Minneopa bison to assist prairie restoration in park

When bison are introduced to Minneopa State Park near Mankato this fall, they are expected to be a popular attraction for park visitors. But the big herbivores have another mission: help the DNR return native prairie flowers to the landscape.

Park crews recently began fencing about 330 acres that will be home to 14 bison, mostly animals from Blue Mounds State Park near Luverne.

While some areas of Minneopa State Park contain the kind of remnant prairie that once sustained wild bison herds, other areas are former farm fields that now host acres of non-native brome grass. These grasses compete with native prairie forbs, and that’s where the bison can help.

“Bison eat about 90 percent grass, as compared to cattle, which will eat pretty much anything,” explained Molly Tranel Nelson, regional resource specialist with the Parks and Trails Division. “As the bison target the brome, it will allow native vegetation to come back. We’re hoping that will increase the amount of wildflowers and forbs, which is good for wildlife and biodiversity.”

Prescribed burning will direct the bison to graze specific patches of land since the animals are attracted to lush new vegetation that shoots up from the burn sites. With this spring’s dry conditions, burn crews are adhering to strict guidelines that take into account temperature, relative humidity and wind.

Parks and Trails staff work with Conservation Corps crew to prepare the future bison range at Minneopa State Park. Patch-burn grazing will be used to rotate the herd through the range without the use of interior fencing.

The DNR is also collecting remnant prairie seed from within the park and spreading it to other areas, a process known as interseeding. And with bison soon roaming those areas, native plants could thrive once again.

“We’re considering the bison part of a prairie restoration,” said Tranel Nelson. “These prairies would have been grazed by large herbivores, and we’re trying to bring that back.”