



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Midewin National  
Tallgrass Prairie  
30071 South State  
Route 53  
Wilmington, IL  
60481

File Code: 1950/5100  
Date: January 10, 2000

Subject: **Prescribed Fire Scoping Letter**

The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is requesting your comments on several prescribed fire projects. **During this initial scoping period your written comments on this proposed project should be received by February 11, 2000.**

BACKGROUND

The Illinois Land Conservation Act allows the Forest Service to conduct appropriate management activities at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in advance of development of a Land and Resource Management Plan. Prescribed fire is one of the interim projects deemed appropriate for immediate implementation in the "Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the Land and Resource Management Plan," June 1998.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Prescribed burning is necessary to help control woody vegetation encroachment into prairies, to control the spread of exotic species, and to stimulate the restoration and growth of native prairie vegetation. Ten sites were identified as high priority for restoration using prescribed fire. See [enclosed maps](#) for approximate location of the sites. These ten sites can be divided into three basic categories consisting of:

- cultivated agricultural tracts (sites 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9)
- remnants of natural vegetation (sites 1, 2, 4, and 7)
- seed production areas (site 10)

Absence of fire in the remnant ecosystems (sites 1, 2, 4, and 7) has left significant portions of the plant and animal communities in poor/declining health. The use of prescribed fire on the cultivated agricultural tracts and seed production areas (sites 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10) would be an effective, cost-efficient approach to help restore these areas to grassland conditions.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action includes prescribed burning of the sites mentioned above (see [attached map](#)). The burn season is October 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup>. Burn plans will be prepared to provide guidance on burning conditions and restrictions, and the type of fire crew and management needed to conduct the burns, and to address the unique management characteristics of each site. As part of the prescribed burning preparation, some of the sites will require firebreaks or control lines to be mowed or thinned. Whenever possible, existing roads and abandoned railroad beds will be used as control lines.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Currently sites 1, 2, 4, and 7 contain scattered patches of native vegetation mixed in with exotic herbaceous weedy species and woody vegetation. Sites 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 were previously cultivated for agriculture production and now have cool season grasses, with some weedy herbaceous exotic species and woody vegetation. Site 10 contains pure stands of prairie grasses that have been planted for seed production.

#### DESIRED FUTURE CONDITIONS

The prescribed burns are expected to occur in the spring and fall of 2000. The successful burning projects will: 1) re-establish fire in an area dependent on periodic fires; 2) restore nutrient cycling processes; 3) enhance native plant communities and associated unique plant species occurring within these habitats; and 4) maintain landscape diversity. Prescribed fire is a scientifically recognized tool for prairie and grassland management. Prescribed burning will enhance grassland bird habitat, improve the quality of native vegetation in the remnant sites, help restore former agricultural tracts to prairie conditions, and enhance the prairie seed production area.

#### PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Due to conditions associated with former Army operations within the boundaries of Midewin, the Forest Service will review the burn areas to assure that health and safety standards are acceptable. The Forest Service is in the process of confirming that environmental conditions on Midewin meet these standards. Forest Service contractors have completed field sampling and are now developing recommendations and prudent precautions for USDA review and concurrence.

Midewin lies in a non-attainment airshed. Non-attainment airsheds have air pollutant levels that violate the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (The Clean Air Act Section 109). Special considerations must be given to smoke management and all applicable Illinois Environmental Protection Agency permits for open burning must be obtained.

Impacts to rare species, nesting birds, and native plant communities on site and in the surrounding landscape must be avoided by strictly following prescribed burn plans and conducting burns with qualified fire staff.

With regard to public health and safety concerns, local fire departments, law enforcement, cooperating agencies, Midewin partners, and surrounding communities will be informed of burning days.

#### PUBLIC COMMENTS

The purpose of this scoping letter is to invite any interested party to recommend issues and express concerns about the ten prescribed burn projects that would help us identify any significant environmental and socio-economic issues related to the project and define a range of reasonable alternatives that should be evaluated.

The 30-day comment period ends on February 11, 2000. An environmental assessment will be written addressing issues, questions, and concerns raised during this scoping process. The environmental assessment will be available for 45 days for public review and comment. The Prairie Supervisor will be the deciding official. Project implementation is expected to begin this spring.

Please submit your written comments, questions, issues, concerns or other important information pertaining to the proposed prescribed fire projects NO LATER THAN FEBURARY 11, 2000 to:

Jeff Martina  
Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie  
30071 South State Route 53  
Wilmington, IL 60481  
Phone: (815) 423-6370  
Fax: (815) 423-6376  
Email: [jmartina@fs.fed.us](mailto:jmartina@fs.fed.us)

Your comments are appreciated. We look forward to hearing from you.

FRANK KOENIG  
Prairie Supervisor

# Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie Wilmington, IL 60481

Proposed Areas for Prescribed Burning for 2000

