

Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
For the
West Side Recreation Trail and Picnic Area
USDA Forest Service
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
Will County, Illinois

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the West Side Recreation Trail and Picnic Area documents the analysis of the proposal to construct the first permanent recreation trail and ancillary facilities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Phased construction over the next several years will provide for a 10-1/2 mile long trail in two segments. One segment will be for shared-use by pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians, extending from the East Trailhead located just east of Illinois State Route 53 and extending southwest to the River Road Trailhead. A second segment will be designed for pedestrian use, extending from the River Road Trailhead north to a return loop at Blodgett Marsh. Although the East Trailhead is located east of the highway, the trail is located almost entirely on the west side after crossing the highway on an iron bridge once used as a train trestle when the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant (Joliet Arsenal) was in operation.

This first trail is being built early in our process of restoration. We will be building the trail across a grassland bird area that is relatively unfragmented. In order to assure maximum opportunity to provide alternative habitat should any birds be temporarily displaced, the analysis includes removal of woody vegetation to make small blocks of existing grassland bird habitat into a large block. The EA also documents analysis of the No Action Alternative and an alternative that would have made extensive use of existing infrastructure in the form of less visibly appealing abandoned rail beds and roads as part of the trail route. On November 18, a legal notice was published in the Joliet Herald News and the West Side Recreation Trail and Picnic Area EA was sent to interested individuals, organizations, and those who participated during the analysis process. The EA was also posted on Midewin's website.

I have decided to approve Alternative 3, which provides for a balance of uses incorporating high scenic quality and visitor experience, mitigation to provide alternative large blocks of grassland bird habitat, and trail amenities for diverse recreational users. I believe that this decision best positions Midewin to meet recreation 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 http://www.fs.fed.us/mntp/nepa/recreation/Trail_EA.pdf.

Reasons for the Decision

Interim (temporary) trails are currently available for public use at Midewin, including three miles of mowed pedestrian trails on the west side and over 16 miles of pedestrian and shared-use trails on existing road beds for hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians on the east side of Midewin. These trails are not adequate for or intended for permanent recreational use.

The reason for initiating construction of a permanent recreation trail at this time is because we have been able to open segments of Midewin to public use and we want that use to be managed consistently over time. The Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan) as well as the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act that established Midewin, directing that recreational opportunities will be provided that are compatible with habitat restoration goals. The Prairie Plan identifies an eventual network of 48 miles of trail corridor at Midewin. We hope that our trail-based recreation program will assure the protection of restored prairie habitats. We want to provide that trail-based opportunity as early as possible so that we do not have to “change the rules” at some point in the future because there is not trail system in place. This project makes an initial dent in that 48-mile goal by providing 10-1/2 miles of permanent trail for pedestrians, bicyclists, equestrians, and others wishing to experience recreational opportunities at Midewin.

My decision includes the construction of facilities that will enhance visitor experiences, including two trailheads, adequate parking for cars and buses, benches and rest areas along the trail route, wildlife viewing sites and a scenic overlook, and interpretation of natural resources and historic sites along the trail route. On the east side of State Route 53 there will be an “East Trailhead.” We will renovate the railroad iron bridge over the highway in order to provide access to the west side of the highway. The iron bridge is the only safe crossing of State Route 53 identified in the Prairie Plan, so we want to make that investment as early as possible. Near the trailhead we will construct a “council ring” for educational and interpretive activities. The former temporary Hotshot headquarters site near Gate 10 will be maintained as a trail staging area.

The portion of trail from the iron bridge to the River Road Trailhead will be for shared use by pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians. The River Road Trailhead and approximately 100 acres of the seedbed gardens will be surrounded by a deer exclusion fence. Minimal equestrian facilities and bicycle racks will remain outside this fenced area. Within the fencing we will construct a simple shelter and picnic area for public use. The pedestrian-only trail segment will extend north to Blodgett Marsh and include two wildlife viewing areas and a short loop segment at the trail’s end.

