

## News from the Watershed

### Florida's cattle industry: Our heritage and future

Did you know that Florida is the oldest cattle raising state in the country? In 1521, accompanied by approximately 400 men, on his second voyage to Florida, Ponce de Leon brought Andalusian cattle, sheep and horses to Florida. He was on a quest to discover more about Florida and planned to establish a settlement. Thus, began a long and interesting history of the cattle industry in the sunshine state.

No other state in the nation participated in the cattle-raising process until the Pilgrims brought cattle to America in the early 1600's. The Spanish settlers had a difficult time in those early days. Although there was ample grazing land, they were challenged with mosquitoes, ticks, storms, swamps, snakes and Indian raids. However, they prevailed and by 1700 cattle ranches were a common site along the Panhandle and St. Johns River.

As more people began to make Florida their home, transportation became an issue. Once the railroad was introduced to Florida in the 1800's, because transporting livestock became less cumbersome, the beef industry began to grow. People began to relocate to Florida and new towns began to appear. Because of the cattle industry, jobs were available in these towns. There was a need for stores to sell goods, blacksmiths to tend the livestock and cowboys to manage the herds.

Agriculture became an essential role in Florida. For almost 500 years, the cattle industry has contributed significantly to Florida's economy and natural resources. Many generations of family ranches and landowners have cared for the land, provided employment for many residents and contributed greatly to the local tax base.

Today, Florida is becoming more populated because of the climate, attractions, recreational activities and natural resources. This urbanization is contributing to the loss of many of the cattle ranches in Florida. With real estate values going up, it is difficult for the land owner to pass up the opportunity to make a large profit on their land, especially when you consider that cattle ranching is a difficult business and does not always have high profit margins.

Agriculture is an essential part of Florida. The cattle industry plays a major role in the agricultural industry. According to the Florida Cattlemen's Association, "cattle ranching significantly supports Florida's interstate economy and provides jobs as well as beef. In addition, the cattle industry supports a vast network of associated businesses. These allies include (but are not limited to) feed companies, heavy machinery corporations and fertilizer manufacturers. This integrated web of economic organizations helps create jobs and business opportunities in Florida. Additionally, Florida's cattlemen have been strong supporters of Florida's youth and culture. From county fair displays to scholarship contests, Florida's cattlemen have worked diligently to give back to the communities they serve."

Not only does the cattle industry provide food, jobs and support to the economy, it is also a business that benefits the environment. In today's world, land owners are conscientious of the environment and how fragile it is. They contribute greatly to the land they manage and the wildlife that lives there. They utilize best management practices on their land regarding conservation. The United

States Department of Agriculture – Natural Resource Conservation Service has programs that will assist the land owner technically and financially in these best management practices. Pest management, prescribed burning, fencing, planting and water structures are just a few of the practices that these agencies are offering assistance with. These programs are available to the land owners in an effort to encourage and assist them to continue to provide this essential service.

Hopefully you understand the benefits of cattlemen to the state of Florida. Our beautiful state is being developed and urbanized more every year. It is vital that each of us know the value of agriculture to our state and support the people who provide in so many ways to all of us. For more information about the programs offered by the USDA/NRCS, please visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.

