



File Code: 1950-1

Date: May 3, 2005

Dear Friends and Partners of Midewin:

The Forest Service at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) proposes to extend the Middle Grant Creek restoration project area south to Prairie Creek. By extending the boundary, we would add approximately 145 acres of upland to the project for restoration using the same goals and treatments proposed on similar lands within the project area. I am not revisiting the decisions already made for the Middle Grant Creek restoration. Based on comments I receive concerning the proposed 145-acre extension to the current restoration project, I will decide which method to apply under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), for instance whether to complete an environmental assessment, categorical exclusion, or other type of NEPA documentation.

The area that is being proposed for addition to the Middle Grant Creek restoration is located within the western side of Midewin in portions of Sections 1, 2, 11, and 12, in Township 33 North, Range 9 East, Will County, Illinois. The enclosed [map](#) delineates the area we propose to add. We invite you to send us your comments on this proposal to extend the project area to the geographic boundary at Prairie Creek.

Purpose and Need: On September 9, 2003, I authorized the Middle Grant Creek restoration, and work has already begun in accordance with my decision. However, it has become apparent that we are not implementing as cost effectively as we could. The 145-acre area from the southern boundary to Prairie Creek is nearly identical in nature to the current project area. It is a continuation of the same landscape and physical characteristics that occur in the original project area and is accessed by the same roads. The original project was designed based on a natural division, or ridge, between the Grant Creek and Prairie Creek watersheds. Including the lands in the Prairie Creek watershed north of the creek will reduce costs over time and allow our restoration to be more efficient. This proposal will also reduce the potential spread of invasive plants because this will allow us to use natural barriers to their spread. Extending the project area would allow the entire area between Grant Creek to the north, and Prairie Creek to the south, to be restored and maintained as one restoration project as opposed to completing the work for these similar areas at different times and at a substantially higher cost. The total Middle Grant Creek project area would be increased in size from 385 to 530 total acres.

There would be no new effects to the hydrology or other natural resources, including threatened and endangered species. Heritage resources located within the added area, which has already undergone the required archaeological survey, would be avoided during project activities in accordance with consultation completed under the National Historic Preservation Act. Schoolhouse Road runs through this area and is presently being used to access the project area to the north, creating ready-made access to the new area.



Background: Both the current and extended project areas were once dominated by wet prairie and sedge meadows, with a few acres of oak savanna, prior to agriculture and arsenal development. This entire area was drained and attempts were made to convert the land to agricultural use between 1830 and 1940. Today the vegetation is mostly a mix of grasslands dominated by non-native, cool-season grasses, and wetlands dominated by native and non-native vegetation. Scattered thickets of woody vegetation remain, primarily invasive species of Osage orange, autumn olive, Amur honeysuckle, red hawthorn, green ash, and eastern cottonwood.

Desired Condition: Restoration of hydrological and ecological connections across the landscape would allow hydrological functions, topography, soils, vegetation, and habitat to more closely approximate the pre-development conditions, to the extent possible. An extended project area will facilitate our goal to restore the tallgrass prairie ecosystem at Midewin to conserve and enhance native populations of fish, wildlife, and plants in accordance with the Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1996. To improve floodplain and habitat conditions, the original project included the removal of obsolete roads, rail beds, several bunkers, and other Army infrastructure on the floodplain that limit the storage and movement of floodwaters.

The table below provides an estimate of acres for the native vegetative communities we propose to restore for the extended part of the project area based on the characteristics of existing soils.

Native Vegetative Communities	Acres Historically	Existing Acres of Native Community	Acres Expected to be Restored
Dolomite Prairie (wet and mesic)	-	-	-
Wetland Habitat (seeps, marsh, sedge meadow, wet prairie)	62	5	20-60
Upland Typic Prairie	52	-	40-80
Woodland/Forest/Savanna	31	-	20-30

Proposed Action: Implement the actions in my Decision Notice of September 9, 2003 to an added 145-acre area. Project goals include: 1) implementing integrated watershed restoration to restore and optimize hydrological, aquatic, and soil conditions for ecological values, 2) restoring habitat and ecosystems, and 3) improving scenic integrity. The project activities authorized include:

- Improving hydrological interactions between Grant Creek and Prairie Creek and their floodplains and associated wetlands; stabilizing stream banks with appropriate native plant species; filling unneeded ditches; locating and removing drain tiles; and removing old roads, culverts, fire hydrants, rail beds and ballast, and several bunkers.
- Implementing an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach to control exotic grasses and herbaceous cover, including mechanical treatments, prescribed fire, herbicide treatments, and competition by native plants.

