

Illinois Issue: Should Illinois become more of a Prairie state?

Two hundred years ago, most of Illinois was a natural environment. About 21 million acres were prairies. Thousands of Bison, elk, bears, and birds lived here. During the 19th century, much of that prairie disappeared. About 99% of Illinois' natural prairie was plowed to make farms or built over with towns and cities. This started with the settlement by pioneers who brought barbed wire fences and steel plows. The thick roots of the prairie grass had been too difficult to farm until the steel plow was introduced. With that plow came the end of many prairie environments. As cities and towns and farms grew, the prairie shrank. Today, only about 2,300 acres remain of that prairie environment.

The Illinois Department of Conservation is part of the state government that conserves Illinois natural resources. There are 403,210 acres of public lands such as state parks and nature preserves in Illinois. What if Illinois turned farm land back into prairie land? That would be a great challenge, because it would take years to re make the prairie.

A question that legislators could face is whether to pass laws and provide money to help expand the natural prairie. The state has many other ways to use money. For example, many people want better transportation, improved schools, better health programs.

Imagine you are elected as a representative from your own district. What will you decide to do about the prairie? To make that decision, first list the benefits that having the prairie grow will bring.

Why expand the prairie? List three reasons here.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Then ask if there is any cost to that growth. For example, if we have more prairies, what would we have less of? There is only so much land in Illinois. What else might people want to do with the land that would become prairies? List two other ways Illinois might use that land.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____

What's your decision?

___ more prairie and less _____
___ less _____ and more prairie

Two Sides of the Issue: Writing Project

What might a butterfly write about living in the prairie? Imagine you're writing that butterfly's life story. Write the narrative of the butterfly's summer in an Illinois prairie. In your story, include information about how the butterfly feels about the prairie. The point of your story is to help voters understand how important the prairie is.

Then write the story of a farmer's summer. The farmer has planted corn and will be harvesting it at the end of summer. Tell how the farmer feels about the land. Explain why the farmer wants to keep the land a farm, not turn it back into a prairie.

Newspaper Connections

Read the Chicago Tribune to find information that is important to the environment. Make two lists based on what you read. In one list, note problems that face the environment. In the other list note progress that you find.