

**Decision Notice  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for  
Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola Tract Restoration Projects**

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

**Introduction**

This project fulfills the need to restore tallgrass prairie habitat at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin). These management activities comply with direction outlined in Midewin's Land and Resource Management Plan and the Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995 (Midewin's establishing legislation).

**Decision**

After consideration of the environmental effects analyzed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola Tract Restoration Projects, I have decided to implement Alternative 1. This decision will allow the restoration projects to proceed in order to restore appropriate tallgrass prairie habitat at these sites.

The two project areas selected for restoration total approximately 114 acres of the approximate 15,189-acre Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, fifteen miles south of Joliet and just north of Wilmington, Illinois. Please see the site-specific attached map for the locations planned for restoration under this EA.

Restoration activities will involve removing drain tiles and woody vegetation, restoring native vegetation, and controlling invasive plant species and noxious weeds (non-native or exotic) with mechanical methods and prescribed fire. Phased implementation will occur over several years as funds permit, and monitoring of results will indicate actions necessary for adaptive management and maintenance of the restored tracts.

My decision takes into account project objectives designed to conserve and enhance native vegetation and wildlife, improve or provide potential habitat for Regional Forester sensitive species and state-listed species, and control exotic and invasive plant species through restoration of appropriate vegetation, including wetland, prairie (upland and wet prairie types), and savanna vegetation. Long-term management will include supplemental seeding and planting, prescribed burning, and mowing. Selective application of herbicides is not being considered as part of this EA, as herbicide use is

being assessed separately. A decision will be made on herbicide use at Midewin, including the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts, once that EA has been completed and public comments considered.

### **Rationale for the Decision**

In making this decision, I considered the direction and intent of the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act (ICLA) and the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan) to promote the purposes for which Midewin was established. The activities outlined in this EA are consistent with the Prairie Plan Goals and Objectives for restoring tallgrass prairie habitat and conform to all action alternatives in the Plan.

Alternative 1 meets the project objectives of restoring approximately 114 acres of agricultural land and adjacent successional land to native prairie (both upland and wet prairie types), wetland, and savanna vegetation. To meet these objectives, invasive species and noxious weeds will be controlled by means of various Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. Surviving populations of native plants will be protected and enhanced (EA p. 10-11).

### **Other Alternatives That Were Considered**

#### **Alternative 2 (No Action)**

I did not select this alternative, which would leave the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts in their current conditions of woody vegetation and exotic and weedy plant encroachment. The enabling legislation for Midewin envisioned restoration of a tallgrass prairie rather than preservation of invasive and exotic plant species. By leaving the two sites in their current conditions, the No Action Alternative would promote their continued deterioration, thereby precluding the effective restoration of a tallgrass prairie environment.

Few to no immediate effects on soil, water quality, air quality, heritage resources, scenic quality, or hazardous materials would result under the No Action Alternative (EA, p. 14-15) at the two sites. However, over time, non-management and isolation of small native vegetation remnants would affect the quality of the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola sites through a lack of appropriate habitat to promote the species richness and viability required for restoration success. Habitat available for wetland and grassland species would decrease significantly over time, and woody encroachment would increase habitat for already abundant edge species, such as white-tailed deer and raccoons.

For Management Indicators (MIS) and special status species, restoration of upland typical prairie, wet typical prairie, and sedge meadow in the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts would not be possible, and encroachment by non-native plants would continue (EA, p. 43-44). Impacts to and/or decreases in five sensitive species would be likely under the No Action Alternative for: upland sandpipers, northern harriers, bobolinks, migrant loggerhead shrikes, and plains leopard frogs.

Although recreational access is not currently planned for these restoration sites, both project areas are situated along State Highway 53 and are visible from passing

automobiles. Selection of the No Action Alternative would preclude opportunities to enhance these viewsheds and improve the scenic quality along the highway. Also, future opportunities to interpret these restoration projects for visitors to Midewin would not be possible.

### **Public Involvement**

Public participation in this project and decision was first invited in an April 19, 2000 scoping notice sent to approximately 400 individuals and organizations. On March 27, 2002, a letter requesting comments on the Environmental Assessment (EA) was made available to the public and interested parties. Hard copies of the EA were mailed to approximately 40 persons and organizations. Information on the proposed restoration projects at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts was published in the Midewin Quarterly issues for July-September 2000, October-December 2000, Spring 2001, Summer 2001, Fall 2001, and Winter 2002.

