

## **6. ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE**

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require that the Record of Decision specify “the alternative or alternatives which were considered to be environmentally preferable” (40 C.F.R. §1505.2(b)). The environmentally preferred alternative has been interpreted to be the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in the NEPA Section 101 (CEQ’s *Forty Most-Asked Questions*, 46 *Federal Register*, 18026, March 23, 1981). Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources.

Alternatives 4 and 6 of the Final EIS, which are described above, are the environmentally preferable alternatives.

Alternative 4 with both a large grassland habitat component and an extensive upland prairie restoration component, provides the greatest protection for the diverse set of sensitive plant and animal species at Midewin, including those that depend on grassland habitat and those that depend on native upland or wet prairie habitat. Alternative 6 allows the least amount of human-induced effects on the biological and physical environment, as it has the least amount of capital investment, i.e., trails, roads, and recreational facility development. However, Alternative 6 provides only for minimal grassland bird habitat while it maximizes restored native upland prairie habitat.

Alternative 2 through 6 equally protect, preserve, and enhance historic, cultural, and natural resources at Midewin.

## **7. THE DECISION**

I have selected Alternative 4, as described in the Final EIS for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. The Prairie Plan describes in detail the goals and objectives, management requirements or standards and guidelines, management area direction, and monitoring and evaluation requirements for Alternative 4.

The primary decisions I am making are:

**7.1.** Establishment of multiple-use goals and objectives [36 C.F.R. §219.11(b)];

**7.2.** Establishment of management requirements (standards or guidelines) [36 C.F.R. §219.13 to §219.27];

- 7.3. Establishment of management area direction [36 C.F.R. §219.11(c)]; and
- 7.4. Monitoring and evaluation requirements [36 C.F.R. §219.11(d)].

By this decision, I am confirming the determination made in the Final EIS that these prairie lands with a record of negligible forest vegetation cover at Midewin are not considered forest land, pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §219.3 (at least 10% occupied by forest trees or formerly having such tree cover) and therefore are “not identified as suited for timber production” per 36 C.F.R. §219.14(a)(1) and §219.14(d). I am also making no recommendations for additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System or designating any potential area for wild and scenic rivers, due to the highly altered condition of lands and streams at Midewin resulting from its former use as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant.

As provided in 36 C.F.R. §219.10(g), this decision will remain in effect until the Prairie Plan is revised or amended. This ROD documents the decisions I am making for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

This Land and Resource Management Plan and Final EIS are programmatic and represent a management strategy for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. The Prairie Plan will guide restoration and natural resource management practices at Midewin as well as recreation development. Management direction in the Prairie Plan Standards and Guidelines will be used to work toward attainment of the desired future condition of each Management Prescription, as described in Chapter 2 of the Prairie Plan. The Prairie Plan Management Area map displays the location of the management areas.

This decision narrows the scope of future environmental analyses. Future environmental analyses and documents will tier to the Prairie Plan direction and the Final EIS. The Prairie Plan and Final EIS are treated as companion documents for purposes of NEPA disclosure and later tiering. The Prairie Plan does not include site-specific decisions. Rather, it provides overall guidance and establishes management direction to govern future actions. The flexibility and adaptability of this Plan to changing conditions are important factors in my decision. We will amend this Plan as circumstances warrant.

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is important nationally, regionally, and locally. The Prairie Plan I have adopted will perpetuate the special features of the area and provide future opportunities for people to enjoy the restored prairie. My decisions also ensure that the prairie ecosystems are maintained or restored to a healthier, more vital condition.

## **8. REASONS FOR THE DECISION**

I have selected Alternative 4 because the strategic guidance it establishes best matches the direction I believe needs to be taken on the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. I did not pick an alternative that maximized or minimized any particular element because I think it is important to strike a balance between the priorities discussed below. However, the most important part of my decision was ensuring the short-term habitat needs for sensitive plants and animals and the long-term sustainability of the ecosystem for future generations.

Public comments received during the 120-day comment period generally supported Alternative 4 as the alternative that provides for the widest diversity of restoration, recreation and visitor services, while still protecting the sensitive environmental features and meeting the goals set forth by the Illinois Land Conservation Act.

### **8.1. Response to Issues**

The Final EIS pages 1-7 through 1-13 identified the following significant issues:

1. Providing for human health and safety.
2. Managing habitat for sensitive species.
3. Grassland bird habitat requirements.
4. Contributions to biodiversity in the Chicagoland region.
5. Recreation opportunities.
6. Bison and elk re-introduction.
7. Environmental education and research.

