



**United States
Department
of Agriculture**

**Forest
Service**

**Midewin National
Tallgrass Prairie**

**30071 South State Route 53
Wilmington, IL 60481**

File Code: 1950/5430

Date: November 14, 2000

To Stakeholders and Concerned Citizens:

The 30-day public comment period for the Blodgett Road and South Patrol Road Wetlands Restoration Environmental Assessment has passed, and I have made my final decision. I want to thank those who took the time to comment throughout the planning process for this restoration project. Specific comments on the alternatives were helpful in preparing the Final Environmental Assessment.

Enclosed you will find the Decision Notice which explains my decision to implement Alternative 3, and Appendix C - Response to Public Comments received during the Environmental Assessment comment period. The Environmental Assessment, the public comments received, and the project planning record are on file at our office. We hope that you will continue to be involved with further planning for Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely yours,

FRANK KOENIG
Prairie Supervisor

Enclosures:

Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact
Appendix C, Response to Public Comments

**Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Blodgett Road and South Patrol Road Wetlands Restoration**

**USDA Forest Service
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
Will County, Illinois**

Introduction

This project fulfills the need to initiate long-term restoration plans at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Although a land and resource management plan has not been completed, wetlands restoration have been proposed on these two sites, to begin the lengthy process of restoration to enhance and conserve the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plant species as stated in the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act.

Decision

After consideration of the environmental effects displayed in the Environmental Assessment for Blodgett Road and South Patrol Road Wetlands Restoration, I have decided to implement Alternative 3. Specifically, I have decided to implement wetland restoration at both the Blodgett Road and South Patrol Road sites at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

At Blodgett Road, 151 acres of former croplands will be restored by removing exotic and invasive trees, filling in minor ditches, planting with appropriate native seed, and maintaining through prescribe burns, but the remnant wetlands and prairie will not have additional prairie seed planted in them. At South Patrol Road, 459 acres of former croplands will be restored in three phases over the next five years beginning in the section to the east. Prior to planting with a mix of native forbs and grasses, both sites will first be prepared by removing dense stands of trees growing in fencerows. The trees growing in fencerows at both sites will be removed by bulldozer, and the wood and slash will be piled and chipped into mulch or burned. A burn plan will be prepared and burning permits obtained before any piles are burned. Other non-native and invasive trees growing adjacent to the existing marsh and wetlands and growing alongside the ditch adjacent to Blodgett Road will be selectively removed by power saws. The wood and slash from these trees will also be piled and chipped into mulch or burned. Selected groups of native trees will remain for scenic quality and to provide wildlife habitat. Groups of trees will also remain at the South Patrol Road site to protect and avoid heritage resources. These remaining trees will provide future hunting sites.

All drain tiles located will be initially closed with valves to restore hydrology until monitoring shows that hydrology restoration is successful, and then the drain tile system will be permanently disabled by removing sections of tile. As this is the first large wetland restoration project at MNTP, monitoring may suggest changes to the strategy and techniques used to restore the hydrology. The main drainage ditch at South Patrol Road will be filled and the minor ditches at Blodgett Road will be plugged with small earthen berms. The ditch adjacent to Blodgett Road will not be filled in. The gravel ballast from railroad berms will be removed from the South Patrol Road site. An appropriate mix of native forbs and grasses will be planted at both sites beginning in the spring of 2001 and continuing over the next few years.

Cultural resources will be mitigated by avoiding known sites. Prior to implementation a Section 404 permit (wetland permit) will be obtained from the Army Corps of Engineers.

Rationale for the Decision

In making this decision I considered the direction and intent of the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act, whereby the Forest Service may conduct management activities prior to a land and resource management plan to promote the purposes for which Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was established, including managing the land and water resources to conserve and enhance the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants.

Alternative 3 best meets the project objectives (EA page 13) of conserving and enhancing native vegetation and wildlife; provides 610 acres of potential habitat for eight sensitive species (EA pp 37-38); increases the acres of wetlands at Midewin by 442 acres; begins to control the exotic and invasive plant species on the prairie; and provides for improvement of soil and water resources as the sites are restored. Alternative 3 moves the disturbed prairie sites closer to the desired conditions of restored mesic prairie, wet prairie, dolomite prairie, sedge meadow and marsh.