Decision

Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 3, with a minor change, which utilizes more of the natural contours of the landscape than would be possible with extensive use of the existing infrastructure (roads and old rail beds). I believe that Alternative 3 provides the best balance between the needs of habitat restoration and a high quality recreation experience to initiate the permanent trail system. This alternative provides good scenery and contact with the natural and heritage resources that Midewin has to offer.

We will begin phased construction of Midewin’s first permanent trail in FY 2005, starting with the pedestrian portion of the trail north of the River Road seedbed gardens and renovation of the

iron bridge over State Route 53. Subsequent construction phases will take place contingent upon available funding in the years to come. We will work hard to devise ways to construct trail segments through partnership and volunteer efforts.

I am making this decision because:

- I want the public to enjoy Midewin through an experience that allows them a sense of solitude.
- I believe that the analysis demonstrates that Alternative 3 provides the best combination of habitat restoration and recreation called for in the Prairie Plan.
- There are little or no impacts to air and water quality, heritage resources, or important wildlife species.
- There are greater interpretation and education opportunities.
- Centralizing investments at the River Road Trailhead will provide improvements for recreationists, youth groups, volunteers working at the seedbeds, and hunters.
- I believe that this investment will bring more people to Midewin to recreate and learn about prairie ecosystems and their value.

The only change from Alternative 3 in my decision is to exclude construction of a new bridge over Prairie Creek in the eastern part of the project area because it is too costly. Instead, I have chosen to maintain that part of Alternative 2 that calls for use of the existing bridge over Prairie Creek. This bridge will be converted for shared trail use using the existing rail bed that accesses the bridge. Other than this change, my decision is to select the rest of Alternative 3 in its entirety. At some point in the future we may have the resources to reroute the trail and construct a new crossing that will provide a better recreation experience. For now, I am passing on that opportunity in order to get the trail constructed and the existing crossing improved for trail use.

Removal of fragmenting treelines and fencerows from two areas and planting of cool season grasses in a third area will enhance 743 acres of grassland bird habitat and mitigate for any potential changes in bird use resulting from constructing the trail. Two of the areas selected for mitigation are located five miles east of the project area and one area is located within the eastern portion of the project area just west of State Route 53. (See page 36 and Figure 4 of the [Environmental Assessment](#) for detailed information on project mitigation.)

My decision takes into account the mission of the U.S. Forest Service to “care for the land and serve people” by providing compatible uses of Midewin, including enhancement of our tallgrass prairie restoration efforts while at the same time providing for quality recreational experiences. 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.

My decision to construct a permanent recreation trail, associated facilities, and enhance 743 acres of grassland bird 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 recreation, 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*.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I also considered Alternative 2 and the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1). Summary tables comparing the alternatives can be found in the EA on pages 11 and 16. Alternative 2 was not selected because although fewer impacts would occur with avoidance of contact with the resources located away from the existing infrastructure, the goal of educating the public, providing interpretive experiences, and providing for a high quality of recreational experience tied to some of the vastness and solitude that Midewin has to offer would not be furthered by this alternative. I can further more Prairie Plan objectives with the alternative I have selected.

However, I have selected to implement that portion of Alternative 2 that utilizes the existing bridge over Prairie Creek in the eastern portion of the project area because I believe it will not only allow us to save substantially on the cost of constructing a new bridge, but it will still accommodate the quality recreational experience we are striving to provide for diverse visitors to Midewin.

Because of public interest and partner involvement, a number of modifications to the alternatives were considered by the Interdisciplinary Team. I asked the team to try to incorporate the modifications into existing alternatives rather than build new alternatives. Alternative routings were dropped or incorporated after field review.

No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, construction of a permanent recreation trail and related facilities would not be undertaken at this time, and unrestricted public use would be allowed for dispersed recreation at Midewin. Existing interim trails would continue to be provided, and ongoing, routine management activities such as prescribed burning, invasive species treatment, and prairie restoration would continue. Planning for permanent future trails would not be precluded if the currently planned trail is not constructed.

