



File Code: 1950

Date: February 23, 2009

Dear Friends and Partners of Midewin:

The U.S. Forest Service at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) proposes to remove trees and shrubs, plant native trees (oaks) and shrubs (dogwood, hazel, etc.); grind stumps and needed, and replace the invasive woody vegetation within the River Road Seed Beds Administrative area. This project is expected to take place over the next five years.

The purpose and need for this project is to remove trees and shrubs, including stump grinding as needed, greater than 6 inch DBH having a negative impact on seed production in the seed bed area. Trees and shrubs would be removed to decrease movement of invasive species into seed production areas, connect fields, decrease shading on prairie plants, decrease hydrologic impacts and to improve scenery. Removal of these trees and shrubs would allow for enlargement and enhancement of the seed production areas. Some trees (non-invasive) would be left to delineate fields, provide shade for woodland plant seed beds and visitors. Native non-invasive tree and shrub species would be planted in some locations to replace non-native species. Stumps grinding would occur to impede the sprouting of the invasive species and clear the seed bed areas for planting.

This activity is in compliance with the Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Plan (2002) as designated on pages 3 thru 6.

Background

In 2008, Midewin's Prairie Supervisor completed the *Prairie-wide Habitat Maintenance Environmental Analysis*. This environmental analysis authorized an integrated invasive plant management system, using the following treatments; entire tract mowing (6,000 acres), spot mowing (500 acres), brush-mowing (2,000 acres), individual tree removal (trees larger than 6" DBH) only in 833 acres of native vegetation remnants, mechanical and hand removal (200 acres), prescribed fire (4,000 acres), grazing (6,000 acres), row crop production (4,000 acres), and herbicide application (4,000 acres). None of the 833 acres of native vegetation remnants, where trees larger than 6" DBH may be removed, is located in the River Road Administrative Area.

The *Westside Recreation Trail and Day Use Area Environmental Analyses (2005)*, authorized the implementation of the recreation trail beginning on the west side of Midewin at the River Road trailhead and ending on the East side of Midewin. The EA also authorizes the removal of invasive tree lines and fence rows along the northern edge of the seed beds. The decision notice for both projects can be found on the Midewin website, www.fs.fed.us/mntp.



Existing Condition

The seed bed area is approximately 130 acres in size, designated by the prairie plan as Management Area 2- Administrative Site (MA2). Although the fencerow removal is not required in MA-2 (Prairie Plan, 3-7), the crop fields that were once divided by old fence lines have become over grown with trees and shrubs. In several areas, drainage ditches between or adjacent to fields have also become over grown with trees and shrubs. The trees and shrubs are mostly invasive species and are sources of seeds invading the seed production areas. Small trees and shrubs can damage harvesting equipment and make harvesting difficult overall, resulting in costly annual maintenance.

Along the edge of the seed production areas trees shade out native plants, decreasing the overall size of the fields and vigor of seed bed plants, and allow shade tolerant invasive species to invade into the seed production fields. Some of these crop fields are wet and produce wetland seeds. Large trees such as cottonwoods take up large quantities of water and transpire it to the atmosphere. This uptake dries out these fields making the habitat less desirable for production of wetland plants.

The west side multi-use trail is planned to be constructed at the northern edge of the seed production area within an east-west line. The tree line to the south and north of the proposed trail divide the grassland view. Removal of trees and shrubs would provide for a more scenic view of the seed production fields to blend with the South Patrol restoration; creating an improved view of open grassland. In addition, removal of these trees and shrubs lines would aid in the South Patrol road restoration area to the north. Presently trees and shrubs seeds are blowing into and establishing in the restoration area. Annual control of invasive trees has been required in the South patrol restoration area to control these invasive species at great expense. Reduction of the trees and shrubs within the seed production area would significantly decrease the tree invasion and reduce annual maintenance cost.

The aerial photograph in figure 1 shows the tree lines and small groups of trees dividing the landscape of the seed bed administrative area. Figure 1 shows the current seed production locations and the plant species being produced. Fields with no label are for future expansion. The figure also shows the location of the future multi-use trail and day use area.

There are approximately 73 acres of tree lines and groups of trees and shrubs within the seed bed administrative area. The larger tree species to be primarily consist of cottonwood, hackberry, hawthorn, black cherry, and green ash. The smaller trees and shrubs consist of small plants of these tree species, along with non-native invasives such as bush honeysuckle, autumn olive, osage orange and buckthorn.

Desired Condition

The desired future condition of the seed bed administrative area would consist of the following:

- Join seed production fields previously divided by rows of trees, where desirable.
- Reduce shading on prairie and wetland plants, yet maintain some shade for woodland plant production.
- Reduce aggressive native and non-native invasive species from invading into the seed production fields.

- Remove hazardous trees along the deer exclusion fence.
- Continue to provide some shade for visitors to the seed bed area and users of the multi-use trail.
- Provide for a more favorable hydrology for wetland plants.

Proposed Action

This project proposes to remove all, some and/or selectively remove other tree and shrub plant species from selected locations within the seed bed administrative area. Approximately 29 acres would have all the tree and shrub removal, see figure 1. Approximately 44 acres would have selective tree and shrub removal. Selective removal would target native and non-native invasive tree and shrub species. Trees such as hackberry, hawthorns, black walnut and male cottonwoods could be left, while other more invasive species such as green ash, female cottonwoods, black cherry, bush honeysuckle and autumn olive would be removed. Some planting of native trees (oaks) and shrubs (dogwoods, hazel, etc.) will replace the removed invasive trees and shrubs within the selective removal area. Stump grinding will occur within the project areas as needed.

The area along the multi-use trail route will have selective removal with approximately 40 trees left for scattered shade. As remaining trees begin to decline, they would be replaced with planted native non-invasive species such as bur oaks.

This project is expected to take place over five years from the date of the decision. Complete tree removal and selective tree removal along the multi-use trail would be completed within the next three years. The remaining selective removal and planting of native trees are expected to be completed within five years. Planting of native non-invasive trees and shrubs may continue on beyond the five years as needed.

Public Involvement Requested

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

1. Is there any information about the project area that you believe is important in the context of the proposed activities and which the Forest Service might have overlooked?
2. For you or the group you represent, what are the potential effects of this proposal about which you are particularly concerned?
3. Are there reasonable alternative ways to meet the 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 comments during this public involvement period. At this time, the proposed removal of trees and shrubs, stump grinding, and the planting of native trees (oaks) and shrubs (dogwoods, hazel, etc.) in the seed bed administrative area does not indicate any

significant impact on the environment based on current information. However, we will analyze the effects of 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 a decision on whether or not to proceed with the proposed action. In order to be considered, comments must be substantive, or specific to the actions that are proposed. Please be sure to include your name, address, organization represented, and title. Each individual or representative of a group or organization that submits comments must sign or provide for verification of identity. Please include the title of the document you are commenting on and specific facts and supporting reasons regarding your comments for me to consider.

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

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted. Written comments must be submitted to Prairie Supervisor, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30239 South State Route 53, Wilmington, IL, 60481. Hand-delivered comments will be accepted at the address above during regular office hours, from 8 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday. 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.

Copies of the 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 Bill Glass, Project Leader, at the address above, by email at wglass@fs.fed.us, or by phone at (815) 423-6370. Thank you for your interest in activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Sincerely,

WADE A. SPANG
Acting Prairie Supervisor
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie