



File Code: 1920-2

Date: July 14, 2006

Dear Friends and Partners of Midewin:

**Re: Request for public comments on a proposal to amend the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan**

The U.S. Forest Service at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) proposes to amend the Midewin Land and Resource Management Plan (Prairie Plan). I encourage you to become involved and participate in the planning process. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), I am soliciting public comments and input on this proposal. We will be preparing a programmatic environmental assessment to analyze environmental effects of this proposed plan amendment.

**Purpose and Need:** The purpose is to make a change, called an amendment, to the original Prairie Plan approved in 2002. There are two reasons this first plan amendment is needed at this time:

1. A land management tool is needed to permanently monitor land uses on certain parcels transferred from the US Army. These parcels have been remediated or environmentally cleaned up by the Army to standards that support prairie restoration and recreation activities, but have some permanent land and groundwater use restrictions. The Forest Service has agreed to monitor activities on these parcels and include that monitoring in the Midewin Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Report. Copies of the report would be sent to the Army, US EPA and Illinois EPA to meet EPA tracking requirements. The Army transferred some remediated parcels in September 2005 and it is anticipated that additional remediated lands will be transferred in 2006 and 2007 as the Army completes the remediation process at the former Joliet Army Ammunition Plant.
2. There is a need to designate utility corridors that traverse Midewin to manage the existing uses and any future proposals for oil, gas, and electric utilities. The original Prairie Plan did not identify the existing utility corridors that traverse Midewin.

I believe that this amendment is for the purpose of meeting procedural requirements and will have little impact on implementation of the Prairie Plan. Since arsenal reuse was envisioned and negotiations began, we knew that it was economically infeasible for the Army to clean up some highly contaminated sites to the optimal degree. Advisory groups determined the amount of clean up or "standards" needed to allow for reuse as Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Those standards will be met by the Army and this amendment simply provides the most visible and efficient tracking of those sites. We believe that identifying the cleaned up sites as a Special Management Area is the easiest way for the Forest Service to track them. Utility corridors already exist and this amendment merely documents them in the Prairie Plan.



### **Proposed Action:**

An amendment to the Prairie Plan is proposed to create Management Area 3-Special Management Area (see [map](#)). This new management area will provide direction to monitor and report on land uses for remediated lands transferred from the Army. The amendment would also designate all existing utility corridors (see [map](#)) that are now included in Management Area 1-Prairie Ecosystem Restoration. These utility corridors, once identified and mapped, will be designated in Management Area 2-Administrative Sites. The intention is to keep all future proposals for utilities within the existing Administrative Site Utility Corridors.

The Interdisciplinary Team has developed **two alternatives** to be analyzed in an Environmental Assessment:

1. The Proposed Action: Amend the Prairie Plan to create Management Area 3- Special Management Area and map, designate, and manage existing utility corridors as part of Management Area 2- Administrative Sites.
2. The No Action alternative would make no changes to the approved Prairie Plan. (A “no action” alternative is required for Environmental Impact Statements and Environmental Assessments.)

### **Issues:**

The driving issue for this amendment is the need to monitor and report on land restrictions for 538 acres of remediated lands transferred from the Army. The most recent land transfer was recorded in the Federal Register on September 27, 2005. Some of the parcels have groundwater restrictions and others have soil or land use restrictions designed to protect human health and ecological integrity. The Forest Service agreed to the land use restrictions and also agreed to provide a copy of the annual Prairie Plan Monitoring and Evaluation Report to the Army, US EPA, and Illinois EPA. The report will document the status of land and groundwater use restrictions and any land use proposals that would be, or were, affected by them.

The second issue concerns land use for utilities including pipelines for gas, oil and high voltage electric transmission lines. Existing linear authorizations for utilities will continue but, by regulation, the corridors should be designated and managed as Administrative Sites. These uses serve a public benefit. However, development of any new utilities could fragment or destroy the contiguous prairie and would not be a suitable land use on the remaining fragile prairie remnants or newly restored prairie ecosystems. This amendment will make the plan consistent with the new regulations and clarify locations where future utility proposals may be consistent with the plan.

