

Good morning everyone, thank you for being here. We are going to have a few speakers after me, and then we can open it up for questions. My name is Kerry Leigh, and I am the Executive Director of the Natural Land Institute. We are a Rockford based, private not for profit organization founded on Christmas Eve, 1958 by George Fell, a Rockford son and a true force of nature. Our mission, and the mission that George Fell and his wife Barbara committed their lives to is to protect our natural world for people, plants and animals. This mission reflects the understanding that we are all connected, and interdependent. We are supported by our many donors and foundations who passionately believe in realizing this mission and have embraced it as their own. Please understand that The Natural Land Institute is not standing here alone. This Save Bell Bowl Prairie movement is far bigger than that. It is a movement that has captured the hearts of Americans across the region, the state and the country. And for that we are grateful. It is a movement that has tapped into our shared grief and panic. Grief at losing a piece of what sustains us and panic because of the global crises that we face and the loss of ecosystems that can heal. This grief and panic combined with our shared values has activated a response that has been breathtaking in its momentum of action for saving this place, this piece of America.

People across the country are no longer just fighting to save an endangered bee or an endangered plant, or even a whole ecosystem, we are fighting to save US, and we are using all of the tools available to us. Why are we here? The Bell Bowl Prairie is a remnant, a fragment of what we once were and can still be, and a piece of what is the foundation of all life on earth. Only 1 one hundredth of one percent of all types of prairie remain in Illinois, shamefully still called the prairie state. Prairie ecosystems are Illinois's redwoods, Illinois's iconic emblem. Of that

prairie, only less than 80 acres of high and medium quality dry gravel hill prairie remain across Illinois. Bell Bowl Prairie, until this summer, was 25 of those 80 acres. Some of that 25 acres is already gone. This is an example of how our culture is creating this era of the 6th great extinction that we are currently living in, an extinction caused not by meteors or ice ages, but by us.

Our grief and panic at the loss of this ancient prairie remnant also contains a deep yearning. We want to offer a different way for our children, as they will need this to survive the global crisis they are inheriting from us – in as humane a way as possible. We are already seeing the young people no longer tolerating the old systems we have created and sustained. The work we are all engaged in, the protection and restoration of our prairies, forests, wetlands, rivers, streams, lakes and oceans, and agricultural soils, are all an integral part of mitigating the climate crisis we are in. This is 2021. This type of design and disregard for our natural systems should no longer be tolerated at any level. We should not have to be here.

How did we get to be in this place, here today, standing in front of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois? Everyone here has heard the 8,000 year old story of the Bell Bowl Prairie, an ancient, rare, and tragic story of how this unique place was once a part of what America was, what Illinois was, what Rockford was. A living, thriving, system that works to create the air we breathe, filter the water we drink and support us and the lives of all the other creatures we share this planet with. We are here with grief in our hearts, to file a lawsuit for injunctive relief to stop the bulldozers from destroying, in an instant, what took 8,000 years to create, and for additional environmental assessment of this precious and unique Prairie that provides life to threatened and endangered

species, such as the federally-listed Rusty Patched Bumble Bee, the two state listed endangered species, the *large flowered beardtongue* and the *prairie false dandelion*. All are present on site. They are not addressed in the EA, other than to specifically and erroneously claim *they are not present*, with no mention of the *prairie false dandelion*.

Our grass roots organizing created letters, OpEds, public meetings, gatherings and political pressure that are having an energizing effect on our community and the media. The Airport authorities and local politicians, however, continue to entrench themselves, all parroting the same lines saying that they did all the required processes. Doing all the required processes is no longer morally valid, nor are those processes robust enough. Especially when those processes and reports were disturbingly flawed.

This action we are taking today would allow for this ancient prairie, a special place that has captured the hearts of so many Americans across the state and the country, time to be re-assessed in the spring to determine if the Rusty Patched Bumble Bee, a federally endangered creature, is currently nesting in the prairie. If so, that should be enough to prevent the total destruction of the prairie for a parking lot and 3 holes in the ground for stormwater. Domenico D'Alessandro, the designer of an alternative concept for the airport expansion layout asked so eloquently, "Why is an ancient prairie expendable, and a parking lot so precious?"

In 200 years our ancestors may well be asking 'What is a parking lot?' We ask the Greater Rockford Airport Authority, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Illinois Department of Transportation to be the Heroes, to sit down with our team to explore alternative, sustainable ways to design the airport expansion

and any additional funding needed so that the prairie can remain for another 8,000 years. We have been asking for this for 2 months and are being portrayed as wanting to stop the expansion, and there has been much silence. This dull, repetitive response to individuals who wrote letters and the deafening silence has forced us into this action.

Why are we here? We know there is an alternative. We know we can have the airport expansion for the economic vitality of our region; and that we can also have the prairie, for the health of our region. We are offering to explore a different way of planning and designing, one that responds to the values that nurture our deep interconnectedness, one that allows us to re-become human in a self-nurturing world and economic system.

Thank you to all partners working together, The Illinois Environmental Council, The Friends of the Nature Preserves, Sustain Rockford, Sinnissippi Audubon, Sierra Club Burpee Museum for hosting the public meetings, countless passionate individuals, the Center for Biological Diversity, and our legal team von Briesen & Roper, and Albert Ettinger. Check out the movement at www.savebellbowlprairie.org. Thank you.