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MAIDENCANE AND ITS MANAGEMENT

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Maidencane (*Panicum hemitomon*) is one of the most desirable of Florida's native grasses for cattle because of its good palatability, high quality and yield. It usually grows in pure stands in "maidencane ponds", which are saucer-like depressions scattered around flatwoods range, or it occurs on fresh-marsh sites, such as along the Kissimmee River. Although it will grow on sandy soil, generally it grows on wet soils with high organic matter content, and this is one of the reasons for its relatively high quality and yield.

Maidencane should be grazed in summer. Cattle relish maidencane to the extent that 32 percent of their diet was composed of the grass during June to September at the Ona Research Center. Cattle grazing in maidencane ponds from June to September selected a diet (91 percent maidencane) that contained 10.5 percent crude protein and 50 percent TDN. Such a diet contained more than enough protein for a lactating cow. However, in January and February maidencane made-up only five percent of the diet. Cattle diets at this time contained 7.4 percent protein and 34 percent TDN, which would not even meet nutritional needs for animal maintenance. Unlike creeping bluestem, one of the most important grasses on the pine-palmetto flatwoods range, maidencane will not maintain quality into the winter.

Yield from maidencane ponds can contribute substantially to total range yield. Where maidencane ponds comprised 20 percent of a study area at Ona, 40 percent of total range yield in June came from maidencane. Pure, vigorous maidencane range can produce 5000 to 6000 pounds per acre between April and October. Growth terminates in October, long before we receive the first frost in central Florida, which is another reason why it is important to use maidencane during the summer.

Rotational grazing of maidencane range (rotating with pasture or other maidencane range) at a high stocking rate with five to seven week regrowth periods is a compromise

between persistence, yield and quality. Yield of maidencane reaches a peak after about nine weeks growth, but forage quality declines steadily after three weeks of growth. If cattle graze maidencane range rotationally every three weeks, they will eventually weaken the stand. Summer-long grazing at low stocking rates (less than one cow per acre) will not take advantage of the yield or quality potential of the grass. Where maidencane ponds are scattered about flatwoods range, cattle will concentrate on these ponds between March and May and then maidencane can really take a beating. If possible, move cattle in March onto pasture or onto another range unit that had been burned the previous fall or early winter.

Both roller chopping and burning (2 year intervals) are excellent practices to keep maidencane vigorous. Chopping helps thicken stands because it cuts underground stems or rhizomes into pieces. Chop maidencane in late winter or early spring when ponds dry-out.

Overgrazing can quickly reduce maidencane vigor, but you have to severely mistreat it for several years to kill it. If maidencane has been eliminated, it cannot be reseeded. Maidencane occasionally flowers in May, but I have never found seed. Vegetative cuttings can be used for propagation, much like digitgrass or bermudagrass, but this is not very reliable. The best way of propagating maidencane is to dig rhizomes with a bermudagrass rhizome-digger and plant them. We have measured as much as 11 tons per acre (fresh weight of maidencane rhizomes), so there is plenty of planting material in a good stand. However, this is not practical for range cattle but may be useful for wetland restoration such as phosphate-mined areas.