A frequent concern of Florida cattlemen is variation in mineral intake. Mineral intake always appears to be either too high or too low, and never just right. Many factors influence mineral intake including; season, type of grass, quality of grass, weather, location of mineral box in relation to loafing areas and water troughs, salt content of drinking water, supplemental feeding, soil fertility, and pasture fertilization, just to name a few.

One would expect the cow herd to consume a mineral mixture in amounts close to that recommended on the feed tag, for example 2 ounces per head per day. In reality, the cow herd seldom average eating a specific amount of mineral mixture every day. On occasions the cow herd will not eat mineral for days on end. On other occasions their daily intake will be twice or three times that recommended on the feed tag. One should never expect a cow herd to consume a specific amount of mineral mixture on a consistent basis.

It should be a major concern if a cow herd consumes little or no mineral for weeks or on end. This is usually caused by the mineral mixture being unpalatable, or cattle are getting a large amount of salt from their drinking water or a supplemental feed. Water with a high salt content frequently occurs near Florida's coast where saltwater intrusion can contaminate well water, but a high salt content can occur in water from inland areas. Some feed supplements have salt added to limit supplement intake, and this salt will also curtail mineral mixture intake.

Salt is the component that most affects mineral mixture intake. Cattle have a natural craving for salt and a certain amount in the mixture encourages mineral intake, but high levels of salt in the mineral mixture acts as an intake limiter. Most of the mineral formulas developed by the University of Florida contain 20 to 25% salt. This level of salt tends to maintain an average intake of about 2 ounces per head per day, but this can vary widely.

The other component in mineral mixtures that affects intake is palatable feed ingredients like cottonseed meal, dried citrus pulp, molasses, etc. These are added to mineral
mixtures to maintain consistency, prevent caking, and to encourage intake. The quality of these ingredients in a mineral formula can be adjusted up or down to enhance or limit intake.

A high intake of a mineral mixture is unneeded and costly. Cattlemen should be aware of over consumption and adjust mineral feeding accordingly. This can be accomplished by either increasing the salt level or reducing the level of palatable feed ingredients.

It is best to have a relatively palatable mineral mixture that is fed to cattle on a specific schedule. That is, determine the amount of mineral mixture that provides the cow herd with the recommended level on the feed tag for a set period, for example 2 weeks. Do not be concerned if cows consume all the mineral in 10 days. Cows do not need mineral just because the mineral box is empty. The cow's body tissues have the ability to store mineral nutrients that meets her needs during the short period that mineral mixture is unavailable.

A good mineral mixture that meets the needs of Florida cattle should cost $6 to $10 per cow per year. Make sure cattle are consuming adequate minerals, but do not let them eat a hole in your pocket book.

For more information on mineral nutrition for grazing cattle in Florida go to IFAS-edis website http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an086, an article written by Dr. John Arthington.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate