

Fact Sheet

RANGELAND IN THE SUNSHINE STATE ?



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Yes, in fact Florida has had cattle production since 1521, when the first cattle were introduced into the state by early Spanish Explorers.

Florida has approximately 12 million acres of grazing land, or about 1/3 of the total land area of the state devoted to grazing. This vast resource allows Florida to be a national leader in the production of meat and milk products. Florida's grazing lands are essential to the many wildlife species including the endangered Florida panther, red cockaded woodpecker, Audubon's crested caracara and Florida scrub jay, to more common species such as white-tailed deer, turkey, and bobwhite quail. In addition, grazing lands provide valuable benefits to society in terms of improved water quality, ground and surface water recharge, open space, and outdoor recreation.

Florida ranks 12 nationally in the number of beef cows with 1.74 million head of cattle. About two-thirds of the state's cattle are found from Orlando to the Everglades in an area of the state that contains about 3.9 million acres of rangeland. The primary beef cattle enterprise in Florida consists of cow-calf operations, where weaned feeder calves are sold to other states as far away as California for back-grounding and finishing.



Complementing Florida's rangeland forage resources are approximately four (4) million acres of tame pasture dominated by warm-season (C-4) grasses consisting of Bahia and Bermuda grasses. Together with woodland products (20%) and cropland (35%), beef cattle production is a primary component of the state's agricultural industry, which ranks second only to tourism.



Ranchers as well as other private and public land managers depend upon NRCS Rangeland Management Specialists for quality technical assistance to assess and make recommendations for improving and managing Florida's grazing lands. Through this on-site assistance landowners and managers are able to recognize opportunities that they may be unaware of and to better meet their land use objectives while sustaining their rangeland resources.

Florida's rangelands can be generally characterized as wet and dry prairies, savanna flatwoods and sandhills, and interior and coastal marshes. Originally, Florida had over 14 million acres of rangeland distributed throughout the state. About half of Florida's rangelands have been converted to other land uses that include high intensity agriculture (croplands, citrus, tame

pasture and forestry), commercial and residential development and infrastructure. However, Florida's remaining rangelands are highly prized by ranchers, wildlife managers, hunters, and other outdoor enthusiasts.

The applications of sound grazing management principles are essential in the conservation and health of these dynamic native plant communities. The first order of business is the development of an annual grazing plan that is based upon good science and a thorough plant and forage inventory. Second, the minimum conservation practices needed are designed and installed to meet the rancher's goals and objectives that support the annual grazing management plan. Most critical are conservation practices such as cross fencing, stockwater development, prescribed burning, and where needed, brush and invasive species control to promote productive and healthy rangelands.

Of all of the different rangeland sites in Florida the two sites most commonly found, and which have the greatest management potential, are flatwoods and freshwater marshes.



Mesic Flatwoods

Flatwoods are found in large landscape-flats with high water table soils that will have the water table to a depth of 10 inches to the soil surface during the height of the wet-season. During the dry-season, the water table will recede to 36 inches or more depending on its location and its place on the landscape. Flatwoods are placed into three (3) landscape phases based upon their hydrologic relationship, from the wettest or "hydric flatwoods" to the driest or "scrubby flatwoods." The most common flatwood sites occupy landscapes somewhere between these two

extremes and we refer to them as "mesic flatwoods."

Flatwood sites always have a pine tree component within the plant community that is naturally controlled by periodic fire. Key forage species include a variety of bluestems, panicums, and paspalum grasses. Woody species encroachment such as saw palmetto, gallberry, and wax myrtle can become dominate on these sites requiring treatment.



Freshwater Marsh

Freshwater marshes represent small to very extensive depressions on the Florida landscape. Typically, these sites consist of mineral sandy soils with an organic accumulation found only in areas that are saturated year-long. During the wet-season, freshwater marshes will have water depths from 12" to 36" for 6 – 9 months during the year.

Freshwater marshes can consist of a variety of plant community types based upon their management and hydrologic alteration. Historically, freshwater marshes were dominated by maidencane and cutgrass, two very prized native forages to Florida's livestock producers.

Freshwater marshes like flatwoods quickly response to rangeland improvement practices and management. Most of Florida's historically dominate native rangeland grasses are rhizomatous in nature and quickly response to mechanical treatments and are effectively maintained by good grazing practices and periodic burning.

For more information contact USDA-NRCS, Florida State Rangeland Management Specialist, 352-338-9532.