Reduced Cutting Height for Maximum Ratoon Crop Yield
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The ratoon crop is an important component of production economics for Texas and especially Colorado County. Many factors can influence ratoon crop yield. Recent research has indicated that management from main crop heading to ratoon crop flooding may be very important. Main crop cutting height is just one variable that has proven important. Normal main crop cutting height is considered to be about 18 inches for current varieties. Small plot research at Eagle Lake has proven that reducing the cutting height of the main crop will increase ratoon crop yield. In small plots, ratoon crop yields increased as the main crop cutting height was reduced down to 4 inches. The increase varied with year and cutting height, but ranged from 800 lb/ac up to 2,700 lb/ac. The highest benefits appear to be in those years when there was low yield potential at normal cutting height. The average yield increase has been about 1,500 lb/ac. Obliviously, cutting at 4 inches in large fields would not be practical. In 2002 and 2003, field verification test plots were about 0.5 ac plots. The results of one of these test is shown in the inset figure. In the field verification test, yields did not increase below a cutting height of 8 inches. The yield increase in this test was about 800 lb/ac, but the field was already yielding nearly 3,800 lb/ac when cut at 18 inches. Benefits of reduced cutting height are increased uniformity at maturity, increased yield, and increased milling. The downside is the time and effort to cut lower and it will delay maturity by 6 to 10 days. Do not reduce the cutting height if the main crop harvest is late. The cutting height benefit can be realized by using a flail mower set to cut the stubble at 8 inches. Rolling will only produce partial benefits of cutting low as it can damage the crown.