially hazardous sites (including unexploded ordnance sites still owned by the Army) that lie within the perimeter of Midewin. Midewin is also the key component within the Prairie Parklands, an area of approximately 40,000 acres of important conservation habitat of public, private, and corporate lands in Will and Grundy counties.

A small area within Midewin has been opened to deer hunting during the fall and winter. Two hiking trails were recently opened to the general public. Most visitors see Midewin on hosted tours or as volunteers working on prairie restoration projects or other activities. Midewin is also host to an extensive environmental education program.

3. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF MIDEWIN

Looking to the past, we can paint a picture of a summer day at Midewin sometime in the future.

“I was in the midst of a prairie! A world of grass and flowers stretched around me, rising and falling in gentle undulations . . . We passed whole acres of blossoms all bearing one hue, as purple, perhaps, or masses of yellow or rose; and again a carpet of every color intermixed, or narrow bands, as if a rainbow had fallen upon the verdant slopes.” The words of Eliza Steele in her journal *Summer Journey*, as she traveled near Joliet, Illinois in 1840.

As envisioned by the Joliet Arsenal Citizens Commission that created the basic concept plan, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie over the next decade and beyond will play a key role in prairie restoration in Northeast Illinois, by returning most of the former Joliet Arsenal to a functioning prairie ecosystem through implementation of the Prairie Plan. Attainment of this vision will depend on sustained local, regional, and national support through appropriated funding from Congress, supplemented by partner contributions and a strong volunteer corps ready to restore the prairie. Seed nurseries are yielding a complex mixture of native upland and wetland plants and seeds vital to a healthy prairie ecosystem. Further, Midewin focuses on connecting local and regional urban populations with the vital need to protect and restore prairie habitat. Enthusiastic and well-trained volunteers plant, cultivate, and harvest the multitude of plants in the nursery seed beds. Vast areas formerly planted to agricultural crops are planted with a mix of native prairie grasses and forbs.

Special emphasis is given to the areas with remnants of prairie vegetation; these areas are managed to enhance habitat conditions for rare plants and animals. Habitat conditions for grassland bird species are improved and populations of many sensitive bird species have increased across the prairie. Cattle are used to graze both grasslands and some restored prairie sites to medium or short grass heights to provide grassland bird habitat. Area streams and wetlands are restored and support a diversity of plant and animal species. Prescribed fire is used on a regular basis to keep the restored prairie thriving. Invasive plant and animal species are kept under control.

Cooperative efforts to manage the wildlife and fisheries habitat at Midewin continue with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, other government agencies, and private organizations. Research has provided proven techniques to restore native prairie habitat and manage it so that upland sandpipers and other sensitive birds successfully nest and raise their young in restored prairie areas.

Students from near and far visit Midewin on a regular basis as part of an on-going environmental education program for all ages. Prairie visitors come to experience the beauty of the prairie in bloom in the summer, watch wildlife during any season, and listen to the wind as it waves through the expansive grasslands across the prairie. In such places, a person can experience some isolation and the prairie's relative vastness.

Midewin is open to the public with a network of hiking, bicycle, and equestrian trails traversing the prairie. Visitors are oriented to the site at the visitor center. A shuttle picks up visitors and tours through parts of the prairie, stopping at several points to let hikers off or to view interesting sites. A picnic area is provided near the visitor center. Groups that come to learn or volunteer for longer periods can camp overnight in the group campground.

Most former roads are obliterated, along with most arsenal buildings and other old decaying infrastructure left by the Army. The Army has completed environmental cleanup and more lands have been transferred to the USDA Forest Service as part of Midewin.

Standards and guidelines of the Prairie Plan are followed for all management practices ensuring protection of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, as well as soil, water, visual, and heritage resources of the prairie.

Fulfillment of this vision or mission for Midewin requires exceptional public service and commitment to a public legacy of prairie restoration. It will take a high level of public trust and continued support through volunteerism and understanding. It means that Midewin will need to work cooperatively with its neighbors and partners, and continue inviting the involvement of others, sharing the credit of accomplishments.

4. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED STUDY

The Prairie Plan proposed in the June 1998 Notice of Intent (NOI) used the Joliet Arsenal Citizen's Planning Commission Concept Map created in 1995 as the basis for proposed management areas and activities. The NOI proposal was dropped from further analysis in the Final EIS because it is not a feasible alternative at this time. However, the range of alternatives analyzed in detail in

the Final EIS incorporate the main features of the NOI proposal. The proposal in the NOI outlined five management areas, with Management Areas 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 emphasizing managing the prairie ecosystem, endangered species habitat, and riparian areas. Alternatives 2 through 6 in the Final EIS also provide for prairie ecosystems, endangered species habitat and riparian management.

Management Area 8.1 in the NOI proposal featured bison and elk re-introduction, and a seed production area, with restricted public access and a shuttle system. Re-introduction of bison and elk was dropped from detailed study, because it is not feasible at this time, with a greater need to focus first on prairie restoration, cleanup, and recreation development. All action alternatives recognize that planning and analysis of bison and elk must wait until the primary remediation, restoration, development projects are well underway and the restored prairie environment at Midewin has begun to stabilize. All action alternatives provide for a seed production area and some level of public access.

Management Area 8.2 featured dispersed or less developed recreation with a limited trail system. All action alternatives in the Final EIS provide for some areas of less developed, dispersed recreation and trail systems. Management Area 8.3 provided seasonal or limited bison or elk re-introduction, with a shuttle and limited trail system. As discussed above, bison and elk re-introduction is not feasible at this time and alternatives 2 through 6 in the Final EIS provide for a variety of recreational access and opportunities.

Management Areas 8.4 and 8.5 emphasized managing grassland bird habitat and riparian areas with an extensive trail system. Management Area 8.4 featured dispersed recreation opportunities and no motorized vehicles and Management Area 8.5 featured key recreational development, including a visitor center, camping and picnicking area, and a short auto tour route. These aspects of the proposal from the NOI are also represented within the range of alternatives considered in detail, because all action alternatives provide some amount of grassland bird habitat, manage riparian areas, and provide a trail system.

5. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

The strength of this planning process lies in the alternatives and the way they were formulated. The alternatives address the major issues raised by the public and management concerns and opportunities brought forward by Midewin staff. These issues, concerns, and opportunities were consolidated into a list of significant issues in the Final EIS. The alternatives express a range of responses to the significant issues identified in the Final EIS. All alternatives provide for ecosystem management and public use. All alternatives share a set of basic goals, standards, and guidelines ensuring protection of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie resources and compliance with applicable laws. All alternatives meet the management requirements of 36 C.F.R. §219.27, as well as all other

legal and regulatory requirements. The following alternatives are described and evaluated in detail in the Final EIS, Chapter 2:

5.1. Alternative 1 (The No Action Alternative)

“No action” means continuation of existing conditions and interim management practices for the next 10 to 15 years. No long-range plan for Midewin is developed, and minimal to no expansion or development of additional programs and facilities is provided. Because a land and resource management plan is required by law, the primary purpose for this No Action Alternative is to serve as a baseline for the comparison of other alternatives. (See Figure 1 –Alternative 1 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.2. Alternative 2

Maximizes expansion of grassland bird habitat for area-sensitive bird species such as upland sandpiper, bobolink and loggerhead shrike, with a moderate amount of recreation opportunities. (See Figure 2 – Alternative 2 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.3. Alternative 3

Emphasizes recreational development with an extensive trail system, campground, visitor center, and a greater amount of grassland bird habitat restored than upland prairie habitat. (See Figure 3 – Alternative 3 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.4. Alternative 4 (Selected as the Prairie Plan)

Provides a balance of restoration of habitat types for sensitive grassland birds and restoration of upland prairie. Offers moderate recreation development with a mix of opportunities compatible with restoration. (See Figure 4 – Alternative 4 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.5. Alternative 5

Focuses on upland prairie and wet prairie/sedge meadow restoration, with less grassland bird habitat. Maximizes upland prairie restoration, with moderate recreation development. (See Figure 5 – Alternative 5 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.6. Alternative 6

Focuses on upland prairie and wet prairie/sedge meadow restoration with less grassland bird habitat, and the least amount of investment for recreation development. (See Figure 6 – Alternative 6 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).