

Record Of Decision

Final Environmental Impact Statement and Land and Resource Management Plan

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Located within Will County, Illinois

Responsible Agency: United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service, Eastern Region
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Responsible Official: Donald L. Meyer
Acting Regional Forester

Recommending Official: Frank Koenig
Prairie Supervisor

This document presents the decision to select a Land and Resource Management Plan for the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. It summarizes the reasons for choosing the selected alternative as the basis for the Prairie Plan that will be followed for the next 10-15 years. The long-term environmental, economic and social consequences contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement are considered in this decision.

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Record Of Decision

Final Environmental Impact Statement
and
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1. INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision (ROD) approves the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Land and Resource Management Plan (also referred to as the Prairie Plan) and gives the reasons for selecting Alternative 4 of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) as the Prairie Plan.

A Land and Resource Management Plan is required for each National Forest unit as directed by the rules implementing the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resource Planning Act of 1975 (RPA), as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), and for Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie by the Illinois Land Conservation Act (ILCA). The purpose of a Prairie Plan is to provide for multiple use and sustained yields of goods and services from National Forest System lands in an environmentally sound manner. The ILCA established Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie “to be managed for National Forest System purposes, including the following:”

- 1) “To manage the land and water resources . . . in a manner that will conserve and enhance the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants.” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(1)).
- 2) “To provide opportunities for scientific, environmental, and land use education and research.” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(2)).
- 3) “To allow the continuation of agricultural uses of lands within Midewin consistent with section 2915(b).” (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(3)). Section 2915(b)(3) states that special use or grazing permits may be issued “ . . . for purposes primarily related to erosion control, provision for food and habitat for fish and wildlife, or other resource management activities.”

- 4) "To provide for a variety of recreation opportunities that are not inconsistent with the preceding purposes." (Pub. L. No. 104-106, §2914(c)(4)).

The Prairie Plan will remain in effect for 10 to 15 years until revised or amended. The Prairie Plan may be revised sooner if conditions or demands change significantly and may be amended as needed. In preparing the Prairie Plan, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie planning team followed the 1982 version of rules established in 36 C.F.R. §219 for preparing Forest Service land and resource management plans.

The Final EIS is a companion document to the Prairie Plan. The Final EIS has been prepared following Forest Service and Council on Environmental Quality rules implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Final EIS describes a reasonable range of alternatives that were considered and discloses their significant environmental effects. Each alternative could have been the basis for a land and resource management plan. One alternative (Alternative 4) has been further developed as the "Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Land and Resource Management Plan."

Planning records contain the detailed information and decisions used in developing the Prairie Plan and Final EIS. These records are incorporated by reference into the Final EIS and Prairie Plan. Some of these documents are available for review on the Midewin web site at www.fs.fed.us/mntp and all are available at the Prairie Supervisor's Office:

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
30071 S. Illinois Route 53
Wilmington, IL 60481
Phone (815) 423-6370

2. MAJOR FEATURES OF MIDEWIN NATIONAL TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was created from land that was part of the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant when Congress passed the ILCA in 1996. The first 15,080 acres were transferred from the Department of Defense (Army) to the USDA Forest Service on March 10, 1997.

Additional land, representing approximately 1,650 acres, may eventually be transferred from the Department of Defense following environmental cleanup during the next decade. Anticipating eventual transfer to the USDA Forest Service once these lands are cleaned to environmental standards, they have been assigned management prescriptions, goals, objectives and applicable standards and guidelines in the Midewin Prairie Plan. Several other land parcels,

representing approximately 110 acres, have also been acquired from other sources since Midewin was established. These acquired lands have been assigned management prescriptions, goals, objectives and applicable standards and guidelines in the Prairie Plan. The boundaries of Midewin, as shown on the Land and Resource Management Plan maps, include National Forest System land, the recent acquisitions, and the Army land to be eventually transferred. Together these lands on 16,840 acres include four highly altered and channelized streams, the rare dolomite prairie habitat, and large open grasslands. Much of the land is still under agricultural use as authorized by the ILCA, including cattle grazing for grassland bird habitat management and crop cultivation. Most of these fields have been drained with an extensive system of drain tiles and ditches. Major features of Midewin today are the presence of numerous arsenal buildings and infrastructure, including 392 concrete bunkers, fields of warehouses, 118 miles of road and 116 miles of railbed remaining from 50 years of land use as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant.

Less than 3% of Midewin remains as upland prairie remnants and it will take a major effort to restore the prairie ecosystem with native vegetation. Prairie restoration projects are already underway with three native seed gardens beginning to produce seed needed to restore vast acres. It may be decades before Midewin's restored prairie begins to resemble the prairies once found in northeast Illinois.

The extent and diversity of habitat found within Midewin today provide for some of the most significant wildlife habitat in northeastern Illinois. The large acreage of short stature grassland habitat supports the state's largest population of upland sandpiper. The upland sandpiper is listed as an Illinois State Endangered Species and Regional Forester Sensitive Species. Midewin is also a refuge for other grassland birds such as the bobolink and loggerhead shrike, (also on the Regional Forester Sensitive Species list), whose numbers are declining in the Midwest due to loss of grassland habitat as pastures are converted to suburban housing, commercial/industrial development or to corn and soybean crop fields. In northeastern Illinois, Midewin provides perhaps the last opportunity to create relatively large grasslands for upland sandpiper, bobolink, and loggerhead shrike, and to restore a prairie ecosystem from remnants of wetlands, dolomite prairie, and native upland prairie plant communities.

The rare dolomite prairie is home to a recently discovered population of leafy prairie clover, listed as a federal endangered species. The habitat condition for both plants and animals is dependent on the careful management of the prairie vegetative communities. Native seed gardens have been established to supply needed native prairie and grass seed for restoration in the coming years.

Because it has large open grasslands that have been maintained as pasture lands for decades, Midewin provides habitat for a rich diversity of plants and animals, despite many years of arsenal production and intensive agriculture.