However, the alternatives do not vary greatly in their responses to three of the significant issues. There was no difference in how the alternatives address Issue 1-Health and human safety. This issue is treated the same for each alternative, safety is the top priority. All alternatives provide equally for education and research programs, Issue 7. Issue 6 - Bison and elk re-introduction, was determined to be “an action not ready for a decision at this time” (Final EIS 1-7 and 1-12). It was not necessary to use these issues as decision criteria. A summary comparison of the alternatives in Chapter 2 of the Final EIS provides a more complete description of the alternatives and how they address each issue.

Addressing Issue 2 - Managing habitat for sensitive species, all action alternatives provide adequate habitat for sensitive species. Although there are differences in acreages for proposed habitat for these sensitive species, all alternatives have minimum management requirements to provide sufficient habitat to maintain viable populations of sensitive species per 36 C.F.R. §219.19 and related NFMA regulations.

The primary decision criteria discussed below links the significant issues of Issue 3 - Grassland bird habitat requirements, with Issue 4 - Contributions to biodiversity in the region. The secondary decision criteria addresses how each alternative responds to Issue 5 - Recreation opportunities.

## **8.2. Primary Decision Criteria**

The primary decision criteria were the extent to which the alternatives achieve a balance between conserving grassland dependent birds and restoring upland prairie communities to make a significant contribution to biodiversity at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, and at multiple scales including local, regional, and national.

The upland sandpiper is listed as an Illinois State Endangered Species and Regional Forester Sensitive Species. Midewin hosts the largest breeding population of upland sandpipers in the State, and they are currently found nesting only in large open pastures or grasslands of non-native grasses maintained at short heights by livestock grazing. It is not certain whether upland sandpipers will adapt to and maintain viable populations in restored upland prairie habitat.

The bobolink is on the Illinois State Watch List and is a Regional Forester Sensitive Species. Midewin also hosts the largest breeding population of bobolinks found in the state. Bobolink populations in Illinois have declined over 90% in the past 30 years due to habitat destruction. Bobolinks are currently found nesting and breeding in hay fields or grasslands of medium height at Midewin.

These two sensitive bird species have distinctly different habitat needs of grassland conditions. Yet they will both benefit from continuing to maintain existing non-native grasslands at Midewin. Other restoration needs that conflict with the habitat needs of these two sensitive bird species include the restoration of large areas of grasslands and agricultural lands to native upland prairie and wet prairie, and restoration of grasslands to rare dolomite prairie habitat for a number of sensitive plant species.

Midewin is ideally suited for native prairie ecosystem restoration and there is public expectation that the Forest Service will manage the prairie to:

- Create large unfragmented or contiguous tracts of restored prairie and grasslands.
- Restore natural disturbance processes such as fire and grazing by large animals needed to sustain the ecosystem.
- Restore watersheds and water bodies, including streams, marshes and their riparian areas, and connected uplands in order to improve water quality, water quantity, aquatic habitat, and the connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

- Control and manage invasive species.
- Provide unique educational, research, and recreational opportunities in a restored tallgrass or upland prairie setting that are consistent with the ecological goals of Midewin.

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was established with the primary purpose of managing the resources to conserve and enhance native populations of fish, wildlife, and plants. The legislative purpose of Midewin relates to the first goal of the Forest Service National Strategic Plan 2000, Ecosystem Health, and its objectives to sustain viable populations of native and desired nonnative species, and to achieve objectives for Management Indicator Species. The Final EIS addresses population viability in Appendix A, and Management Indicators in Chapter 3.

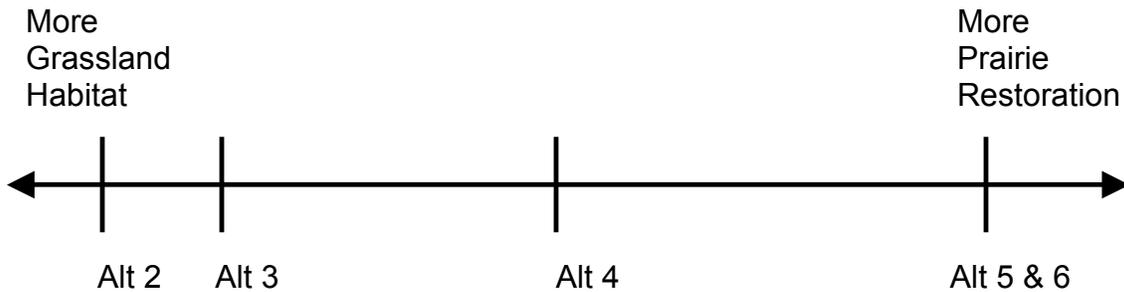
Midewin has an opportunity to make significant contributions to biological diversity at local, regional, and even national scales due to its size, continuity, historical land use, natural landscape features, and geographic location. The Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan, 1999, refers to the unique opportunity to protect upland sandpiper, bobolink, loggerhead shrike and other grassland birds that are “area-dependent” or require large open grasslands: “The region is fortunate to have a very large protected site for grasslands at Midewin. Efforts to manage and restore the most area-dependent species should focus on this site.”