### **Mitigation Measures**

The Environmental Assessment (p.16-18) outlines mitigation and monitoring measures that are in accordance with the Prairie Plan and that will be implemented as part of this decision. We have effectively used many of these mitigation measures in the past to reduce or eliminate adverse effects on different resources. We anticipate continued effectiveness of the mitigation measures for protection of the resources listed below.

- Sensitive, Threatened, and Endangered Species
  - Manually removing woody vegetation during the dormant winter season;
  - Removing woody plant stands outside the bird breeding season;
  - Avoiding adverse impacts on nesting birds during mowing and prescribed burning activities;
  - Surveying for nesting northern harriers and other ground-nesting birds to avoid impacts if prescribed burns are conducted after March 15;
  - Assuring that naturally-occurring special status species populations will not be affected prior to introducing new populations of species;
  - Evaluating restored habitats for their potential to support additional special status species prior to conducting species-specific restoration work.
- Heritage Resources
  - Avoiding any known heritage sites during project activities;
  - Stopping work in the vicinity of the find if previously undetected heritage resources are discovered during the course of restoration work;
  - Contacting the Forest Service archaeologist for an assessment of the situation should new heritage sites be located during project activities.
- Soils
  - Avoiding wet soils when operating vehicles;
  - Avoiding disturbance of wet or compacted soils;
  - Using fill material of native origin and local source for ditches;
  - Riding heavy equipment on pads or wide-area (low pressure) tires over hydric soils when wet to lessen surface compaction;

- Confining heavy equipment to designated work areas and travel routes located primarily in areas slated for disturbance by restoration work;
- Eliminating deep compaction by post-work plowing in areas of excavation or heavy machinery traffic;
- Deep-plowing old roads, rail beds, and past building sites to prevent field compaction;
- Removing and replacing topsoil over any drain tile excavations.
- Hydrology
  - Disabling tiles through removing sections at intervals along tile lengths, depending on slope, tile diameter, and length;
  - Digging up and removing or crushing in place tile sections planned for removal;
  - Backfilling trenches with native material;
  - Planting appropriate vegetation on barren surfaces to control erosion.
- Air Quality
  - Burning woody debris as an alternative to chipping or cutting and removing;
  - Conducting burns at the Mola tract when winds are blowing easterly;
  - Conducting burns at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road tract when winds are blowing westerly and northwesterly to keep smoke away from State Highway 53 and Hoff Road;
  - Conducting prescribed burns during stable weather systems;
  - Conducting burns on days when there is no eminent risk that regional ozone concentrations will exceed air quality standards;
  - Conducting burns when conditions do not cause smoke problems for State Highway 53, Hoff Road, or the railway corridor;
  - Executing burns pursuant to approved site-specific burn plans and applicable state and county permits;
  - Warning local area residents about smoke from prescribed burns;
  - Posting notices on area highways to inform motorists of burning activities.
- Scenic Quality
  - Regrading areas to blend with and mimic the natural topography;
  - Planting for restoration in a random, natural form that resembles nature;
  - Feathering edges of removed woody plant stands, where not completely removed, to mimic natural conditions;
  - Removing tree stumps to within four inches of the ground;
  - Sloping stumps away from the primary line of sight within 100 yards of State Highway 53 and Hoff Road.

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

Based on the interdisciplinary environmental analysis, review of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) criteria for significant effects, and knowledge of the expected impacts, I have determined that this action does not pose a significant effect upon the quality of the human environment and is not a major Federal action. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not indicated for the restoration projects at the

Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts within Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. This determination is based on the following factors:

**Context:**

Alternative 1 is within the context of the 1995 Illinois Land Conservation Act, Midewin's establishing legislation (PL 104-106), to manage Midewin as part of the National Forest System under direction unique and specific to the management needs of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie ecosystem. Restoration activities are also consistent with Midewin's Land and Resource Management Plan, which guides all resource management activities and sets programmatic direction for managing the land and resources of Midewin.

