

Tiger Head Lake Ranch

“Real Florida” and Best Management Practices

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As I sat waiting for the owners of the Tiger Head Lake Ranch to arrive, I gazed at the new concrete pad that stretched from the road to the gate. The sound of a pickup truck winding toward me from the interior of the property broke into my thoughts. Mr. George MacKay and his son, David, got out of the truck. They opened the gate and took down the ribbon stretched across the new pad so I could drive onto the property. At their request, I had come to talk to them about cow/calf best management practices (BMPs) for water quality, help them select the ones applicable to their ranch, and sign them up in the program. A key part of this enrollment process is assessing what water resources might be affected by ranch activities so potential impacts can be reduced, or avoided altogether.

The McKays greeted me and invited me into their truck, and we proceeded down a natural dirt path into the 450-acre ranch, located in southern Marion County. The first 200 feet or so was planted in pine trees, possibly to encourage the cattle to stay away from the road (nothing to eat here), to serve as a privacy and sound buffer and, well, it just looked nice. As we drove into a pasture area, I saw a herd of cattle with their month-old calves grazing. They immediately raised their heads, began lowing, and rapidly moved toward us. George Mackay explained their enthusiasm; his manager/partner, who also is a veterinarian, insists on feeding the cattle hay on a regular basis, especially that time of year, which happened to be winter. It was obvious to me that the cows were indeed well fed and that the pasture was in great shape. I was then shown one of several wells on the property that are used to water the cattle, along with a couple of livestock ponds created in the uplands for the same purpose. The wells, salt blocks, and supplemental feeding stations were all spaced well apart and had minimal bare spots around them.

We next moved to an area that the St. Johns River Water Management District is allowing the MacKays to work and manage. That property consists of an additional 150 acres, but from what I could see only about 75 acres was being grazed. The rest was natural, thick undergrowth and trees, which likely transitions down to marshland toward the Ocklawaha River. The Ocklawaha, which is listed as an impaired waterbody, flows north to meet with the Silver River and then northeast to the St Johns River, which flows to the Atlantic Ocean in Jacksonville. Through implementing BMPs, the MacKays help protect these invaluable water resources.



I asked about fertilizer, and George answered with a smile that told me they don't use any; the pastures are dragged regularly, leaving them "self-fertilized" from the cow manure and looking revitalized. George also told me that lime is applied, as needed, to control prickly pear cactus and help raise the pH level in the soil so that the Bahia grass can take up nutrients more efficiently. He added that they use soil tests to determine the amount of lime needed.

We visited more areas of the ranch, where I saw cross-fenced pastures and several old sinkholes. The sinkhole areas had been left to grow vegetation naturally, with understory plants and trees throughout. Although fire is used occasionally to control underbrush, mechanical means have been used more often. We also visited a couple of natural lakes that were fenced to keep the cattle out. Along the way, I was treated to stories about how during times of heavy rain these lakes would overflow and the water would sheet flow across the property to the river.

There was a modest cabin on the property used for occasional family gatherings or as a getaway. There was also one barn and a tractor, but that was about it. The rest was given over to natural vegetation and open land with lakes, sinkholes, and wetlands. George indicated that they share a stock pen with a neighbor to work the cattle and load them for travel to the market. However, there are only about 90 head on the property, including calves, a low stocking rate for the size of the ranch.

There were no high-intensity areas on the ranch, and I saw no erosion, even in areas with steep slopes, such as sinkholes. They showed me where they had buried a cow carcass; the spot was well covered with a mound of soil, and well away from any wet areas. The potable water well was fenced off from pasture areas, with a 75-foot buffer.

Eventually, we pulled back up to my vehicle. In a relatively short time, we had surveyed the property, completed the Notice of Intent (NOI) to Implement BMPs and the BMP checklist, and David signed the NOI. From what I had observed, all the practices applicable to the ranch already were in place, with the exception of prescribed burning, which we included on the checklist.

As I drove across the Ocklawaha Bridge back to my office, I passed a fish camp and numerous trailers and homes, and thought that I was truly lucky to have just visited a place where caring people work the land in a manner that conserves the "real Florida" for the rest of us.

