

THE REINTRODUCTION OF BISON (*BISON BISON*) IN A TALLGRASS PRAIRIE.

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Abstract: American bison (*Bison bison*) once roamed the grasslands of North American. After intense hunting pressures in the 19th century, this keystone prairies species is currently limited to a few herds in national parks as well as captive commercial operations. In 2008, bison were reintroduced onto 150 acres of tallgrass prairie at the preserve of Belwin Conservancy, a non-profit organization located in the St. Croix Valley. In an effort to demonstrate bison as a means of sustainable land use, partnerships were developed with a local bison rancher, a grocer, and preserve neighbors. Press releases, public events and viewing platform, and outreach materials were used to generate interest in the program. In addition to grazing, the tallgrass prairie has also been managed using patch-burning techniques to encourage grazing on recently burning areas. In August of 2009, data collection was initiated on plots to investigate if bison have any grazing preferences in the tallgrass prairie. Preliminary results show the majority of the plots had been grazed, both burned and unburned. Warm season grasses were significantly selected for grazing more than forbs, which were significantly selected more than cool season grasses regardless whether or not the plot was burned. While the overall percent cover was low, there was higher coverage of invasive forbs in plots that had signs of grazing suggesting that bison may create niches for the establishment of forb species within a matrix of established tall grasses.