Over one hundred bird species nest and breed at Midewin, and an additional 68 bird species utilize habitat at Midewin during migration or as winter range. Midewin is also home to 27 mammal species and 53 fish species. The diversity of plants includes over 600 plant species identified so far, including a number of invasive and non-native plant species.

Midewin has a rich cultural history dating back over the last 12,000 years. Early people used the area's resources for subsistence and hunting. Later native people incorporated horticulture into their livelihood by approximately 900 A.D. Early French explorers were Louis Joliet and Pere Marquette, who traveled the nearby Des Plaines River in 1673, followed by fur traders in the next two centuries. American and European settlers continued to move into the region after the Black Hawk War of 1832, when members of several tribal groups resisted encroachment of settlers onto their ancestral lands. Early settlers were encouraged with construction of the Illinois and Michigan canal connecting the Great Lakes to the Illinois River. Homesteads were established in the 19th century and agricultural use patterns have continued through today.

In 1940 the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant (Joliet Arsenal) was authorized and the US Army bought land from local farmers. Over 1,000 buildings were constructed including 392 concrete bunkers, loading plants, bomb filling plants, warehouses, family housing, sewage plants, administration buildings, and TNT processing facilities. To complete construction of the Joliet Arsenal, almost half of the natural landscape was modified to some degree. During its heyday, 14,000 people were employed at the Joliet Arsenal and peak production resulted in 5 million pounds of TNT per week. The Joliet Arsenal produced ammunition for World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Production ceased in 1977 and the Army declared the Joliet Arsenal as excess federal property, initiating studies to decommission the site in 1993. Following the concept plan developed by the Joliet Arsenal Citizens Commission, the Joliet Arsenal was divided into several land uses with the majority becoming Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Other properties created with passage of the ILCA from the former arsenal include the Deer Run Industrial Park, owned and managed by CenterPoint Properties, Ltd., Island City Industrial Park, the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, and a Will County landfill.

Midewin is the largest public conservation land parcel located in the greater Chicago metropolitan region, and lies within a 1½-hour drive of more than 6 million people. It lies in Will County, the fastest growing county of the entire Chicagoland region. At the present, public access is extremely limited at Midewin, owing to the need to protect the public from safety risks and potentially hazardous sites (including unexploded ordnance sites still owned by the Army) that lie within the perimeter of Midewin. Midewin is also the key component within the Prairie Parklands, an area of approximately 40,000 acres of important conservation habitat of public, private, and corporate lands in Will and Grundy counties.

A small area within Midewin has been opened to deer hunting during the fall and winter. Two hiking trails were recently opened to the general public. Most visitors see Midewin on hosted tours or as volunteers working on prairie restoration projects or other activities. Midewin is also host to an extensive environmental education program.

3. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF MIDEWIN

Looking to the past, we can paint a picture of a summer day at Midewin sometime in the future.

“I was in the midst of a prairie! A world of grass and flowers stretched around me, rising and falling in gentle undulations . . . We passed whole acres of blossoms all bearing one hue, as purple, perhaps, or masses of yellow or rose; and again a carpet of every color intermixed, or narrow bands, as if a rainbow had fallen upon the verdant slopes.” The words of Eliza Steele in her journal *Summer Journey*, as she traveled near Joliet, Illinois in 1840.

As envisioned by the Joliet Arsenal Citizens Commission that created the basic concept plan, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie over the next decade and beyond will play a key role in prairie restoration in Northeast Illinois, by returning most of the former Joliet Arsenal to a functioning prairie ecosystem through implementation of the Prairie Plan. Attainment of this vision will depend on sustained local, regional, and national support through appropriated funding from Congress, supplemented by partner contributions and a strong volunteer corps ready to restore the prairie. Seed nurseries are yielding a complex mixture of native upland and wetland plants and seeds vital to a healthy prairie ecosystem. Further, Midewin focuses on connecting local and regional urban populations with the vital need to protect and restore prairie habitat. Enthusiastic and well-trained volunteers plant, cultivate, and harvest the multitude of plants in the nursery seed beds. Vast areas formerly planted to agricultural crops are planted with a mix of native prairie grasses and forbs.

Special emphasis is given to the areas with remnants of prairie vegetation; these areas are managed to enhance habitat conditions for rare plants and animals. Habitat conditions for grassland bird species are improved and populations of many sensitive bird species have increased across the prairie. Cattle are used to graze both grasslands and some restored prairie sites to medium or short grass heights to provide grassland bird habitat. Area streams and wetlands are restored and support a diversity of plant and animal species. Prescribed fire is used on a regular basis to keep the restored prairie thriving. Invasive plant and animal species are kept under control.

Cooperative efforts to manage the wildlife and fisheries habitat at Midewin continue with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, other government agencies, and private organizations. Research has provided proven techniques to restore native prairie habitat and manage it so that upland sandpipers and other sensitive birds successfully nest and raise their young in restored prairie areas.

Students from near and far visit Midewin on a regular basis as part of an on-going environmental education program for all ages. Prairie visitors come to experience the beauty of the prairie in bloom in the summer, watch wildlife during any season, and listen to the wind as it waves through the expansive grasslands across the prairie. In such places, a person can experience some isolation and the prairie's relative vastness.

Midewin is open to the public with a network of hiking, bicycle, and equestrian trails traversing the prairie. Visitors are oriented to the site at the visitor center. A shuttle picks up visitors and tours through parts of the prairie, stopping at several points to let hikers off or to view interesting sites. A picnic area is provided near the visitor center. Groups that come to learn or volunteer for longer periods can camp overnight in the group campground.

Most former roads are obliterated, along with most arsenal buildings and other old decaying infrastructure left by the Army. The Army has completed environmental cleanup and more lands have been transferred to the USDA Forest Service as part of Midewin.

Standards and guidelines of the Prairie Plan are followed for all management practices ensuring protection of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, as well as soil, water, visual, and heritage resources of the prairie.