Alternative 3 will not affect the potential migration of contaminants from adjacent or nearby Army lands (EA pp 19- 20). Alternative 3 provides the most effective way to disable the system of drain tiles with the least soil disturbance, and will not affect the drainage and hydrology of adjacent private lands or lands still owned by the Army. (EA pg 18). The Forest Service will monitor changes to soil and water conditions as described in the EA page 40.

Alternative 3 complies with the criteria the Forest Service proposed for “interim projects”:

- 1) “The environmental conditions of the site meet Forest Service standards”. The few sites along the security fence with higher levels of arsenic will not be disturbed. (EA pg 12 and pg 19);
- 2) This activity will not interfere with Army cleanup operations;
- 3) This activity provides necessary resource protection, although an irretrievable commitment of resources is made, including planting native prairie seeds and seedlings, drain tile removal, filling of ditches and removal of trees; and

- 4) Implementing Alternative 3 also complies with the 4th criteria, “activity represents a valid, existing right as provided by legislation”, (EA pg 40).

In addition, I selected Alternative 3 as it best provides an opportunity to create large, unfragmented (contiguous) habitat and best provides an opportunity to enhance the diversity of plants and animals at MNTP. Alternative 3 incorporates an adaptive management approach to restoration.

Implementing Alternative 3 will not limit future recreation opportunities if they are proposed at a later date. The restoration sites will provide opportunities for continued learning, environmental education, and interpretation.

Other Alternatives That Were Considered

Alternative 1, the proposed action was not selected as it provides less improved wetlands habitat by leaving numerous invasive trees along existing wetlands at the Blodgett Road site.

Alternative 2 was not selected as it would leave all drainage ditches open for many years, and the objective of restoring the hydrology would not be met.

Alternative 4 (No Action Alternative) – I did not select this alternative as it does not address the restoration needs of the area; the sites would further degrade over time; and the opportunity to increase habitat for sensitive species may be lost.

Alternatives Considered but not Fully Analyzed –

Alternative 5 included a 30-acre shorebird pond development. This alternative was considered infeasible at this time and was dropped from detailed analysis.

Public Involvement

Public involvement in this decision first began with a scoping notice May 20, 1999 sent to over 1,600 people and organizations. On September 15th, 1999, a letter requesting comments on the environmental assessment (EA) was sent to 576 interested parties. The draft EA was added to the website for MNTP and was made available to the public. Copies of the EA were mailed to 50 individuals and organizations. In addition to the public involvement opportunities cited in the EA, we have had several meetings and phone conversations with interested individuals and groups. Information on the proposal was also published in the Daily Southtown, the Joliet Herald, the Wilmington Free Press, and the Kankakee Journal. Information on the proposal was published in the Midewin Quarterly, December 1999, February 2000, and June 2000, and September 2000.

Mitigation Features

The environmental assessment page 12, describes several mitigation measures that will be implemented as part of this decision.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on the interdisciplinary environmental analysis, review of the National Environmental Policy Act criteria for significant effects, and my knowledge of the expected impacts, I have determined that this action does not pose a substantial question of significant effect upon the quality of the human environment and is not a major federal action. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination is based on the following factors:

Context:

Alternative 3 is within the context (here a local action) of the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act.

