



File Code: 1950-1/7100/5100

Date: December 3, 2002

Subject: **Midewin Hotshot Facility**

Friends and Partners of Midewin:

The USDA Forest Service at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) is proposing to construct a fire crew facility for the Midewin Hotshots in early summer 2003. Firefighting capabilities are integral to the Forest Service mission of “caring for the land and serving people.” The Midewin Hotshots are an elite firefighting resource assigned to initial attack on wildland fires across the nation. The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is in a unique position to facilitate training and mobilization of the Midewin Hotshot fire crew in concert with our primary restoration goals.

During this public comment period, we are providing you with information on the proposed facility construction and invite you to send us your comments.

The Purpose and Need

The recently established Midewin Hotshot firefighting crew is now using a temporary modular office located 1 ½-miles north of the Midewin Supervisor’s Office on Illinois State Route 53. The temporary site is not suitable as a long-term office and training facility due to inadequate sewer, water, power, and infrastructure. The newly constructed Supervisor’s Office was not designed to support the Hotshot fire crew.

Crew quarters and adequate office and training facilities need to be constructed as soon as it is feasible in order to fully support the Midewin Hotshots. With an appropriate facility to support a full-time crew of seven and a seasonal crew of twenty persons, the Hotshots can be fully trained and quickly mobilized.

Proposed Action

The proposed action includes construction of an office, garage, and crew quarters, with adequate parking on approximately two acres. The Midewin Hotshot facility would

be located immediately north of, and adjacent to, the site of the new Midewin Supervisor’s Office. The temporary office now in use would be dismantled and the site made available for future restoration.

The facility would be landscaped in a manner that is compatible with the surrounding grassland and Supervisor’s Office. The primary purpose would be to function solely as a fire training and mobilization center for the Midewin Hotshot fire crew.

Project Location

The project area is located immediately east of Illinois State Route 53 and just north of the Supervisor’s Office now under construction. The proposed site is located in the western portion of Section 18, T.33 N., R.10 E., Will County, Illinois. The attached map shows the location being proposed for this Hotshot facility construction project.

Existing Conditions

The proposed construction site is currently



under U.S. Army jurisdiction pending transfer to Midewin, and is under lease for cattle grazing. The site is largely comprised of short-stature grassland bird habitat, which is the preferred habitat type for two Regional Forester Sensitive Species (RFSS), the loggerhead shrike and the upland sandpiper. Additionally, the area is known to support Sullivant's coneflower, a rhizomatous, perennial herb with RFSS status commonly found on outwash plains at Midewin.

Issues and Concerns

Based on other construction activities at Midewin and on our primary goal to restore the tallgrass prairie, we anticipate that issues and concerns will focus on potential impacts to the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, the needed space and location for constructing a Hotshot facility, and potential impacts related to hazardous materials and U.S. Army cleanup procedures. Preliminary issues have been identified by the Interdisciplinary (ID) Team of Midewin specialists and other Midewin staff members.

The ID Team will analyze potential effects of the proposed Hotshot facility construction. The following issues, along with other issues raised during this public scoping process, will be addressed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) for this project:

- Protection of Federally Endangered and Threatened species, State Endangered and Threatened species, and Regional Forester Sensitive Species and their habitat.
 - Potential concerns of adjacent landowners.
 - Grazing and other management activities.
- Removal of any arsenic-contaminated soils along the existing fence line at the southern and western boundaries of the proposed project area.
 - Visual impact of development of the Illinois State Route 53 corridor.

Compliance with the Prairie Plan

Midewin's Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan) includes standards and guidelines for the development of administrative facilities in Management Area 2, including Hotshot firefighting facilities. The proposed construction site for the Hotshot facility lies within Management Area 2 – Administration and Developed Recreation Sites.

Public Scoping Process

With this letter, we are initiating the procedures required of the Forest Service by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). We will complete an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed activities during the next few months. You have been contacted as part of the public involvement process. Your comments on the proposed action will help complete the EA.

Please consider the following specific questions and respond to any or all of them in writing by no later than **January 6, 2003**.

1. Is there any information about the project area that you believe is important in the context of the proposed activities that the Forest Service might have overlooked?
2. For you or the group you represent, what are the potential effects of this proposal about which you are particularly concerned?
3. Are there reasonable alternative

ways to meet the purpose and need (the rationale for conducting activities) for which you would like the Forest Service to develop and analyze the environmental effects?

4. Are there issues and concerns, in addition to those listed above, which you believe are important and would like to have addressed in the EA? If so, please include your rationale for why they should be analyzed.

We will review and consider comments received during this public input period. We will then develop and analyze alternatives to this proposal, and analyze other environmental effects. We will also analyze a “no action” alternative as required by NEPA regulations. The Prairie Supervisor will be the deciding official for this project.

At this time, I do not believe that the proposed activities will have a significant impact on the environment based on similar activities conducted in the past. However, we will analyze the proposed activities’ effects on the biological, cultural, and socio-economic environment, including water, air, soil, sensitive species, Federally Threatened and Endangered species, hazardous materials, recreation, and heritage resources in order to make a final determination.

You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the analysis we conduct when I release the Environmental Assessment. My final decision, issued after comments have been reviewed and addressed, will be administratively appealable under 36 CFR Part 215.

If you have any questions about the proposed activities or the purpose and need, please feel free to contact Enid Erickson, Environmental Coordinator, at the address above, by email at eerickson@fs.fed.us or by phone at (815) 423-6370. Please submit your written comments by **January 6, 2003** to Enid Erickson at the address above. Thank you for your interest in activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely,

Logan Lee

LOGAN LEE
Prairie Supervisor,
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

PROPOSED MIDEWIN HOTSHOT FACILITY