Fulfillment of this vision or mission for Midewin requires exceptional public service and commitment to a public legacy of prairie restoration. It will take a high level of public trust and continued support through volunteerism and understanding. It means that Midewin will need to work cooperatively with its neighbors and partners, and continue inviting the involvement of others, sharing the credit of accomplishments.

4. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED STUDY

The Prairie Plan proposed in the June 1998 Notice of Intent (NOI) used the Joliet Arsenal Citizen's Planning Commission Concept Map created in 1995 as the basis for proposed management areas and activities. The NOI proposal was dropped from further analysis in the Final EIS because it is not a feasible alternative at this time. However, the range of alternatives analyzed in detail in

the Final EIS incorporate the main features of the NOI proposal. The proposal in the NOI outlined five management areas, with Management Areas 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 emphasizing managing the prairie ecosystem, endangered species habitat, and riparian areas. Alternatives 2 through 6 in the Final EIS also provide for prairie ecosystems, endangered species habitat and riparian management.

Management Area 8.1 in the NOI proposal featured bison and elk re-introduction, and a seed production area, with restricted public access and a shuttle system. Re-introduction of bison and elk was dropped from detailed study, because it is not feasible at this time, with a greater need to focus first on prairie restoration, cleanup, and recreation development. All action alternatives recognize that planning and analysis of bison and elk must wait until the primary remediation, restoration, development projects are well underway and the restored prairie environment at Midewin has begun to stabilize. All action alternatives provide for a seed production area and some level of public access.

Management Area 8.2 featured dispersed or less developed recreation with a limited trail system. All action alternatives in the Final EIS provide for some areas of less developed, dispersed recreation and trail systems. Management Area 8.3 provided seasonal or limited bison or elk re-introduction, with a shuttle and limited trail system. As discussed above, bison and elk re-introduction is not feasible at this time and alternatives 2 through 6 in the Final EIS provide for a variety of recreational access and opportunities.

Management Areas 8.4 and 8.5 emphasized managing grassland bird habitat and riparian areas with an extensive trail system. Management Area 8.4 featured dispersed recreation opportunities and no motorized vehicles and Management Area 8.5 featured key recreational development, including a visitor center, camping and picnicking area, and a short auto tour route. These aspects of the proposal from the NOI are also represented within the range of alternatives considered in detail, because all action alternatives provide some amount of grassland bird habitat, manage riparian areas, and provide a trail system.

5. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

The strength of this planning process lies in the alternatives and the way they were formulated. The alternatives address the major issues raised by the public and management concerns and opportunities brought forward by Midewin staff. These issues, concerns, and opportunities were consolidated into a list of significant issues in the Final EIS. The alternatives express a range of responses to the significant issues identified in the Final EIS. All alternatives provide for ecosystem management and public use. All alternatives share a set of basic goals, standards, and guidelines ensuring protection of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie resources and compliance with applicable laws. All alternatives meet the management requirements of 36 C.F.R. §219.27, as well as all other

legal and regulatory requirements. The following alternatives are described and evaluated in detail in the Final EIS, Chapter 2:

5.1. Alternative 1 (The No Action Alternative)

“No action” means continuation of existing conditions and interim management practices for the next 10 to 15 years. No long-range plan for Midewin is developed, and minimal to no expansion or development of additional programs and facilities is provided. Because a land and resource management plan is required by law, the primary purpose for this No Action Alternative is to serve as a baseline for the comparison of other alternatives. (See Figure 1 –Alternative 1 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.2. Alternative 2

Maximizes expansion of grassland bird habitat for area-sensitive bird species such as upland sandpiper, bobolink and loggerhead shrike, with a moderate amount of recreation opportunities. (See Figure 2 – Alternative 2 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.3. Alternative 3

Emphasizes recreational development with an extensive trail system, campground, visitor center, and a greater amount of grassland bird habitat restored than upland prairie habitat. (See Figure 3 – Alternative 3 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.4. Alternative 4 (Selected as the Prairie Plan)

Provides a balance of restoration of habitat types for sensitive grassland birds and restoration of upland prairie. Offers moderate recreation development with a mix of opportunities compatible with restoration. (See Figure 4 – Alternative 4 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.5. Alternative 5

Focuses on upland prairie and wet prairie/sedge meadow restoration, with less grassland bird habitat. Maximizes upland prairie restoration, with moderate recreation development. (See Figure 5 – Alternative 5 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

5.6. Alternative 6

Focuses on upland prairie and wet prairie/sedge meadow restoration with less grassland bird habitat, and the least amount of investment for recreation development. (See Figure 6 – Alternative 6 - Proposed Habitat Restoration).

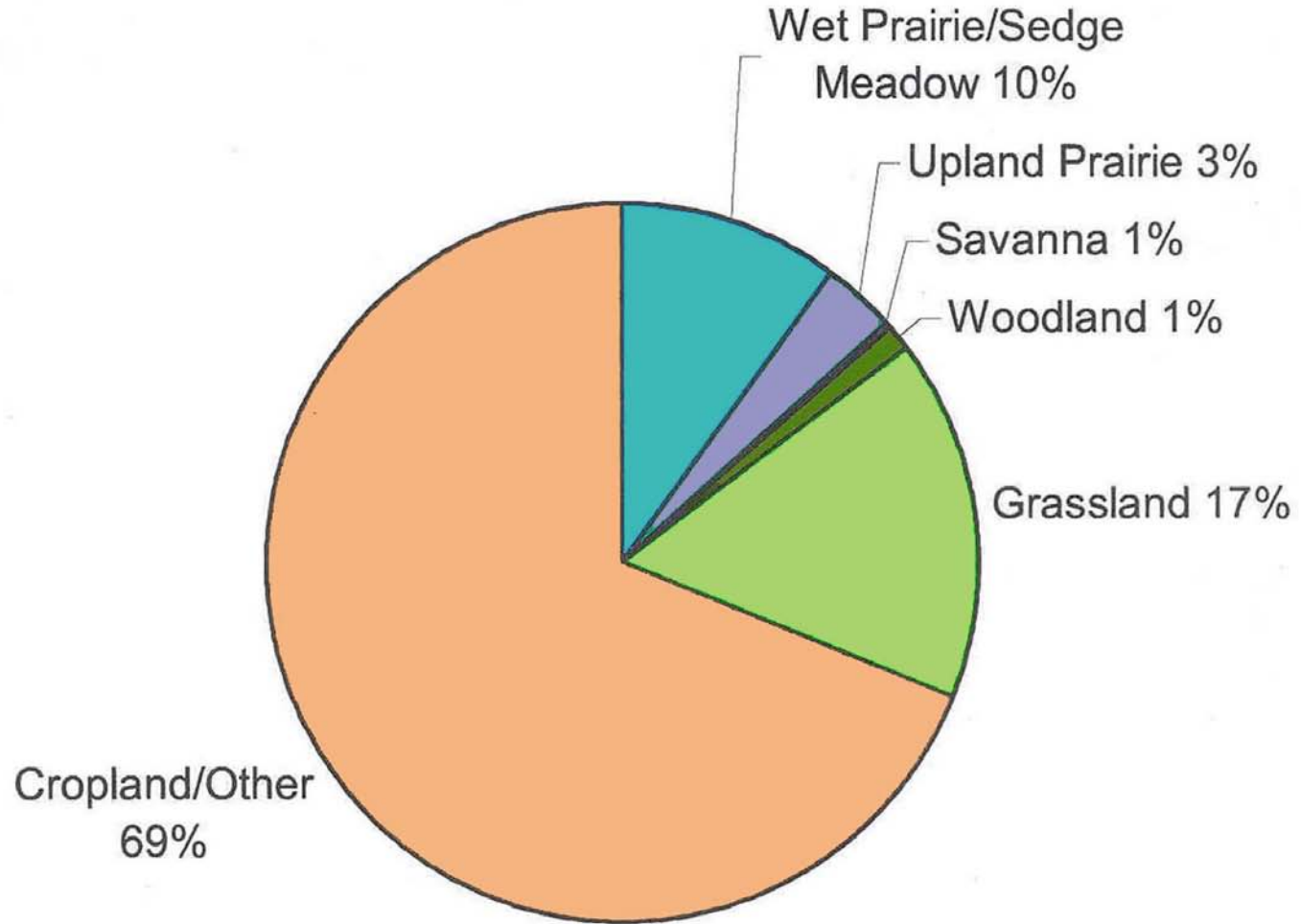


Figure 1 Alternative 1 Proposed Habitat Restoration

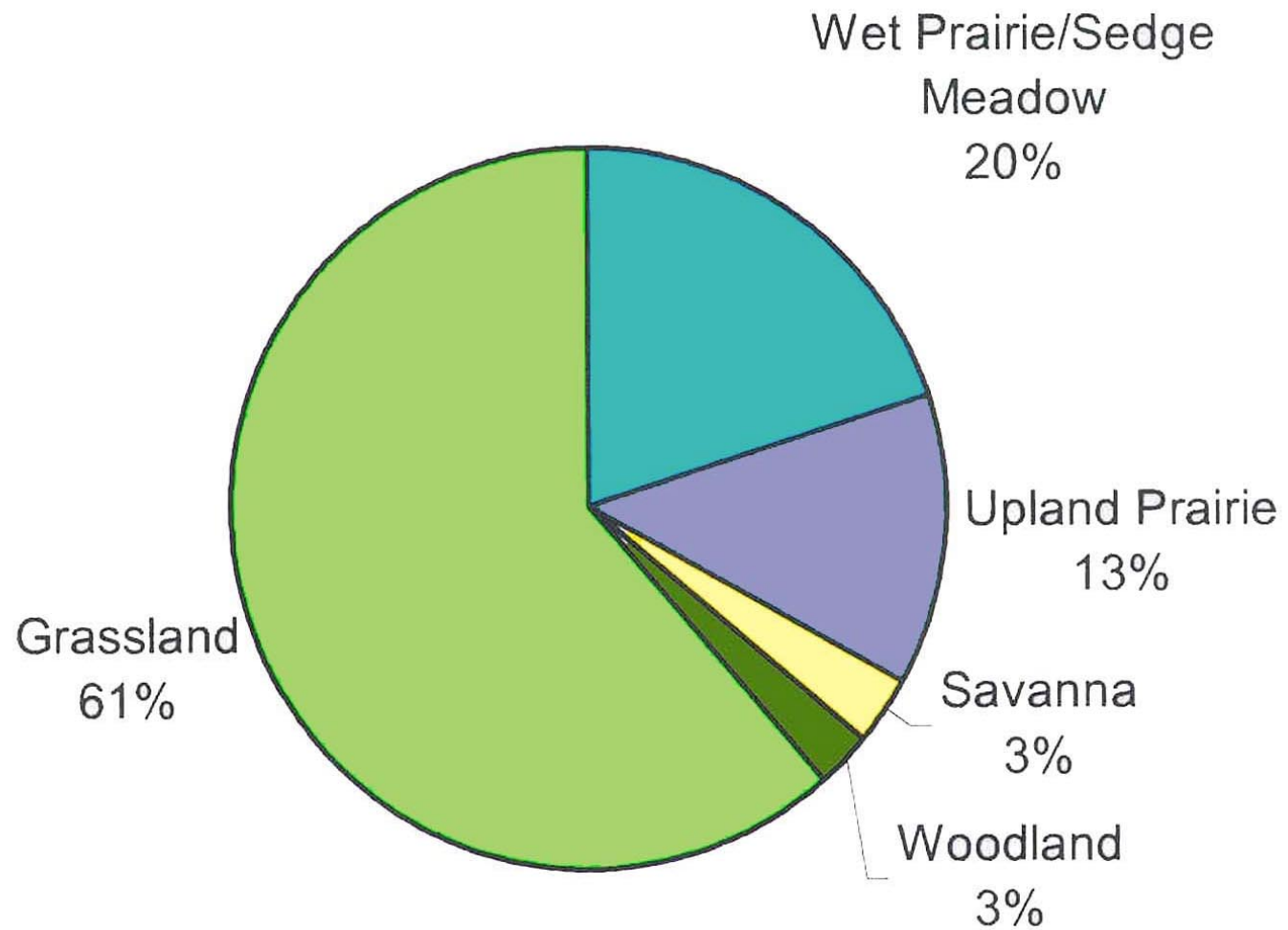


Figure 2 Alternative 2 Proposed Habitat Restoration