### **Desired Condition for Management Area 3-Special Management Areas**

The remaining infrastructure from the Army will be removed and the landscape restored to a more natural appearing condition with native prairie vegetation or agricultural grassland maintained as grassland bird habitat. Activities allowed will be similar to Management Area 1-Prairie Ecosystem Restoration. These prairie land management activities may include: agricultural use for crops, hay, or grazing, prescribed fire, prairie restoration, wetland restoration, watershed restoration, other habitat restoration, noxious and invasive species management, grassland bird habitat management, native seed production, fencerow removal, recreational

hunting, and research. Roads near these sites may be decommissioned if no longer needed for access by the Army or the Forest Service for administrative purposes. These Special Management Areas are not suited for campgrounds or playgrounds and may not be suitable for any future land conveyance without further cleanup. Other uses not suitable for these sites include removing the soil or disturbing the groundwater or any existing wells.

### **Desired Condition of Utility Corridors in Management Area 2- Administrative Sites**

Where possible, place proposed new transmission lines or pipelines within existing and designated utility corridors, rather than creating additional corridors or expanding corridors. Some existing utility corridors traverse sensitive species habitat and expanding or adding utility lines may not be appropriate. Encourage burial of utilities, where appropriate. Compatible multiple uses are encouraged including co-location of communication and electronic towers on existing electric transmission towers. Coordination between and with utility companies will help to develop appropriate management strategies for each corridor. Utility corridors may also be used for additional vegetation/habitat or agricultural uses. Noxious weeds and invasive species will be managed in partnership with utility companies. The landscape character may range from pastoral to a more natural prairie appearance. Recreation use is generally related to hunting, although some trails may cross utility corridors.

**Public Involvement Requested:** Your comments will help us to determine any unforeseen issues that should be considered. When you respond, please consider:

1. Is there any information about the area that you believe is important in the context of the proposed activities and which the Forest Service might have overlooked?
2. For you or the group you represent, what are the potential effects of this proposal about which you are particularly concerned?
3. Are there reasonable alternative ways to meet the desired condition or purpose and need (the rationale for conducting activities) for which you would like the Forest Service to develop and analyze the environmental effects?
4. Are there issues and concerns which you believe are important and would like to have addressed during the NEPA process? If so, please include your rationale for why they should be analyzed.

We will review and consider all public comments received during this public scoping period. As the Prairie Supervisor, I will be the deciding official. At this time, I do not believe that the proposed Prairie Plan amendment would have a significant impact on the environment based on current information. However, we will analyze the effects of the proposed activities on the biological, cultural, and socio-economic environment, including water, air, soils, sensitive species, Federally Threatened and Endangered species, hazardous materials, recreation, and heritage resources in order to make a final determination.

In accordance with Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215, this information is being made available to the public for a 30-day comment period prior to my decision on whether to proceed with the proposed action. In order to be considered, comments must be substantive, or specific to the actions that are proposed. Please be sure to include your name, address, organization represented, and title. Each individual or representative of a group or organization that submits

comments must sign or provide for verification of identity. Please include the title of the document you are commenting on and specific facts and supporting reasons regarding your comments for me to consider.

The opportunity to comment ends 30 calendar days following the date of publication of a legal notice in Joliet Herald News. The publication date in The Herald News is the exclusive means to calculate the comment period. Because the regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period, no comments will be accepted after the 30-day comment period ends.