- Cutting woody vegetation with hand tools and removing (burning or chipping); removing undesired understory components of Grant Creek and Prairie Creek riparian corridor woodlands; treating cut tree stumps with herbicides to prevent re-sprouting.
- Monitoring to determine management results prior to enhancing native vegetation remnants or planting appropriate native species to restore wetland, prairie, and savanna.
- Protecting and enhancing existing native vegetation remnants.
- Utilizing prescribed burning, mowing, and possibly grazing after the initial invasive species control actions to manage the restored wetland, prairie, and savanna.

The same activities that were proposed and the same effects that were analyzed for the selected alternative of the EA for Middle Grant Creek are now being proposed for the extended project area. For instance, fire hydrants within the extended project area are all on the same hydrant lines and are pumped by the same pumping station. For efficiency and cost effectiveness, it makes sense to remove all the hydrants and plug all the lines between Grant and Prairie Creeks at the same time.



Public Involvement Requested: With this letter, we are initiating the procedures required of the Forest Service by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). You have been contacted as part of the public involvement process, and your comments will help us to complete the legally required NEPA documentation for this project.

1. Is there any information about the project area that you believe is important in the context of the proposed activities and which 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 which you believe are important and would like to have addressed during the NEPA process? If so, please include your rationale for why they should be analyzed.

We will review and consider comments during this public input period. As the Prairie Supervisor, I will be the deciding official for this project. At this time, I do not believe that the proposed 145-acre extension of the Middle Grant Creek restoration area will have a significant impact on the environment based on the analysis completed for the current project area located immediately north. However, we will analyze the effects of the proposed activities on the biological, cultural, and socio-economic environment, including water, air, soils, sensitive species, federally threatened and endangered species, hazardous materials, recreation, and heritage resources in order to make a final determination.

In accordance with Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215, this information is being made available to the public for a 30-day comment period prior to my decision on whether or not to proceed with the proposed action. In order to be considered, comments must be substantive, or specific to the actions that are proposed. Please be sure to include your name, address, organization represented, and title. Each individual or representative of a group or organization that submits comments must sign or provide for verification of identity. Please include the title of the document you are commenting on and specific facts and supporting reasons regarding your comments for me to consider.

The opportunity to comment ends 30 calendar days following the date of publication of a legal notice in the Herald News. The expected publication date is on or about May 6, 2005. The publication date in the Herald News is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period. Because the regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period, no comments will be accepted after the 30-day comment period ends.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted. Written comments must be submitted to Logan Lee, Prairie Supervisor, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30239 South State Route 53, Wilmington, IL, 60481. Hand-delivered comments will be accepted at the address above during regular office hours, from 8 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Saturday until Memorial Day weekend, when Midewin will be open seven days a week, starting May 29, 2005. Oral comments may be provided at the Midewin Supervisor's Office during normal business hours via telephone (815) 423-6370 or in person. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to ***comments-eastern-midewin@fs.fed.us***.

The Environmental Assessment (October 2002) and Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (September 2003) for the Middle Grant Creek restoration project may be reviewed under *Current Projects* at Midewin's website: ***www.fs.fed.us/mntp/***.

Copies of my decision will be mailed to those submitting comments and to those who request copies. If you have any questions about the proposed action or the purpose and need, please feel

free to contact Enid Erickson, NEPA Specialist, at the address above, by email at *erickson@fs.fed.us*, or by phone at (815) 423-6370. Thank you for your interest in activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely,



LOGAN LEE,
Prairie Supervisor



Proposed Middle Grant Creek Project Area Extension