Figure 3 Alternative 3 Proposed Habitat Restoration

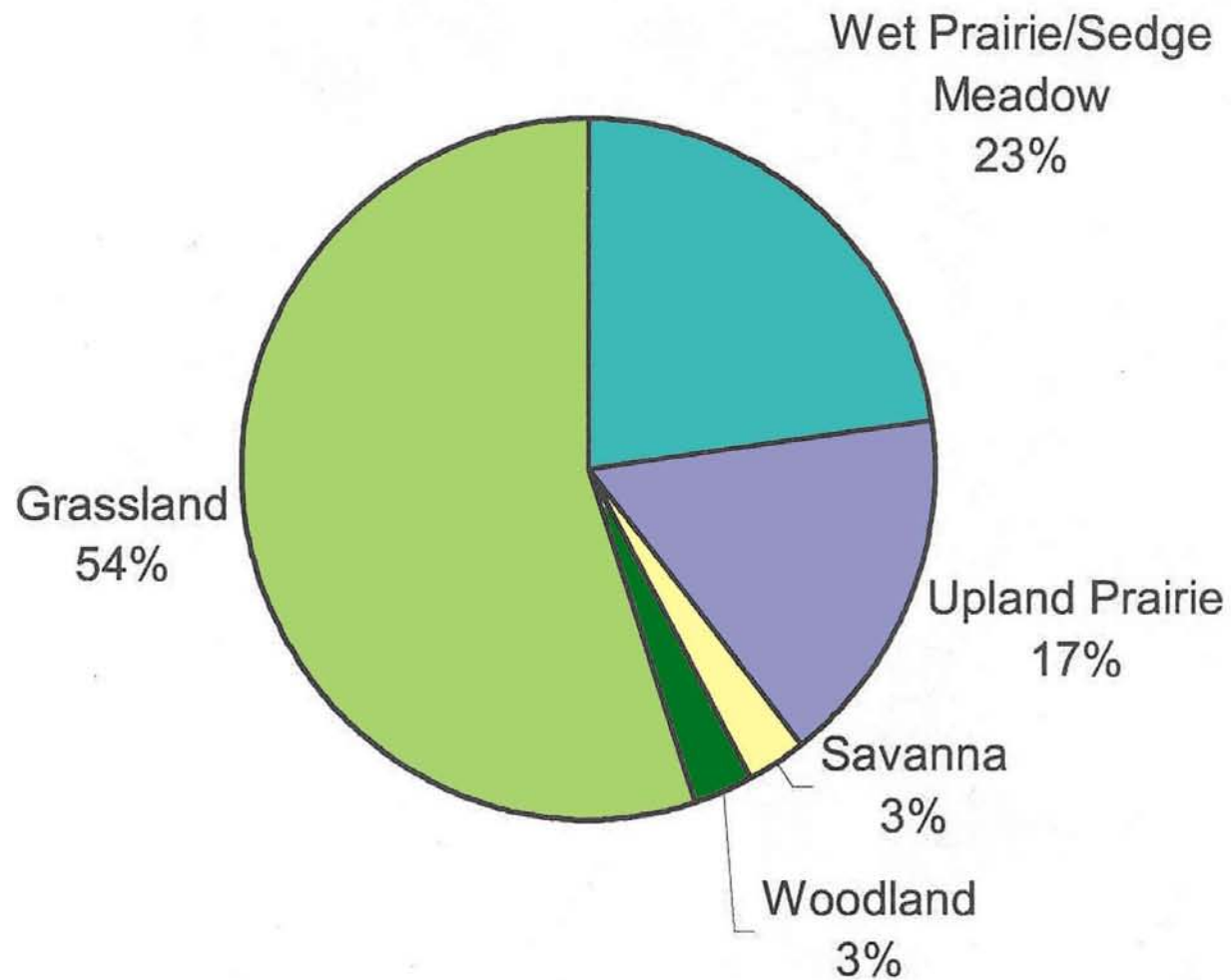


Figure 4 Alternative 4 Proposed Habitat Restoration

