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Can Florida Range be Improved by Grazing?

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Research at Ona and demonstrations by SCS range conservationists have shown that roller chopping for brush control followed by deferment of grazing for one growing season can result in large increases in palatable range grasses. However, chopping can cost about \$ 10 per acre, so there are economic considerations, and more recently environmental restraints, placed on this practice. Consequently, we were interested in determining if range improvement on South Florida wiregrass range could result from control of grazing alone.

In 1981 we built 20,1 hectare (2.2 acres) fenced areas at the Babcock ranch in Charlotte county. This was essentially wiregrass range and was a 16-section unit with no crossfences. Since the early days when this area was logged, grazing was controlled by burning, with cattle grazing the area which had been recently burned.

There were four replicas of the following treatments: areas always closed (no grazing), closed December to March, closed April to July, closed August to November, and areas always open (year-round grazing). In the following nine years, the range was burned every other winter. In the fall after the burn, we measured yield of shrubs, wiregrass, decreaser grasses (creeping bluestem, little blue maidencane, etc.), increaser grasses (broomsedge, bottlebrush threeawn, etc.) and forbs (herbaceous, flowering plants like goldenrod, etc.). We also followed changes in the frequency of occurrence of about 75 plant species.

The answer to our question was yes. Technically we could improve this type range by control grazing. However, both shrubs (mainly palmetto and runner oak) and palatable decreaser grasses yielded more in areas with no grazing compared to areas where cattle grazed year round, but improvement in grasses was slight and meaningless from a

practical standpoint (see table). Other treatment differences were not statistically significant.

The relatively large changes in botanical composition that are so obvious after chopping and resting South Florida range cannot be expected with only a change in grazing practices, and if change occurs it happens very slowly. This has meaning for people on both sides of the question of cattle grazing native lands.

Some environmentally concerned people, who see cattle as the cause of a decline in plant diversity and a destructive force on Florida range, can expect little change in the plant community in return for their effort to eliminate cattle. The rancher can expect little return for his fencing alone without chopping if the single criteria is greater quantity of so-called desirable, degreaser grasses.

In our research, we did not measure the effect of deferment from grazing on animal performance or efficiency of forage use, which are other important factors to consider in relation to grazing management.

Grazing Treatment		
Plant Group	Year Round	none
	lb/A	
Shrubs	1710	2120*
Wiregrass	370	370
Increasesers	330	290
Decreasers	60	100*
Forb	160	130
	2630	3010
* Statistically different (P<0.05).		