Intensity:

The severity of the environmental effects of the proposed wetlands restoration considered alone or cumulatively with others, were tested against the following ten criteria listed in the NEPA regulations 40 CFR 1508.27:

1. In reaching my conclusion of no significant impacts, I recognize that this wetland restoration project is likely to have impacts that are perceived as negative as well as positive (EA pp. 29). The short-term effects of tree removal may cause some displacement of deer hunting opportunities and some temporary displacement of fencerow bird habitat, to gain the long term benefit of wetland and prairie restoration.
2. This action does not pose a substantial question of significant effect upon public health and safety (EA pp. 19-20).
3. There are no significant adverse effects to prime farmlands, floodplains, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, or ecologically sensitive areas (EA pp. 32- 33). The wetland restored will be dominated by a community of native wetland and wet prairie plants following hydrological restoration and planting.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. I believe we addressed the most significant biological, social, and economical issues sufficiently to avoid scientific controversy over the scope and intensity of effects (EA pp. 19-20).
5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks (EA pp. 19-20).
6. No precedents are established as a result of the decision being made. The wetlands restoration project is specific to the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Future proposals within the area or in surrounding areas can be analyzed on their merits and implemented or not, independent of the action currently proposed.

7. There are no known cumulative adverse effects of this wetlands restoration and other past or reasonably foreseeable projects implemented or planned on the area. This finding is based on the cumulative effects analysis pp. 32-40 in the EA.

8. The Forest Service land was professionally surveyed for heritage resources. No sites were found. Therefore, no significant effects are foreseen, and no loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources is anticipated (EA pp. 38-39).

9. The biological assessment and evaluation prepared for this project found no federally endangered or threatened species within the proposed site. (EA Appendix B, Biological Evaluation).

10. The actions in this decision do not violate federal, state or local laws or regulations imposed for the protection of the environment. (EA pp. 39-40).

Findings Required By Other Laws

This wetlands restoration is consistent with the Illinois Land Conservation Act, 1995.

Project Implementation

Implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is filed, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition (36 CFR 215.10).

Implementation means conducting ground-disturbing actions described in this decision.

Appeal Rights

This decision is subject to the USDA Forest Service process for administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7, by those who provided comments or otherwise expressed an interest in this particular proposal. Written notice of appeal to remand or reverse this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 "Content of Appeal," and must be submitted within 45 days of publication of the legal notice of this decision in the Joliet Herald newspaper to:

USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region (R9)
Attn: Appeals Deciding Officer
310 West Wisconsin Ave, Suite 500
Milwaukee, WI 53203

Detailed records of the environmental assessment are available for public review at USDA Forest Service, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30071 S. State Route 53, Wilmington, IL 60481. For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Renée Thakali, Prairie Parklands Coordinator at the Midewin office or at (815) 423-6370.

FRANK KOENIG, Prairie Supervisor

Date

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Appendix C:

Agency Responses to Public Comments from Environmental Assessment

Below are agency responses to the six written public comments received during the environmental assessment comment period, September 15 to October 20, 2000. Letters received are available for review at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie office.

Comment #1

Forest Service Response: The Illinois Land Conservation Act states that management activities may be conducted to effectuate, or put into effect, the purposes for which Midewin is established, in advance of development of a land and resource management plan. This wetland restoration project would put into effect Purpose (1) – “To manage the land and water resources at Midewin in a manner that will conserve and enhance the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants”; thus expediting the administration of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. The EA Purpose and Need Section page 4, describes the purpose of this project as enhancing native populations of wetland and prairie species.

The EA page 40, concludes that this project complies with the Forest Service criteria proposed for interim projects at MNTP. The EA page 38, concludes that future recreation opportunities or public use will not be adversely affected.

The project objectives listed in the EA page 6, are based on the established legislative purposes for MNTP and we are confident that the proposed Land and Resource Management Plan objectives will be similar. Conservation Assessments for the Sensitive Species for MNTP were the source of information for the biological input to the EA.

When the Final Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) is approved, this EA will be reviewed for any major conflicts, and this EA may be revised or amended, as needed.

If the analysis and implementation for this project were delayed for several years pending the Final LRMP, restoration of these large areas would be further delayed and current agreements with project partners would have to be extended for longer time periods.

The EA Section 5, List of Preparers and Consultation with Others, lists three consultants with whom the Forest Service is working under authorized agreements, and the Federal Advisory Committee Act is not implicated in these circumstances.

The issues identified from initial scoping did not indicate that the size of the restoration areas was a major concern, thus no alternatives were developed to address that issue. Large-scale restoration at MNTP is widely recognized to be “experimental” in nature and we have incorporated an adaptive management approach.