Because biodiversity is so important in the enabling legislation, the selected alternative will provide the greatest contribution to biodiversity through a careful combination of restoration of native upland prairie habitat for sensitive plants and animals, including Hill’s thistle, earleaf foxglove, Henslow’s sparrow and northern harrier, and continued management of non-native grassland habitat for bird species dependent on grasslands of short and medium height or structure. At Midewin, the Forest Service needs to strike a balance in determining management goals and allocating lands for native tallgrass or upland prairie restoration and for grassland bird populations of regional significance.

#### **8.2.1. Reasons for Selecting Alternative 4**

I have selected Alternative 4, because it provides the best balance between conserving grassland dependent birds and restoring upland prairie communities to make a significant contribution to biodiversity at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. (See Figure 7 - Relative Comparison of Restoration Activities and Figure 8 – Comparison of Alternatives, Proposed Habitat Restoration).

**Figure 7. Relative Comparison of Restoration Activities**



Alternatives 2 and 3 have the greatest potential for sustaining populations of the sensitive birds including the loggerhead shrike, bobolink, and upland sandpiper that require short and medium stature grasslands. Alternative 2 provides 61% of Midewin as proposed grassland bird habitat for sensitive bird species. Alternative 3 provides 54% and Alternative 4 provides 39% of Midewin in grassland, which is considered adequate suitable habitat to sustain populations of upland sandpiper, bobolink, and loggerhead shrike.

Alternatives 5 and 6 provide the largest area for those sensitive birds such as Henslow's sparrow and northern harrier which require taller grasses that can be found in upland prairie. Alternative 4 provides 55% of Midewin as upland prairie and wet prairie/sedge meadow, adequate suitable habitat to sustain populations of Henslow's sparrow and northern harrier (Final EIS 2-30).

Although several alternatives optimize habitat for one or two groups of bird species, Alternative 4 offers sufficient habitat conditions for all three groups (short grassland, medium grassland, and taller upland prairie grasses) of sensitive grassland birds. With a balanced mix of habitat types, Alternative 4 provides adequate suitable habitat to sustain populations of upland sandpiper, bobolink, loggerhead shrike, Henslow's sparrow, and northern harrier (Final EIS 2-30).

**Figure 8 – Comparison of Alternatives:**

**Proposed Habitat Restoration**

(Percent of Total Midewin Land Area)

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4 <sup>1</sup> :	Alternative 5	Alternative 6
Wet Prairie/Sedge Meadow	10	20	23	30	34	34
Upland Prairie <sup>2</sup> :	3	13	17	25	37	37
Savanna	1	3	3	3	3	3
Woodland	1	3	3	3	3	3
Grassland <sup>3</sup> :	17	61	54	39	23	23
Cropland/Other	69	0	0	0	0	0

Note 1: Alternative 4 is the selected alternative.

Note 2: Sensitive plant species Hill’s Thistle and earleaf foxglove and sensitive bird species Henslow’s sparrow and northern harrier use the upland prairie habitat.

Note 3: Sensitive bird species loggerhead shrike, bobolink, and upland sandpiper use the grassland habitat.

I have selected Alternative 4, as it provides large unfragmented or connected habitat areas (Final EIS 2-30). Alternative 4 also makes a contribution to the maintenance of species diversity, viable populations for plant and animal species, and the associated interactions of the prairie ecosystem (Final EIS 2-30). Additionally, Alternative 4 provides an opportunity to effectively control and manage invasive species (Final EIS 3-214).

**8.2.2. Reasons Other Alternatives Were Not Selected**

Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative has the least amount of improved habitat for grassland birds or species dependent on restored native prairie habitat, 17% and 3% respectively (Final EIS 2-29). Alternative 2 provides 61% of Midewin as proposed grassland bird habitat for sensitive bird species, but only provides for minimal restored native prairie habitat important for some sensitive plants (13%). Alternatives 5 and 6 provide the largest amount of restored upland prairie (Final EIS 2-29) and a relatively small amount of grassland bird habitat (23%), making the long run viability of these sensitive birds species less certain.