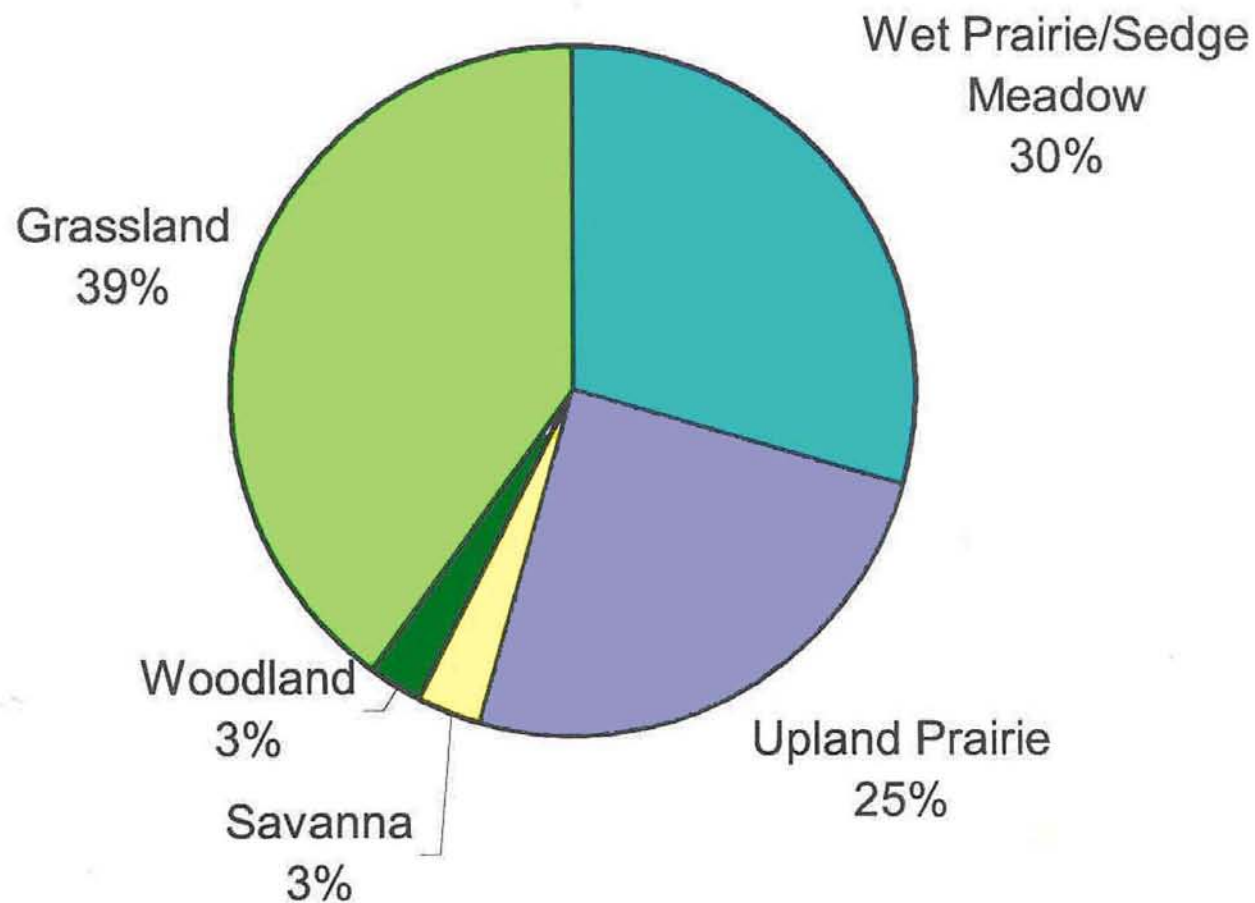


Figure 5 Alternative 5 Proposed Habitat Restoration

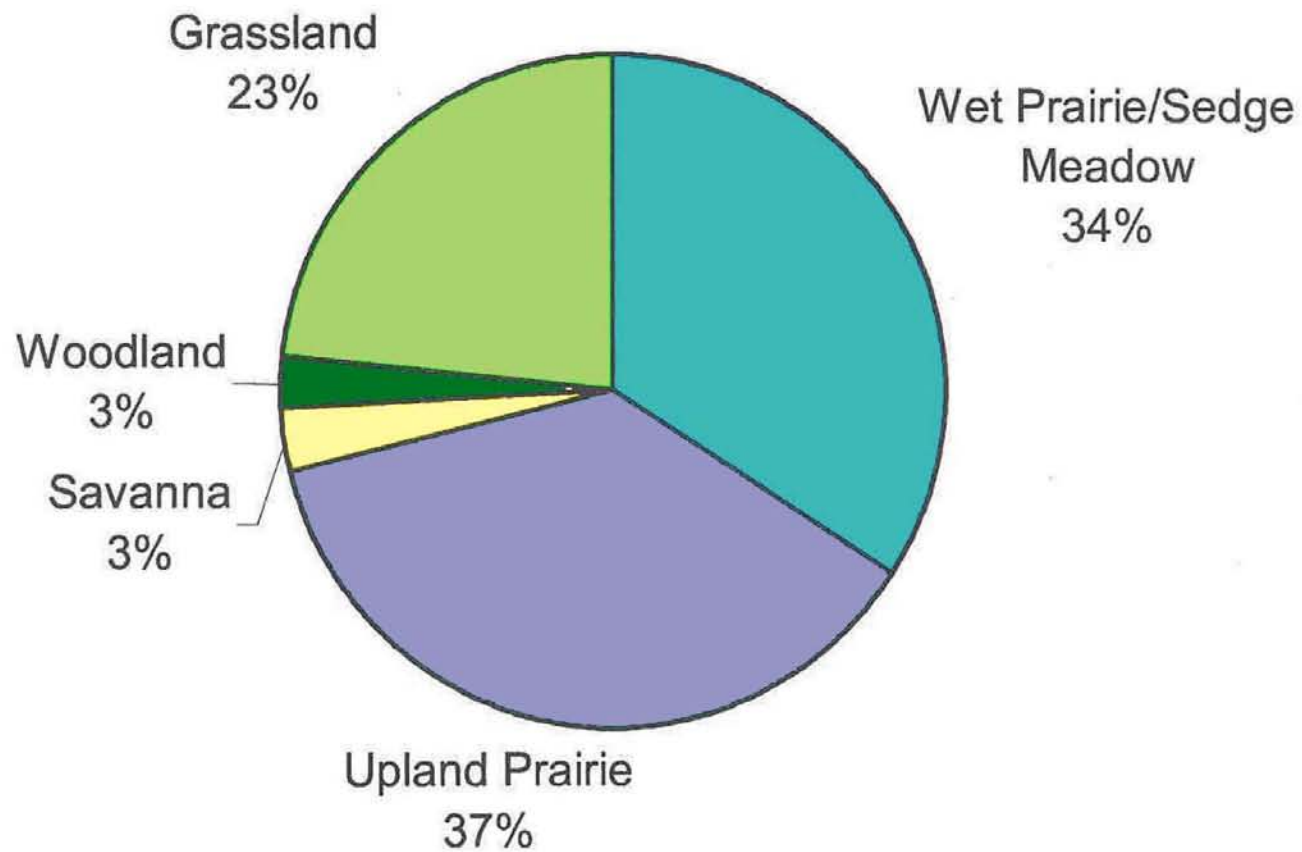
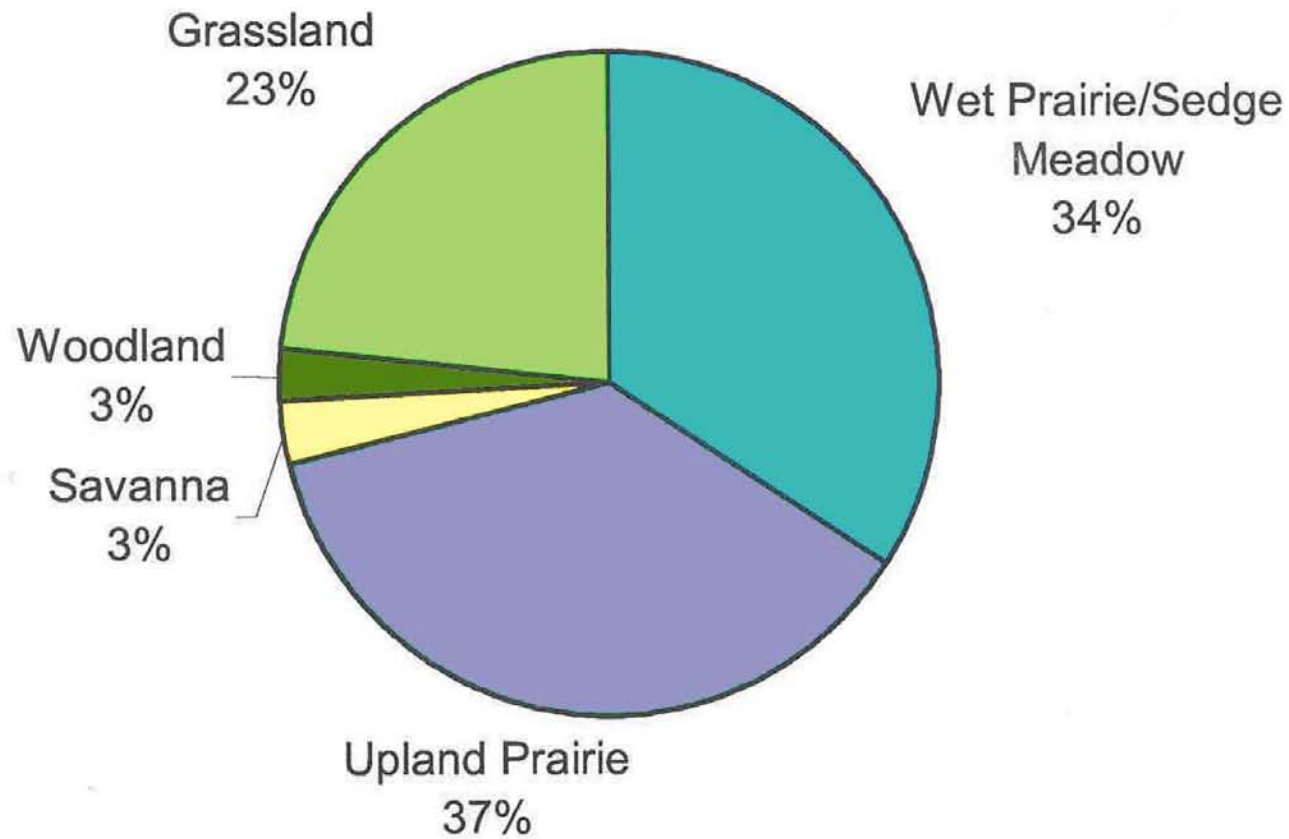