**Intensity:**

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

1. In reaching my conclusion of no significant impact, I recognize that these restoration projects may have some impact on the land. However, there are no significant effects, either individually or cumulatively, which would preclude implementation of restoration activities in the Grant Creek/Hoff Road or Mola sites designated for restoration. Negative effects to soils are limited to minor soil cover reduction and temporary heating from prescribed burning, compaction from the use of equipment during restoration work, and soil re-disturbance from activities such as road, rail bed, and drain tile removal. Short-term adverse effects on water quality could occur following prescribed burns, with the threat of heavy rainstorms transporting sediments into surface waters. Some ponding effects are possible with the removal of drain tiles. Negative effects to edge species will occur, although edge species are common at Midewin; the impact would be minimal.
2. This action does not pose a substantial question of significant effect upon public health and safety. No concerns were raised, either by individuals or organizations, about public health and safety during the public scoping process or during the 30-day public review period for the EA.
3. 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. This project will not impact ecologically sensitive areas. Wetlands and floodplains will not be adversely affected.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not expected to be highly controversial. I believe we have addressed the known significant biological, social, and economical 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 consulted about the conclusions and effects identified in this analysis.

5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.
6. No precedents are established as a result of the decision being made. Restoration activities are specific to 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 actions currently proposed.
7. There are no known cumulative adverse effects associated with restoration activities when added to other past or reasonably foreseeable future actions implemented or planned within the project areas.
8. The two project sites have been extensively disturbed and used for agricultural purposes in the past. The Forest Service archaeologist has reviewed and compiled information, and determined that heritage resources will not be impacted.
9. The Biological Evaluation prepared for this project, which is available to the public at our office, found that there would be no adverse effects to Federally endangered or threatened species within the proposed project areas (EA, p. 49).
10. The actions in the decision do not violate Federal, state, or local laws or regulations imposed for the protection of the environment (EA, p. 64).

#### **Findings Required By Other Laws**

Restoration projects at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie are consistent with the Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and all other applicable laws, regulations, and Forest Service direction.

#### **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 Enid Erickson, NEPA Coordinator, at the Midewin office or at (815) 423-6370.

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FRANK KOENIG, Prairie Supervisor

May 1, 2002  
Date

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**Appendix A:**

**AGENCY RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS CONCERNING  
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

## **Agency Response to Public Comments Concerning Environmental Assessment**

Below are agency responses to the public comments received during the comment period of the Environmental Assessment on restoration activities at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts. Letters received are available for review at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) office.

### **Comment 1 (email letter from Vicki Gerberich, Forest Preserve District, Will County):**

Supports restoration as “conducive with the overall management goals and objectives for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.” Staff of the District “recognizes the need to restore the sites in question and supports Midewin in its efforts to complete the projects.”

### **Forest Service Response to Comment 1:**

Thank you for your support of these restoration projects as integral components of Midewin’s overall management and restoration goals.

### **Comment 2 (email letter from Geoffrey Levin, Ph.D., IL Natural History Survey):**

EA addresses “all issues associated with the proposed restoration activities.” Supports restoration of habitat at Midewin through selection of the Action Alternative, which is “completely consistent with purposes of Midewin and the Prairie Plan and EIS.” The only concern is that reputable contractors be selected and that close monitoring of their work be undertaken to assure adherence to project specifications.

### **Forest Service Response to Comment 2:**

Thank you for your support of the proposed restoration projects at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts. In order to assure that quality restoration work is performed at Midewin, whether through contracting or using our own staff to complete the needed activities, we will carefully monitor project work at all phases on a regular basis.

### **Comment 3 (email from Marianne Hahn, Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Alliance):**

Supports restoration of the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola tracts and agrees that the EA adequately addresses the issues identified in the document pertaining to restoration work at the two sites.

### **Forest Service Response to Comment 3:**

We appreciate your support of our proposal to restore habitat at the two sites and agreement that the issues were addressed adequately.

**Comment 4 (letter from John Rogner, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service):**

Supports habitat restoration actions at the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola sites, which are consistent with “similar practices used by other natural resource management agencies in our region, and with the conservation and restoration purposes of MNTP, as listed in the Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995. We believe that restoration of these two sites will be an important and beneficial step in the long-term, landscape-scale restoration planned for MNTP as a whole.”

**Forest Service Response to Comment 4:**

Thank you for your comments on, and support of, the restoration projects proposed for the Grant Creek/Hoff Road and Mola sites on Midewin.