Alternative 3 provides a greater amount of restored upland prairie (17%) and wet prairie/sedge meadow (23%) important for sensitive plant species found in dolomite prairie and other wet habitats, than Alternative 2 with 13% and 20% respectively, and provides for sufficient grassland bird habitat. However, Alternative 3 has the greatest potential for disturbance and habitat fragmentation given the extensive proposed trail system and recreational uses (Final EIS 2-29).

### **8.3. Second Decision Criteria**

The second decision criteria is the extent to which the selected alternative provides outdoor recreation experiences consistent with the conservation of native species and habitats.

Another legislative mandate for Midewin is to provide a variety of recreation opportunities that are consistent with Midewin's other purposes. This is in alignment with the second goal of the National Strategic Plan 2000, which includes the following objectives:

- Provide a variety of uses, values, products, and services for present and future generations.
- Manage within the capability of sustainable ecosystems.
- Provide diverse, high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Be accessible to a diversity of people, especially in urban communities.

The growth of the Chicago metropolitan area and Will County, the fastest growing county in the Chicago region, bring an increased demand for open space for outdoor recreation use. Local, state, county and other federal lands (Joliet Army Training Area) provide, or will in future years provide, a number of recreation opportunities in the same general area. However, the public will also benefit if Midewin can provide some unique recreation opportunities that cannot be provided elsewhere.

There is substantial public interest and increasing expectation to gain access to the former Joliet Arsenal because it is a large tract of federal land that has been closed to the general public for over 50 years. Hunting for white-tailed deer and other species is a popular recreational activity in rural Will County, as are hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding. Bird watching is also a popular recreational activity.

Currently, recreational use at Midewin is limited to deer hunting, escorted tours, and two short hiking trails. Further recreational use could occur only after cleanup operations are completed and recreation facilities are developed. As the largest single block of public land reserved for open space in the Chicago metropolitan region, Midewin has the potential to provide a mix of outdoor recreational opportunities that provide a sense of vastness and solitude not found on other nearby public lands. In order to be consistent with the conservation of native wildlife, fish, and plants, recreational activities must be limited to controlled non-motorized use. Recreational users must be required to stay on developed trails and trail density and use must be kept to a relatively low density in order to reduce impacts on the surrounding environment.

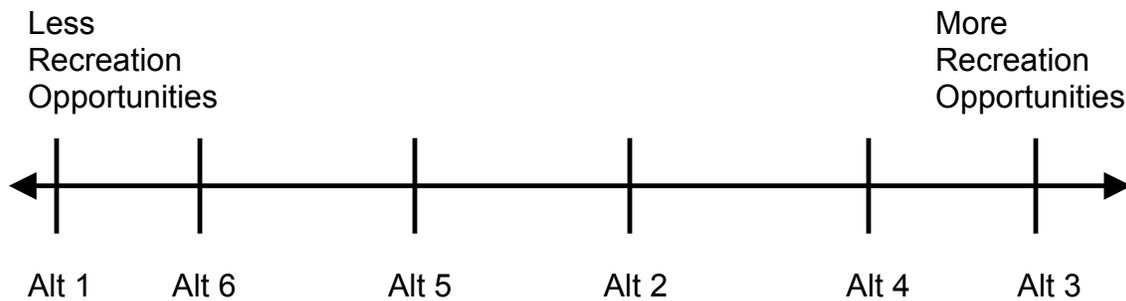
Before Midewin is fully opened to the public to safely experience recreational activities in a restored prairie setting, significant investments will need to be

phased in during the planning period. Public safety is our primary concern, and the first priority will be to safely dispose of hazardous waste materials and remove numerous unsafe buildings, structures, and facilities remaining from the Joliet arsenal. Our second priority will be to initiate habitat restoration projects across the prairie, which will also provide the unique and attractive setting for visitors to enjoy. Thirdly, the Forest Service will need to make major investments in recreational facilities, as only two short hiking trails currently exist to accommodate visitors.

### 8.3.1. Reasons for Selecting Alternative 4

Over the past six years, the public has expressed interest in a variety of recreational opportunities that may be provided at Midewin. It is expected that demand for recreation on public lands will increase. I have selected Alternative 4 because it offers the greatest diversity of recreational opportunities that are compatible with the ecological goals of Midewin (Final EIS 3-244). (See Figure 9 below for a relative comparison of recreation activities by alternative).

**Figure 9. Relative Comparison of Recreation Activities**



**Figure 10 – Comparison of Alternatives:**

**Diversity of Recreational Activities**

Activity	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4 <sup>1.</sup>	Alt. 5	Alt. 6
Visitor Center/ Environmental Learning Center <sup>3.</sup>	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Hiking only (miles) <sup>3.</sup>	3	37	40	20	30	12
Multi-use trail - bicycle, equestrian and hiking (miles) <sup>3.</sup>	0	0	19	17	23	15
Bicycling and Hiking (miles) <sup>3.</sup>	0	35	20	6	# <sup>4.</sup>	# <sup>4.</sup>
Horse back riding and Hiking (miles) <sup>3.</sup>	0	0	11	5	# <sup>4.</sup>	# <sup>4.</sup>
Shuttle (guided tour)	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Auto Loop (self guided tour) <sup>2.</sup>	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
Developed Camping (family) <sup>2.</sup>	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
Group Camping <sup>3.</sup>	no	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Dispersed Camping <sup>3.</sup>	no	no	yes	yes	yes	no
Picnic Area	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Wildlife/ Nature Viewing	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Hunting (seasonal)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Total types of activities</b>	2	10	12	11	8	4
<b>Compatibility of activities</b>	2	8	10	11	8	4

Note 1: Alternative 4 is the selected alternative.

Note 2: The following recreational activities are considered not compatible with the ecological goals of Midewin: Auto Loop (self tour) and Developed Camping (family).

Note 3: The following recreational activities fill Midewin’s niche by providing opportunities for interpretive and educational programs and backcountry experiences in a restored prairie setting: visitor center/environmental learning center, trail system, group camping site, and dispersed camping sites.

Note 4: Available on shared multi-use trails; but not included in diversity calculation..

Alternative 4 reduces the potential for user conflict by prescribing a system of trail types for different users and spreading visitors over a large area with eight access points (Final EIS, 3-245). The visitor center/environmental learning center, trail system, group camping site, and dispersed camping sites proposed in Alternative 4 best fulfill Midewin’s unique niche for outdoor recreation by providing opportunities for interpretive and educational programs and backcountry experiences in a restored prairie setting.

### **8.3.2. Reasons Other Alternatives Were Not Selected**

With minimal recreation development, Alternatives 1 and 6 would provide few opportunities for outdoor recreation and would not meet expected future demand for this type of use. Alternative 2 was not selected as it has no equestrian trails proposed and would not meet demand for this type of use. Alternatives 2 and 3 both offer a auto loop and developed family camping site, but these uses are not considered compatible to the ecological goals of Midewin. Alternative 3 offers a spread of recreational opportunities similar to that of Alternative 4, but its environmental impacts are greater. Alternative 3 has the longest trail length and widest distribution of trails available for equestrian use and thus has the highest potential for spreading invasive plant species associated with this use, has more habitat fragmenting features, and disturbance effects (Final EIS 3-214). Alternatives 5 and 6 do not offer separate equestrian trails and have equestrian and bicycle use together on the same trails, thus the potential for user conflict is higher.

## **9. OTHER FACTORS CONSIDERED IN THIS DECISION**

In addition to the decision criteria described above, my decision to select Alternative 4 was reached after a comprehensive review of the relevant environmental, social, and economic consequences of the Final EIS alternatives, and is based on a number of factors include the following:

- 9.1.** All action alternatives fully provide protection of the fundamental resources of soil, air, and water (Final EIS 2-3).
- 9.2.** Midewin has the unique opportunity to serve a diversity of local and regional demands for outdoor recreation and environmental education in a restored prairie setting. Alternative 4 offers a visitor center/environmental learning center, a system of trails, a shuttle route, and both group and dispersed camping to serve the people who will come to Midewin to learn about and enjoy the restored prairie (Final EIS 3-244).
- 9.3.** The Prairie Plan alternatives all have a relatively minor direct or indirect role in the economic activity of Will County and the Prairie Plan is not likely to affect associated social communities and lifestyles in a significant manner (Final EIS 3-265).
- 9.4.** The role of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in the ecology of the greater Central Till Plains Section and lower Des Plaines River valley is significant as Midewin can become the most important area for preservation of dolomite prairie (Final EIS 3-121, 3-123) and for many sensitive plant

species found on prairie habitat within the Central Till Plains Section (Final EIS 3-131).

**9.5.** Biological processes, including the protection of threatened, endangered, or sensitive plant and animal species; natural processes, including disturbance from fire and grazing; the importance of riparian areas and human activities and how they influence ecosystems, habitat capability, connectivity, and fragmentation were important considerations (Final EIS 2-11, 2-12, 3-17, 3-22). Alternative 4 provides significant amounts of restored native vegetation, protects native vegetation remnants, and reduces potential impacts from recreation development (Final EIS 3-70).

**9.6.** The plans and policies of adjacent landowners and other government agencies (private, corporate, local, state, and national) were considered in shaping the alternatives (Prairie Plan 1-3), and analyzing the cumulative effects (Final EIS 3-65, 3-236, 3-247, 3-252), and the Prairie Plan was crafted to be compatible with these plans and policies.

**9.7.** The process to determine population viability assessments for Regional Forester Sensitive Species at Midewin contributed to my selection of Alternative 4. Two expert panels were convened. The first panel was held in 1999 to review and provide additional information for conservation assessments for the sensitive species. The second expert panel of biological scientists met in November 2000, and identified likely future conditions for populations of these species at Midewin under each of the six plan alternatives. Each scientist independently rated the likely outcome for the sensitive species based on environmental conditions at Midewin and in the wider Central Till Plains Section (Final EIS Appendix A-3). Expert judgments were collected using a structured process to describe population abundance and distribution. Based on the expert panel ratings and opinions of the biologists at Midewin, Alternative 4 offers the best mix of suitable habitats to provide for viable populations of all sensitive species at Midewin (Final EIS Appendix A-14).

I have considered all of these factors in the decision-making process.

## **10. COMPATIBILITY WITH PLANS OF OTHERS**

Careful consideration has been given to other federal, state, county, and local plans to prevent conflicts and unnecessary duplication of effort, as well as to seek new partners and cooperative efforts. The Midewin Prairie Plan and Final EIS are the result of extensive consultation with federal, state, and local agencies. Contacts were made with federal, state, county and other organizations beginning in 1996 as part of the initial identification and scoping of issues, concerns, and opportunities. Contacts continued throughout the planning

process. This provided early insight that our actions and plans were compatible with the plans of others. Principal agencies involved are the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Natural History Survey, and the Forest Preserve District of Will County. Plans of these agencies and other organizations were reviewed and used in developing the Prairie Plan. Below is a summary of activities at Midewin that will be compatible with the plans of others:

**10.1.** Restoration and recreation development plans are compatible with the 1995 Arsenal Land Use Concept Plan prepared by the Joliet Arsenal Citizens Planning Commission and 1998 Strategic Plan for the Prairie Parklands (Prairie Plan 1-3).

**10.2.** Restoration and recreation projects at Midewin are tiered to the 1997 Interim Record of Decision prepared by the Department of Defense (DOD) for the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, and will be tiered to any subsequent Record of Decision prepared by the DOD for this site (Prairie Plan 1-3 and 4-17).

**10.3.** All restoration, demolition, and recreation development projects are closely coordinated with the Army (DOD), as directed by the Illinois Land Conservation Act, to ensure that contamination problems are not exacerbated or that Army cleanup operations are not affected (Prairie Plan 4-6 and 4-17).

**10.4.** Enhancement and management of grassland bird habitat and dolomite prairie and wetlands at Midewin are compatible with the goals outlined in the 1999 Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan (Prairie Plan pp. 1-3 and 2-1).

**10.5.** The protection, restoration, and management of habitat for state threatened and endangered species that occur within the planning area of Midewin are closely coordinated with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and federal species are managed following recovery plans in coordination with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Prairie Plan 4-20 and 4-22).

**10.6.** Hunting and fishing management programs at Midewin are closely coordinated with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (Prairie Plan 4-30).

**10.7.** The heritage program is carried out in cooperation and consultation with the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office (Prairie Plan 4-12).

**10.8.** The trail system to be constructed at Midewin is compatible with the Forest Preserve District of Will County Wauponsee Trail to be built on the eastern boundary of Midewin, with the future trails of the Des Plaines

Conservation Area to the south, and to some degree with recreational trails planned by the Village of Elwood to the north (Prairie Plan 1-3).

**10.9.** The trail system proposed at Midewin is also compatible with the Will County Land and Resource Management Plan transportation component currently under development.

**10.10.** The restoration plans and recreation development plans are compatible with Northeast Illinois Planning Commission regional plans for greenways and conservation lands.

## **11. RESOLVING CONTROVERSY**

Multiple use resource planning is the complex process of assessing public expectations and desires; evaluating legal requirements, environmental objectives, and resource capacity; and determining the best or optimal choice that addresses all factors. In selecting Alternative 4 as the strategic direction for the future of Midewin, I have considered how public controversy might be resolved by each alternative. It is not possible to completely resolve all public issues. I know that selecting Alternative 4 is not likely to completely satisfy every individual or group interested in Midewin. However, I feel that Alternative 4 sets a reasonable course that gives most people some satisfaction while providing future opportunities for participation in implementation of the Prairie Plan in the coming decade. I believe that Alternative 4 is a balanced response to the significant issues.