Figure 6 Alternative 6 Proposed Habitat Restoration



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.

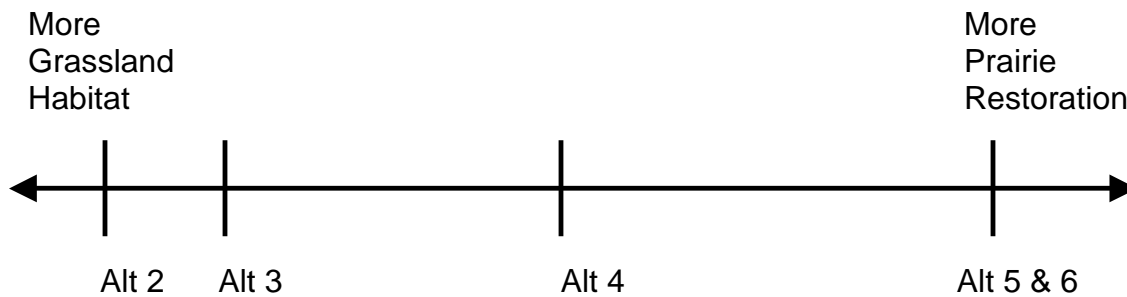
Midewin has an opportunity to make significant contributions to biological diversity at local, regional, and even national scales due to its size, continuity, historical land use, natural landscape features, and geographic location. The Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan, 1999, refers to the 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 ^{1.}	Alternative 5	Alternative 6
Wet Prairie/Sedge Meadow	10	20	23	30	34	34
Upland Prairie ^{2.}	3	13	17	25	37	37
Savanna	1	3	3	3	3	3
Woodland	1	3	3	3	3	3
Grassland ^{3.}	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 ^{1.}	Alt. 5	Alt. 6
Visitor Center/ Environmental Learning Center ^{3.}	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Hiking only (miles) ^{3.}	3	37	40	20	30	12
Multi-use trail - bicycle, equestrian and hiking (miles) ^{3.}	0	0	19	17	23	15
Bicycling and Hiking (miles) ^{3.}	0	35	20	6	# ^{4.}	# ^{4.}
Horse back riding and Hiking (miles) ^{3.}	0	0	11	5	# ^{4.}	# ^{4.}
Shuttle (guided tour)	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Auto Loop (self guided tour) ^{2.}	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
Developed Camping (family) ^{2.}	no	yes	yes	no	no	no
Group Camping ^{3.}	no	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Dispersed Camping ^{3.}	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
Total types of activities	2	10	12	11	8	4
Compatibility of activities	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).

15. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

I have considered the numerous statutes governing management of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, and I believe this decision represents the best possible approach to implementing the statutory duties of the Forest Service at Midewin.

