

## Save One of the Last Prairies of Illinois

By Lara Jackson

The February 2022 program discussed the hot topic of saving Bell Bowl Prairie in Rockford, which is on the verge of destruction by the impending expansion of the Chicago-Rockford International Airport. The prairie was first recorded in 1917, which was also known as Camp Grant Prairie. In 1946 the prairie was then deeded to the Greater Rockford Airport Authority (GRAA), which leads us to current concerns. In 2018 an environmental assessment was conducted for the airport's expansion project. A Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was issued in 2019 regarding the expansion; however, in the summer of 2021 construction began. But, when the federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee was discovered at the site in September 2021, a temporary hold was placed on the construction due to conservation efforts and local and national media coverage. The National Lands Institute (NLI) filed for an injunctive relief on October 26, 2021 and two days later on October 28, 2021 the airport issued a statement explaining construction had been halted until March 1, 2022 after reopening consultation with the Federal Aviation Administration and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

However, there was no advancement in the conservation of the Bell Bowl Prairie during the fall. On November 9, 2021, the airport stated that they plan to continue to move ahead with construction as planned. On December 17, 2021 the airport sued NLI for a motion to dismiss stating that the NLI has no standing to sue. In turn, on January 19, 2022, the NLI filed their response to the airports motion to dismiss citing their long relationship with the airport and Bell Bowl Prairie. On February 7, 2022, the airport responded to the NLI letter stating basically they still plan on destroying the prairie.

### **Grass Roots Makes a Difference**

Amy Doll, Director of the Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves noted during the presentation that "constituency – people being connected makes things happen....the laws aren't written to stop bad development, but people still can through advocacy matters, social media and media."

Doll continued, "...it's important that we understand what is going on at the local level, understand how local government works, pay attention to hearings, and understand the process of local government because local members."

The first part of the airport expansion is the proposed construction of the Midfield Entrance Road. The north side of the prairie has already been encroached upon, which is where the Rusty Patch Bumblebee was discovered. Other proposed expansion and construction areas of the airport include temporary detention areas, parking lots, buildings, and roads, which is considered the highest quality portion of the prairie. The airport also wants to add a third runway. If this proposed construction comes to fruition, this is considered a total loss of the prairie.

The prairie is also considered significant by some Native American tribes due to its location at the confluence of the Kishwaukee River and Rock River.

### **Why Does Bell Bowl Prairie Matter?**

- Category Illinois Nature Preserves Illinois Natural Areas (INA) Inventory area

- State designation
- Reflects high ecological quality of the site
- Contains most of intact and undisturbed natural plant communities found in the state
- Less than one hundredth of one percent of prairie remaining in the state
- This assemblage of plant life cannot be found anywhere else in the state and there are two plant species only found at this site.

### **Legal Updates**

As of February 4, 2022, the NLI asked the airport whether they intend to resume construction on March 1 and if they would agree to meet with them to discuss alternative design or settlement proposals, in which the airport responded that it will not enter into any agreements to pause construction and if the NLI files for injunction or temporary restraining orders (TRO), the airport will file for attorney's fees and costs for a "frivolous motion" and it further stated that "the current plan for the new road is the only place that the road can reasonably go.

"It's become clear that the airport continues to keep going. It will only redesign the road if the FAA tells them they have to." states Doll.

On March 1, 2022, the agreement to stop construction ends unless there is further agreement or court order

### **Legislative Update**

State – IDNR Consultation process rules being reviewed and rewritten – this is important, but unfortunately, it won't affect the Bell Bowl Prairie because it's a long process.

As of the February presentation, Governor J.B. Pritzker stated that he was surprised the airport isn't "talking" – that there has been no conversations were had or compromise

Reopening consultation – another part that we as conservationists need to be aware of is that the consultation allows for plans to be modified, suggest alternatives – continue to make phone calls to Federal Aviation Administration and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act covers how consultation will work and it has been updated the guidance for Rusty Patched Bumblebee, which is the federally endangered species that has halted construction It states that the construction would have to harm the entire existence as a species. So, the species doesn't have quite as much protection. Actions can't result in the destruction or adverse modification that...diminishes the value of critical habitats as a whole of a listed species.

**What you can do** – write letters, emails, visit web site for scripts, ideas, talking points

October – everyone knew Bell Bowl Prairie

According to Doll, "We need the same people who took action in October to take action again and get five more people to action – call Durbin, Duckworth, Facebook, Twitter pages – write to Pritzker – make contact with the media. If you have questions or concerns, you can contact Doll at [amy@friendsilnature.org](mailto:amy@friendsilnature.org)

There is also a fundraising drive the end of February to help pay legal fees – matching pool of \$14,000 – first 60 donors giving a gift of \$100 will receive an illustrated nature journal page (suitable for framing) from Domenico D’Alessandro. Please visit [www.gofundme/f/kt3ne-save-bell-bowl-prairie](http://www.gofundme/f/kt3ne-save-bell-bowl-prairie).

To view the entire presentation, please visit. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-Zan-y2GvU>