This alternative was not acceptable to me because it would have created a situation where we were not providing any recreational infrastructure to help manage recreational activities at Midewin. The potential for unmanaged recreational impacts is of great concern when considering the investments being made to restore native prairie habitats. I want to create a pattern of use today that sets the tone for the future. I do not believe this alternative would help us comply with the long term goals of the enabling legislation or the Prairie Plan.

Public Involvement

A proposal to construct the West Side recreation trail and associated facilities was described in the Schedule of Proposed Actions for Midewin, starting with the Spring/Summer 2002 issue of the Midewin Quarterly. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during the public scoping period from October 24, 2002 to December 16, 2002. Seven public scoping comments were received. We hosted a public field trip to get feedback and comments

and had an equestrian trail expert from Clemson University provide a public workshop to help Midewin staff and our partners understand some of the construction and maintenance issues. The EA was sent to interested parties and was available for public review and comment from November 19, 2004 to December 20, 2004. The comments were summarized and responded to by the Forest Service, and are included with this Decision Notice.

Using the comments from the public and other agencies received during the initial scoping period, the Interdisciplinary Team of resource specialists identified three issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. The primary issues concerned the potential for fragmentation of grassland bird habitat, the potential for user conflicts, and the quality of the recreational trail use experience (EA p. 9). To address these concerns, 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 the actions I have selected for implementation 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 3 will provide for a quality recreational experience that is fully compatible with prairie restoration efforts, including the mitigation outlined in this alternative for improving or unfragmenting three grassland bird habitat areas both within and outside the trail project area. 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. Trail 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).

In reaching my conclusion of no significant impact, I recognize that this trail 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 permanent recreation trail, removal of woody vegetation to reduce fragmentation in 125-acre and 300-acre tracts, or planting cool season grasses to improve a 318-acre tract of grassland habitat (EA p. 36).

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. 41).

2. Public health and safety are not adversely affected by the proposed action (EA p. 40).
3. Like most of Midewin, the project area has been modified by past agricultural practices, grazing, unpaved roads, fences, rail beds, and other fragmenting features such as hedge rows and fencelines of woody vegetation. 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 fragmenting woody vegetation from two areas east of the project area, thus opening up 300-acre and 125-acre grassland tracts for sensitive birds requiring short-stature grasses. Further mitigation will enhance 318 additional acres of grassland bird habitat by planting the area in cool season 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.17, 36).

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 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 p. 17, 36).
5. 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 recreational trails and related public facilities on public land is not without precedence. These trail construction, woody vegetation removal, and planting projects represent an opportunity to move toward the goals of the Midewin Prairie Plan (EA p.5). This project is also an opportunity to support the Forest Service mission of “caring for the land and serving people” by providing quality recreational opportunities for visitors to the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. I conclude that the effects of this project are non-significant and will be short-term and localized in nature. The selected alternative is consistent with the two management areas designated in the Prairie Plan for Administration and Developed Recreation and for Prairie Ecosystem Restoration
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 construction of a permanent recreational trail and associated public facilities or with woody vegetation removal and planting to enhance grassland habitat at Midewin. 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, 25-26, 28-29, 36-40). 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 located during archaeological surveys for this project (EA p. 19-20).
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 has concurred with this conclusion (January 24, 2005).
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.

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. Recreation trail and associated facilities construction and restoration activities 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.

Appeal Opportunities and Implementation

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215. Only those individuals or organizations who submitted substantive comments during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision.

The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirement at 36 CFR 215.14. Appeals must be filed (regular fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeals Deciding Officer. Written appeals must be submitted to:

Appeals Deciding Officer
Randy Moore, Regional Forester,
USDA Forest Service
Gaslight Building, Suite 700
626 E. Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53202

The office hours for those submitting hand-delivery appeals are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt) rich text format (.rtf) and Word (.doc) to: appeals-eastern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of the legal notice in The Herald News, which will be the exclusive means for determining the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely on dates or timeframes provided by any source other than The Herald News.

If no appeals are filed within 45-day period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, the 5th business day from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

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.



LOGAN LEE,
Prairie Supervisor

February 14, 2005
Date

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.