

Cook County Forest Preserve District Interest Group 2025 - 2026 Annual Report

Adam Bianchi, who describes himself as a forester and scientist, was hired as the new Cook County Forest Preserve District Superintendent in July 2025. Highly respected former Superintendent Arnold Randall took a position with the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelly Foundation after 14 years leading the Cook County Forest Preserve District.

The next Century Conservation Plan is the guide for the Cook County Forest Preserve District. The centennial goals are to restore 30,000 acres to good or excellent ecological health, expand the preserves from 70,000 to 90,000 acres and create a permanent conservation corps by 2039. Restoration efforts have impacted 18,000 acres so far. Chicago Botanic Gardens is helping restoration efforts by gathering seeds that can be used in the forests.

Superintendent Bianchi stated that the expansion of land to the forest preserves needs to connect habitats in uninterrupted trails in order for animals and plants to move. The most attractive plots of land have remnants of prairie, oak savanna and wetlands. These plots also acts as a bridge between human communities. In 2024, 181 acres were added to the Forest Preserves and 184 acres in 2025. There are plans to add 400 more in the next two years.

The public support and engagement of volunteers helped Superintendent Bianchi decide to move his family to Cook County from Colorado. He stated that all the great organizations and partners, who really value public lands and ecosystems really make a positive difference, particularly with the challenges at the federal level. Bianchi wants to engage communities and make sure the Forest Preserves are a place for everyone.

Brookfield Zoo Chicago, which sits on Forest Preserve land, upgraded its HVAC system and improved exhibits and equipment. This year the zoo is being recognized for its leading research in creating a red blood cell bank for zoo and aquarium animals, and celebrating the birth of 10 painted dogs. The zoo is a member of the Saving Animals from Extinction program and the Species Survival Plan. Due to habitat loss, painted dogs in the wild have decreased from hundreds of thousands across Africa to fewer than 7,000.

The LWV Cook County is monitoring land acquisitions and restoration, capital improvements in the forest preserves and Brookfield Zoo, and offering guided walks in the woods plus other educational opportunities. The Forest Preserves team's mission is "Nature is our Business" and the team meets once a month at 8:30am. Members

monitor the Cook County Commissioners forest preserve meetings. There are several new commissioners this year that may change the dynamics of the board.

Improvements have been made at Sand Ridge Nature Center with native plants and animals on display, including a snapping turtle called Henry. Small cabins and pads for tents are available, and expanded events like night hikes and tours of local sites that were part of the Underground Railroad. Efforts are being made to engage more people in the Forest Preserves.

2025-2026 Proposed Program:

1. Monitor
 - a. land acquisitions and restoration efforts by the FP
 - b. capital improvements made and proposed by the FP in the preserves and at Brookfield Zoo
2. Offer guided walks in the woods to League members

Submitted by Laura Davis May 2026