15.1. The Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan is in compliance with the Clean Water Act as stated in the conclusions documented in Chapter 3, Water Quality Section of the Final EIS (Final EIS 3-16).

15.2. The Midewin Prairie Plan is in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, Archaeological Resources Protection Act, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Executive Order 11593 (Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment), and Executive Order 13007 (Indian Sacred Sites), as stated in the conclusions presented in Chapter 3, Heritage Resources Section of the Final EIS (Final EIS 3-258).

15.3. The Midewin Prairie Plan is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act, as documented in the conclusions in Chapter 3, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species Section of the Final EIS (Final EIS 3-125, 3-137).

15.4. The Midewin Prairie Plan is in compliance with the Clean Air Standards as documented in conclusions presented in Chapter 3, Air Quality Section of the Final EIS (Final EIS 3-43).

15.5. Per Executive Order 12898, pertaining to Environmental Justice, the activities planned to implement the Prairie Plan are not foreseen to have disproportionately high or adverse human health and environmental effects on minority or low income populations (Final EIS 3-271).

15.6. The analysis of civil rights impacts does not foresee any adverse effects on the civil rights of any individual or group (Final EIS 3-270).

15.7. The Prairie Plan is in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Prairie Plan 4-8).

16. IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, AND MITIGATION

The Prairie Plan will be implemented no sooner than 30 days following publication of the legal notice of this decision in the *Federal Register* as required by 36 C.F.R. §219.10(c)(1).

Several projects were previously approved following environmental analysis under NEPA procedures. These projects were outlined in the June 1998 Notice of Intent to implement the ILCA. These existing projects, as well as current contractual obligations, will continue to completion as originally planned. During project implementation, subject to valid existing rights, the Prairie Supervisor will assure that:

- (1) Annual program proposals and projects are consistent with the Prairie Plan;
- (2) Program budget proposals and objectives are consistent with management direction specified in the Prairie Plan; and
- (3) Implementation is in compliance with National Forest Management Act regulations.

The Prairie Plan is implemented through various site-specific projects, such as building a visitor/learning center, restoring a portion of the prairie or wetland, or constructing a trail. If the budget is less than full in any given year, the projects scheduled to implement the Prairie Plan for that year may have to be rescheduled; however, the management area prescriptions and the areas to which they apply will not change unless the Prairie Plan is revised or amended. As a long-range strategy for Midewin, the Prairie Plan and the accompanying Final EIS are programmatic in nature. Site-specific analyses will be conducted when the various projects are proposed during Plan implementation. These analyses may result in environmental assessments, environmental impact statements, or categorical exclusions and, possibly, an amendment or revision of the Prairie Plan. Any resulting documents may be tiered to the Final EIS for the Prairie Plan.

Further proposals to use National Forest System lands at Midewin will be reviewed for consistency with the Prairie Plan. Management direction contained in Chapter 3 of the Prairie Plan will be used to analyze any proposal involving use of National Forest System lands at Midewin. All permits, contracts, and other instruments for occupancy and use of Midewin must be consistent with the Management Direction in Chapter 3 of the Prairie Plan. If the proposed use is not consistent, the proposal will be dropped or the plan will be amended to provide for needed consistency.

Any unavoidable adverse environmental effects, such as the disruptive effect of prescribed burns on air quality, will be temporary and will involve only a percentage of the prairie at any one time. Mitigation measures are included as standards and guidelines in Chapter 4 of the Prairie Plan. Through this decision these measures are adopted.

The monitoring and evaluation requirements established in the Prairie Plan, Chapter 6, are adopted through this decision. The implementation of

management practices will be documented and their effects recorded to measure progress toward attainment of the Prairie Plan goals and objectives and to ensure that anticipated results are actually achieved. Data gathered during monitoring will be evaluated and a determination made whether to modify implementation schedules, to improve mitigation measures, or to assess the need for amending or revising the Midewin Prairie Plan. A review and evaluation of monitoring results will be conducted annually and summarized in an annual report. The Prairie Supervisor will review conditions of the land during the 5th year of Plan implementation to determine whether conditions have significantly changed.

17. APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §217. A written appeal of this decision must be filed in duplicate within 90 calendar days of the published legal notice of this decision in the Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel newspaper of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. However, when the appeal filing period would expire on a Saturday, Sunday, or federal holiday, the filing time is extended to the end of the next Federal working day. Appeals must be filed with:

Chief, USDA Forest Service
Attn: Barb Timberlake
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Stop 1104
Washington, DC 20250

Any notice of appeal must be fully consistent with 36 C.F.R. §217.9 and include at a minimum:

- A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §217.
- The name, address, and telephone number of the appellant.
- Identification of the decision to which the requester objects.
- Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject, date of the decision, and name and title of the Deciding Officer.
- Identification of the specific portion of the decision or decision document to which the requester objects.

- The reasons for objecting, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy and, if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.
- Identification of the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

Requests to stay the approval of the Prairie Plan will not be granted [36 C.F.R. §217.10(b)].

Decisions on site-specific projects have not been made in this Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan. Final decisions on proposed projects will be made after site-specific analysis and documentation in compliance with NEPA.

For questions concerning the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan, contact:

Frank Koenig
Prairie Supervisor
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie
30071 S. Illinois Route 53
Wilmington, IL 60481
(815) 423-6370

Reviewers are encouraged to contact the Prairie Supervisor before submitting appeals to determine if misunderstandings or concerns can be clarified or resolved.

18. CONCLUSION

I am pleased to announce this decision and bring this phase of the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan to completion. Working together we can meet the challenges, realize the opportunities, and achieve the goals and objectives of the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan.

The Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan is our strategic plan for ensuring the long-term health of the land. We will use adaptive management strategies as we work to implement the Plan. We will carefully monitor our activities, conditions of the land, the goods and services produced, and the effectiveness of the resource protection measures included in the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan to ensure a healthy prairie ecosystem for future generations.



DONALD L. MEYER
Acting Regional Forester

Date: Feb 8, 2002