The controversy over whether all of Midewin should be restored to native upland prairie vegetation or whether part of Midewin should be maintained as non-native grasslands for sensitive grassland bird habitat will likely continue. Some people will continue to feel strongly that the grassland birds will easily adapt to restored native upland prairie habitat. The Prairie Plan reduces this conflict by taking an adaptive management approach and leaving the option open to fully restore native prairie types if and when it is determined that the sensitive grassland birds in question, do, in fact, thrive on restored and maintained native upland prairie.

Controversy over the mix and amount of compatible outdoor recreation uses at Midewin is not likely to be resolved in the near future. Many different users are eager to gain access to the site prior to construction of recreational facilities. Some recreational users want Midewin to be developed to the maximum amount of potential for their preferred type of use, and we can expect that user conflicts will arise as areas are opened to different uses. The Prairie Plan and Final EIS address this potential for user conflict between recreational users. Alternative 4 reduces the potential for user conflict by prescribing a system of trail types for different users and spreading visitors over a large area with eight access points (Final EIS 3-245).

## **12. COST EFFICIENCY**

The Final EIS analyzed the present net value of each alternative. Consideration was also given to non-monetary benefits resulting from environmental restoration, protection of sensitive species, and avoiding adverse environmental effects. I conclude that the maximum net public benefit alternative is not the one that maximizes present net value. The Final EIS disclosed the present net value of Alternative 4 at a negative (\$291,814,000) (Final EIS 3-269). This large negative figure is due to extensive demolition, restoration, and recreational development that is needed to make progress toward the desired future condition.

## **13. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

The Final EIS presents information indicating that while there may be instances where a management practice or activity could have a significant but temporary adverse effect on soils, air quality, water quality, riparian areas, wetlands, wildlife, fish, or vegetation, there would be no permanent impairment of the productivity of the land (Final EIS 3-272). The Prairie Plan has been reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion states that the Prairie Plan is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species. Analysis indicated that the effects on the environment would generally be positive.

### **13.1. Relationship of Short-Term Uses and Long-Term Productivity**

The relationship of short-term uses and long-term productivity of the land and its resources will be maintained or improved by implementing the Prairie Plan. Although the Prairie Plan is programmatic in nature and does not make the final decision to implement management activities, the Prairie Plan does prescribe proposed and probable management practices that will be implemented after future site-specific NEPA analyses. Implementation of the following activities will result in short-term ground disturbance with some long-term loss of soil productivity: construction of camping areas, permanent trails, roads, a visitor center, and other facilities. Other ground disturbing activities that will result in short-term soil dislocation and possible erosion, but will enable long-term recovery of soil productivity, include: demolition and removal of old arsenal buildings and infrastructure, removal of roads and railbeds, removal of drain tiles and ditches, and tilling or planting of vegetation (Final EIS 3-273).

### **13.2. Irretrievable or Irreversible Commitments of Resources**

The Prairie Plan is a programmatic document and, as such, does not in itself make any irretrievable or irreversible commitments of resources. The only irreversible commitment of resources anticipated through the implementation of

any alternative, including the selected Alternative 4, is the use of fossil fuel energy to administer and manage Midewin and any inadvertent loss of heritage resources (Final EIS 3-272).

Irretrievable commitments of resources that would occur during implementation of the Prairie Plan include the lost production or lost use of renewable resources due to management decisions. The opportunity to use the resource would be foregone during the period of time that it was committed to other uses. Examples are the reduction of habitat potential on sites dedicated to recreation and administrative facilities, seed production areas and roads.

### **13.3. Unavoidable Adverse Effects**

Implementation of any alternative will result in some adverse environmental effects that cannot be avoided. The severity of these adverse effects is minimized or mitigated by complying with direction in the Standards and Guidelines listed in Chapter 4 of the Prairie Plan. I believe these tradeoffs are acceptable in order to reasonably meet the legislated purposes for Midewin and future public needs.

**13.3.1.** Air quality may be temporarily affected by dust or particulates resulting from management activities such as prescribed burning, construction, or tilling for site preparation for prairie restoration planting (Final EIS 3-43 and Prairie Plan 4-19).

**13.3.2.** Some wildlife species will be adversely affected. While sufficient habitat will be maintained for all species, management activities will result in reduced habitat for some woodland and shrubland species, and increased habitat for others (Final EIS 3-224, 3-225 and Prairie Plan 4-30).

**13.3.3.** Some plant and animal species may be disturbed as new trails and facilities are constructed and used (Final EIS 3-231 and Prairie Plan 4-29).

**13.3.4.** Construction of facilities will adversely affect soil productivity on the occupied site (Final EIS 3-41 and Prairie Plan 4-7).

**13.3.5.** Recreational experiences may be temporarily disrupted or dislocated due to management activities such as prescribed burns or construction projects (Final EIS 3-241 and Prairie Plan 4-8).

## **14. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie planning staff conducted an extensive public involvement process throughout the development of this Prairie Plan. See Appendix D of the Final EIS for a more complete description of the public participation activities undertaken.

#### **14.1. Determination of the Issues**

Initially, issues were identified through focus groups organized by the Openlands Project and The Conservation Fund in partnership with Midewin. Next, the Midewin planning staff reviewed letters from the public, existing documents, the results of the early workshops, and talked with other Forest Service personnel. Issues were presented to the public and discussed at a series of open houses in June and July of 1998. These meetings helped to refine the issues, identify potential solutions, and develop a preliminary range of alternatives.

The issues addressed in this planning process are fully described in Chapter 1 of the Final EIS and constitute the identification of significant issues, as required by NEPA. A Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement was published in the Federal Register on June 22, 1998. The public was kept informed throughout the planning process through a series of newsletters, news releases, escorted public tours, and updates on the Midewin website.

The issues and early concepts for alternatives were presented in a series of public meetings in August of 1999. Discussions were lively, opinions diverse, and the level of interest in the Prairie Plan was high. Another series of informational meetings was held after the alternatives were formulated. Once the Draft EIS was published in May 2001, a series of open houses was held to clarify information presented in the Draft EIS and to answer questions. Additional meetings were held with local governments, state agencies, and interested groups throughout the planning process.

Forest Service planning staff consulted with other federal agencies (the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Army Corps of Engineers, the Army, and numerous state and local agencies, including the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the Forest Preserve District of Will County). The Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Forest Preserve District of Will County were key consulting partners in this initial planning effort. In addition, two expert panels of scientists were convened and contributed valuable information for species conservation assessments and rated viability of all sensitive species for each plan alternative.

#### **14.2. Changes Made In Response to Public Comments**

A Notice of Availability of the Draft EIS and Proposed Land and Resource Management Plan was published in the Federal Register on May 11, 2001, followed by a 120-day public comment period that ended on September 6, 2001. Over 600 copies of the Proposed Prairie Plan and Draft EIS were distributed to the public. The documents were also made available to the public on the Midewin website. Midewin received 68 written comment letters on the Draft EIS and proposed Prairie Plan. The Prairie Supervisor and Planning Team read each of those letters and the planning staff has responded to the public concerns listed in

the Summary of Public Comment (see Final EIS, Appendix F). I am well informed about the content of the public comments and the changes made between the draft and final documents as a result of the public comments.

The Forest Service undertook considerable public involvement as the Land and Resource Management Plan was being developed. The final Prairie Plan is significantly improved by many of the ideas and suggestions from the public concerned about Midewin. We have not addressed every suggestion made by the public, as to do so would be impossible. However, we did listen, and we paid close attention to and used many ideas and concepts that people shared with us throughout the planning process and as a result of reviewing the Draft EIS and proposed Land and Resource Management Plan.

No major changes were made in preparing the Final EIS and Prairie Plan. However, changes made include the following:

**14.2.1.** Addition of standards in the Prairie Plan to require that the condition of the lands be assessed and a determination made whether limitations of expected human activities are required prior to any ground disturbing activities (Prairie Plan 4-6).

**14.2.2.** Clarification of the desired future condition for different vegetation types (Prairie Plan 2-3).

**14.2.3.** Addition of a proposed facility for a new permanent fire fighting crew stationed at Midewin (Final EIS 2-21 and Prairie Plan 3-6).

**14.2.4.** Changing the developed campground use to group camping only (Final EIS 2-21, 3-244 and Prairie Plan 3-6).

**14.2.5.** Clarification that the proposed group campground will be developed only after restoration and cleanup activities have been completed (Prairie Plan 2-9).

**14.2.6.** Clarification of research goals and objectives relating to grassland bird habitat management (Prairie Plan Appendix E-3).

**14.2.7.** Emphasis on adaptive management for long-term grassland bird habitat management and prairie restoration (Prairie Plan 3-1).

**14.2.8.** Clarification of the research program at Midewin; who can participate and how (Prairie Plan Appendix E-1).

**14.2.9.** Revision of the Proposed and Probable Management Practices (Prairie Plan Appendix F-1).