

Newport Chemical Depot Prairie: Can a Success Story Be Saved?

by Lenny Siegel
Center for Public Environmental Oversight
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The 7,000-acre Newport Chemical Depot, nestled in western Indiana's Wabash Valley, is about to be returned to civilian use. The former home of the U.S. Army's production program for VX nerve agent, it is slated for transfer to a Vermillion County-sponsored Local Reuse Authority sometime this year. Local residents and officials are now debating how the former ammunition plant can best provide some of the prairie habitat that once characterized much of this portion of the country.

Authorized in the weeks before Pearl Harbor, the 22,000-acre Wabash River Ordnance Works began producing Royal Demolition Explosive (RDX) in 1942. During World War II it also produced heavy water for the Manhattan (atomic bomb) Project. In the 1950s it produced more RDX and heavy water, and in the early 1970s it briefly manufactured TNT explosives.

In the 1960s, the downsized facility produced 4,400 tons of lethal VX nerve agent. While much of its product was shipped offsite, Newport retained bulk VX, representing 4% of the U.S. chemical agent stockpile, in ton containers. From 1998 to 2006 the Army dismantled the production facility, and from 2005 to 2008, it neutralized all of the remaining VX. A succession of communities in Ohio and New Jersey opposed the treatment of the resulting neutralant in their areas, so without advance public notice the Army shipped the waste to Port Arthur, Texas for incineration.



Entering the Newport Chemical Depot

I first became aware of Newport while an anti-war activist at Stanford University in the late 1960s. Part of our program was an end to chemical and biological warfare (CBW) programs, at Stanford and in the country as a whole. At a public forum, University Trustee William R. Hewlett—known for founding electronics pioneer Hewlett-Packard—denied that FMC, another company on whose board he sat—made nerve gas. Under further questioning, he admitted that FMC had recently turned over its Indiana plant to the government. In fact, VX production had been suspended. This was a turning point for the Stanford Movement, for it undermined the credibility of university and national leadership. In 2004, I visited Newport for the first time as a member of a National Academies of Sciences committee advising the Army on the dismantling of the VX manufacturing plant. Having “cut my teeth” opposing CBW, it was personally rewarding.

I visited Newport a second time in May 2011. I attended a meeting of the Newport Chemical Depot Local Reuse Authority, and Army officials gave me a windshield tour of the Depot’s extensive open space. My purpose was to learn the likely fate of the 336 acres of restored, black-soil tallgrass prairie on Depot property, the largest black-soil prairie site in all of Indiana. The Newport Depot had manufacturing buildings and munitions storage igloos, but like most Army Ammunition Plants, it kept most of its property undeveloped as a safety buffer. It contains wetlands, woodlands, and soybean and corn fields. Today those farms generate more than \$700,000 in annual revenue.



Restored Prairie

In 1994, recognizing that much of the Depot property was mesic black soil ideal for tallgrass prairie, the Army and its contractor-operator, Mason and Hanger Corp., undertook a 336-acre prairie restoration project, with encouragement and guidance from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR). From 1994 to 2005, when the Depot was placed on the base closure list, it spent a mere \$128,000 of its farming revenue planting prairie grasses and forbs, and it managed the prairie through prescribed burns. The project was a great success. Today the prairie provides year-round habitat for dozens of grassland wildlife species, including the following State endangered species: peregrine falcon, northern harrier, Henslow's sparrow, sedge wren, and Virginia rail. Many other notable species, including ring-necked pheasant, bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer, and the state-listed bobcat also call the prairie home. The restoration project was instrumental in the Depot's receipt of two Army Natural Resource Conservation Awards.

After the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Commission designated the depot for closure, the Newport Chemical Depot Local Reuse Authority was created to develop a reuse plan. After a series of public meetings, it issued that plan in late 2009. The Reuse Authority designated about half the property for development. In this economy—with many, better located factory sites in the Midwest empty—it is (in my opinion) unlikely to attract manufacturing investment. However, the Depot property could prove desirable for energy plants, such as coal liquefaction, seeking remote locations. The reuse authority projects that a mix of development could bring in 9,000 construction jobs and continuing employment of 2,500.



Farmland provides limited habitat

The plan also envisions 2,400 acres of natural areas, open space, and parkland, along with 1,250 acres devoted to agriculture and forestry, likely to serve as a steady source of revenue. It does not, however, call for the preservation of the restored prairie.

While the Reuse Authority was developing its plan, it received four notices of interest for open space conveyances. Most notably, in March 2009, DNR requested 5,747 acres, including the restored prairie, for “natural ecosystem protection, hunting and fishing, and other compatible public uses.” The DNR request noted:

At one time 14 percent of the State of Indiana was covered with prairie grasses. Today less than one-tenth of one percent exists. Today, in the 21st century, prairies and the grassland animals dependent upon them are considered globally threatened. The importance of prairie to endangered grassland species, floodwater retention, groundwater recharge, watershed protection, return of carbon to soils, erosion control, and aesthetics, among other realized benefits, has caused prairie conservation to become an increasingly important issue. A restoration of prairie on this scale would be of national significance.



Creek and woods in northwestern portion of Depot

The Reuse Authority appears open to habitat preservation and restoration, but on a smaller scale. At the May 2011 Reuse Authority meeting, a DNR scientist described its current proposal. He said that the DNR wants to manage about 1750 acres, more than 60% woodlands and the rest to-be-restored prairie, in the northwest portion of the Depot. He made convincing arguments that this land was ideal for landscape-scale ecological restoration. Yet he stopped short of endorsing preservation of the existing restored prairie land in the southwest.

Many people in western Indiana, including those who participated in the Army/Mason & Hanger restoration project, think it would be a travesty to abandon the 336 acres. They have asked the Army to protect the prairie through mandates in its transfer documents, but other than requiring the protection of the endangered Indiana bat, the Army says the Depot's future is up to the Local Reuse Authority. The Reuse Authority, still awaiting land transfer, cautions that "plows aren't waiting." That is, it is not in a rush to destroy the prairie, but it wants to preserve its options.

The transfer process may be too far along for the Army to insist on the preservation of its award-winning conservation project, but at the very least all parties—the Reuse Authority, DNR, and possibly the Army—should pledge to retain the valuable restored prairie until the proposed larger habitat area to the north is restored and viable. Even then, I find it hard to believe that agricultural income or other potential uses outweigh the value, as highlighted above by the DNR, of indefinitely retaining and managing the Army's 336-acre patch of prairie at the Newport Chemical Depot.