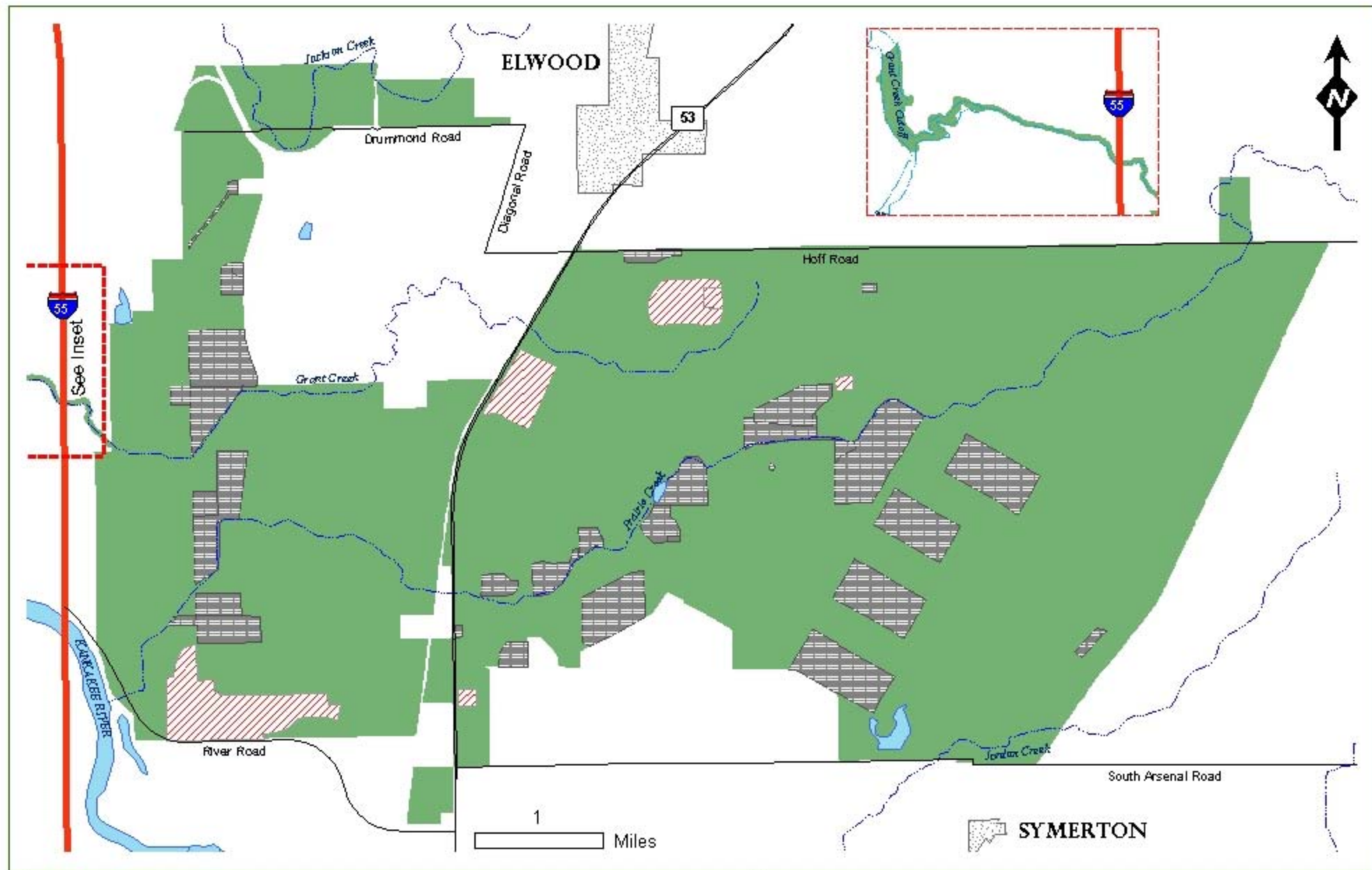
Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted. Written comments must be submitted to Logan Lee, Prairie Supervisor, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30239 South State Route 53, Wilmington, IL, 60481 ATTN: PLAN AMENDMENT. Hand-delivered comments will be accepted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

Copies of my decision will be mailed to those submitting comments and to those who request copies. If you have any questions about the proposed action or the purpose and need, please feel free to contact Renee Thakali, Project Leader, at the address above, by [email](#), or by phone at (815) 423-6370. Thank you for your interest in activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely,

  
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LOGAN LEE,  
Prairie Supervisor

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie



## Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Prairie Plan Proposed Amendment

Special Management Areas - Figure 1



Municipalities

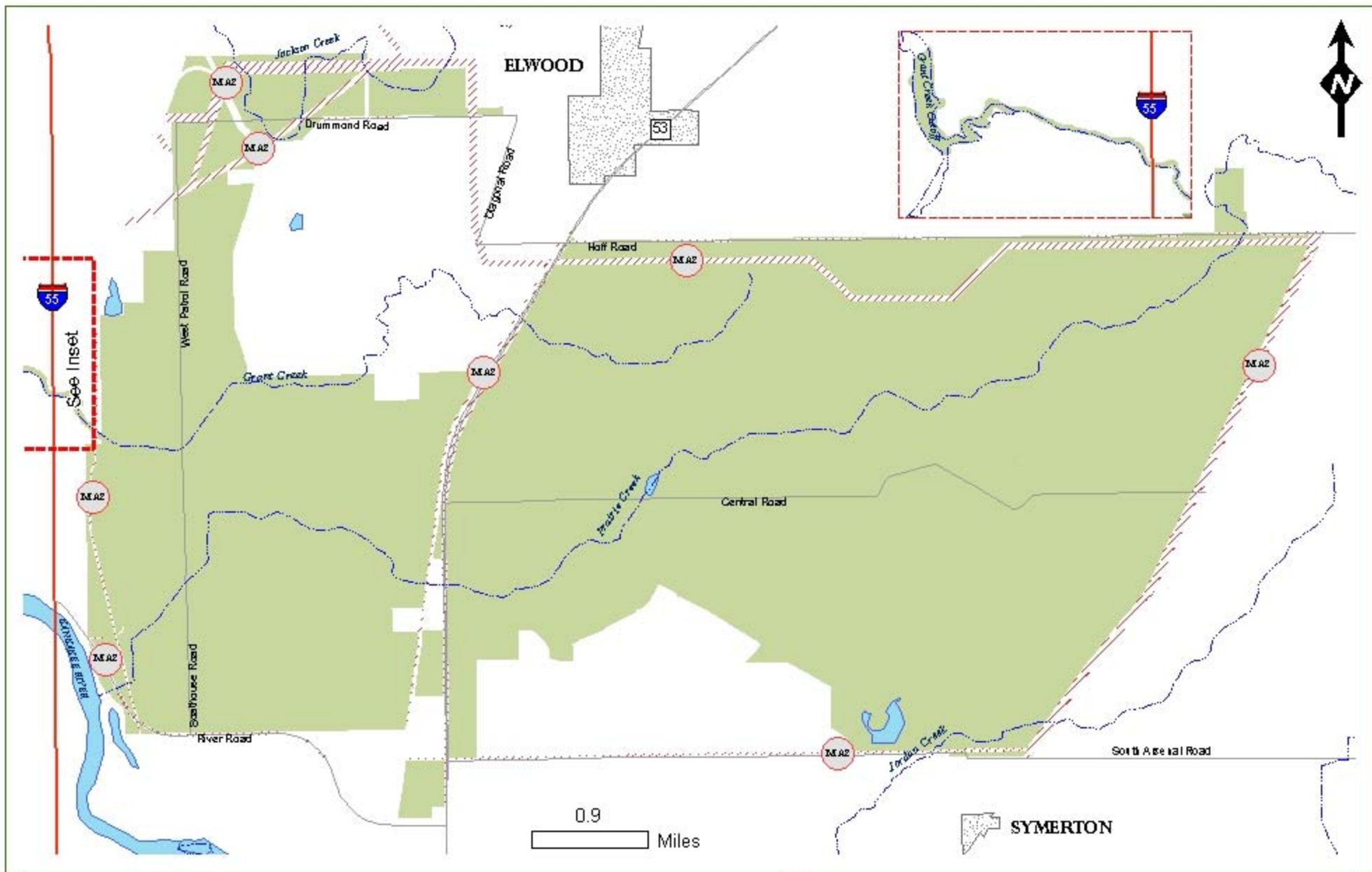
### Prairie Plan Mgmt Areas

Management Area 1 - Prairie Ecosystem Restoration

Management Area 2 - Administrative & Developed Recreation Sites

PROPOSED Management Area 3 - Special Management Areas







## Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie Prairie Plan Proposed Amendment



Utility Corridors - Figure 2

-  Utility Corridors Proposed to be Management Area 2
-  Municipalities