The EA section, Environmental Consequences to General Wildlife has been revised to better display and document the effects to wildlife, EA page 24-25.

The EA pages 25-28 addresses effects to sensitive species based on conservation assessments prepared in 1999 for sensitive species at MNTP. As stated above, if any new information or conflicting goals and objectives are indicated in the Final LRMP, this EA will be reviewed and amended, if needed.

The EA section on Economics page 31 adequately describes the current situation and estimated costs for restoration compared with projected revenue forfeited when agriculture special use permits cease.

Comment #2

Forest Service Response: When preparing environmental assessments or environmental impact statements, the words “effects” and “impacts” are synonymous, per CEQ regulations 1508.8. These documents shall describe the environment of the areas to be “affected” per CEQ regulations 1502.15. Per Webster’s Dictionary the verbs “effect” and “affect” are synonymous and the word “impact” can be both used as a noun and verb. We apologize for any confusion that these words commonly used in our documents may have caused.

The Proposed Action Alternative 1 was not selected as the Preferred Alternative as it provides less improved wetlands habitat by leaving invasive trees along existing wetlands.

Comment #3

Forest Service Response: 1) – Water Quality. The Forest Service will manage for water quality improvement in accordance with several national laws, regulations and policies, as well as Forest Service handbook and manuals. The Final LRMP will direct watershed management for integrated improvements in soil and water resources. Water quality does not appear as an issue in the EA page 4, because it is not a special condition for MNTP that needed recognition in the Notice of Intent or Analysis of the Management Situation. Wetland restoration generally results in improved water quality. The Purpose and Need for Action, page 5 of the EA, is to provide a general description of effects to wetlands in the past and current wetland conditions. The paragraph describes several items that are affected by loss or restoration of wetlands (habitat, water quality, groundwater, flood control). This paragraph is a generalization of extensive research literature on wetlands and watershed hydrology. The habitat improvements are quantified in the EA in terms of type and area. We see no need to calculate effects on soil and water as long as improvements are projected and no adverse effects may occur on adjoining lands.

2) As stated above, we see no need to calculate/estimate soil erosion and non-point source pollution as the projects are proposed for the sake of restoration and land improvements, not as Best Management Practices for non-point source control or soil

erosion control. The major stormwater ditch drains lands to the east, land that remains under Army jurisdiction for remediation purposes. We anticipate removal of this ditch and further wetland restoration after these lands are transferred to the Forest Service.

3) A drain tile survey was done by excavation. Attempts to use ground-penetrating radar were unsuccessful. Control valves will be used to allow manipulation of water levels during the early stages of restoration. The low gradients in the project area allow control of ground water with valves that will be placed strategically to allow control of separate branches of the tile system. Valves and tile sections may be removed when monitoring establishes that restoration has been successful. Erosion control devices will not be used at the excavation sites, unless runoff is expected to enter established wetlands. Excavation will attempt to replace material with the topsoil on the top. The action alternatives would locate and remove or disable the drain tiles to restore the hydrology of the sites.

Comment #4

Forest Service Response: Thank you for your comment.

Comment #5

Forest Service Response: Thank you for your comment.

Comment #6

Forest Service Response: In the preferred alternative 3, populations of many native plant species would stabilize or increase as woody invasive species would be removed from native vegetation remnants. Although a majority of existing trees would be removed from the sites, a number of native trees would remain to continue to provide wildlife habitat and scenic quality to the area.

Alternative 2 considers removing less trees on the Blodgett Road site. (EA page 10). In Alternative 2 there would be limited rehabilitation and enhancement of native vegetation remnants. Native woody plants would experience some declines from prescribed burning and competition from invigorated native vegetation, but most larger woody plants would persist in and adjacent to these remnants for decades. An increased burning frequency may be required to prevent further encroachment by these native woody species. Although invasive exotic plant species would decline in these project areas in Alternative 2, stands of native woody plants would provide habitat for re-infestation by exotic, bird-dispersed shrubs.